



A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE SELECT FOLK TALES OF THE NORTHEAST INDIAN WRITERS MAMANG DAI AND LINTHOI CHANU

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Abstract

This paper entitled “A Psychoanalytical Study of the select Folk tales of the Northeast Indian writers Mamang Dai and Linthoi Chanu” aims to look at the psychoanalytical perspective of the selected stories based on Sigmund Freud’s theory of unconsciousness and interpretation of dreams along with Carl Jung’s concepts of the Archetypes. The paper discusses the events and incidents from the stories to examine the psychoanalytical perspective on how the folklores represent the collective dream of the community. The study centres on two stories- “Pinyar the Widow” from Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* and “The Hound” from Linthoi Chanu’s *Wari: A Collection of Manipuri Short Stories*. Such a reading provides a new way of approaching the Northeast Literature of India rather than just treating it as a protest literature or perceiving it from ethnographic perspective along with the exploration of various customary myths of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and the Meitei community of Manipur. The writers do have a great admiration of the natural vegetation and the rich heritage; however, their literary creation contributes in a wider perspective more than what the mainstream people believe that they do, to the overall literature of India.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, folk literature, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, archetypes, unconsciousness, dream.

This paper aims to delve into the psychoanalytical study of the short stories--

“Pinyar, the Widow” from *The Legends of Pensam* and “The Hound” from *Wari A Collection of*

Manipuri Short Stories. The analysis and interpretation of the tales is based on Freudian theory of the unconsciousness and interpretation of dreams along with Carl Jung's concepts of Archetypes. *The Legends of Pensam* gives a narrative account of the folklore of the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. It is a compilation of nineteenth stories in which the stories span some generations of family, depicting the culture and belief system of the Adi tribes. The book comprises four parts –such as the first part with the title “a diary of the world”, the second as “songs of the rhapsodist”, the third as “daughters of the village,” and the fourth as “a matter of time.”

The other story is from the book, *Wari* by Linthoi Chanu who is an author from Manipur in Northeast India. *Wari* is a collection of eight unusual stories that introduces readers to the rich socio-cultural traditions of Manipur. Manipur is a state of many communities. The Meitei community is considered to be the majority community among all who are in the state. The title of the book, 'Wari' means “story” in Manipuri. This book brings a cauldron of contemporary Manipuri fiction seasoned with age-old tales of magic, black art and deep cultural beliefs that is unique to the state and its people. *Wari* came to be heard and continues to be told.

The psychoanalytical approach to the folk tales of northeast India attempts to apply the terms and ideas from psychology to the analysis of folklore. Sigmund Freud, C.G Jung, Franz Boas, Otto Rank are some of the psychologists and anthropologists that contribute to the study of folklore (Siwakoti 24). According to Sigmund Freud, the literary works of the creative writers are the products of their fantasies or day-dreams. He compared these fantasies with ‘child’s play’ where children have the potential of being able to switch between their real world and their imaginative-paralleled world, while the adults hide their imaginative world and try to repress it with the fear that it may not be accepted by the society

(“Creative Writers and day-dreaming” 1908 427). Consequently, these hidden desires and dreams become the motivators for the creative writers for their writings. Thus, a search for the motivation that makes the Northeast writers focus their creativity on the folklores, leads to the rendering of the repressed mental state of the community as a mass where the people have been colonised mentally with the Eurocentric values that can be a threat to the extinction of the cultural eccentricity of communities such as the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and the marginalisation of Meitei community of Manipur by the mainlanders with cultural dominance/Hinduism over its native faith.

Mamang Dai in her writings tries to explore the necessity of preserving and following patterns of old lifestyle as the modern days have been corrupted by the Eurocentric values. However, it is different in the case of the study of the folklores as seen in the context of Manipur, for the Meitei community is not colonised by eurocentrism, instead the community is culturally threatened by Hinduism which is a religion of the mainlanders. The influence has partly consumed the eccentricity of the community in their ways of living and to subvert that, the writer here, Linthoi Chanu makes an attempt to revisit the significance of the beliefs and myths of the Meitei community of Manipur.

Carl Jung's concepts of the collective unconscious, self, and archetype are also a significant contribution to the study of psychoanalytical perspective of folklores (Siwakoti 6). While Freud proves art as a projection of the personal unconscious of the artist, Jung is of the opinion that art always springs up from the primordial source of life. For him, true art always contains basic archetypal emotion and ideas of the whole humanity. In his essay, “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry” (1968), Jung asserts: “The work of art has its source not in the personal unconscious of the poet but in the sphere of unconscious mythology whose

primordial image are the common heritage of mankind. I have called this the sphere of collective unconscious" (R.F.C Hull 319).

In literary criticism, the term archetype denotes the narrative designs, patterns of actions, character types, themes, images, symbols and situation that recur universally in all time's literature of the world. The basic sources of archetypal motifs are mythology of all religion, fairy tales and myths of primitive people (Siwakoti 28). Archetype also reveals itself in the dream of person and social rituals of the communities. It is a kind of universal collective psychic energy which is primordial and eternal (Abram 105).

According to Jung, human beings do not have only conscious and personal unconscious mind, they also have a collective unconscious mind. Simultaneously, he developed the concept of archetypes too from his theory of the collective unconsciousness. The reason why the people who belong to the Adi tribe and the Meitei community follow such myths and legends and why they are being set the epitome of their respective literatures, can be explained only through the concepts of Jung's collective unconsciousness and archetypes. Collective unconsciousness is the sum total of the basic biological instincts and archetypes. For Jung, archetypes are not individual acquisition; they are inherited heritage of human race. Jung defines archetype:

The concept of archetype, which is indispensable correlate of the idea of the Collective Unconscious, indicated the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. Mythological research calls the 'motifs' In the Psychology of Primitives, they correspond to Levy Bruhl's concept of representation Collectives'. Adolf Bastian long ago called them 'elementary' or primordial thoughts' (Campbell 63).

If looked relatively to the stories chosen for the study, the archetypes of Gods and Goddess can be found in the folklores of the Adi tribe and the Meitei community. The forest serves as a deity to the Adi tribes as their lives are closely related to the forest ecology. In most of the communities of the Northeastern region, respect for nature is ingrained in all the cultures of this region. The writers have delved into the cultural aspects of their respective communities whose values, beliefs and practices live in proximity to nature. Dai states in the "Author's Note", "Like the majority of the tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world" (xi). What Dai has suggested can also be seen in the story of "The Hound" by the Manipuri writer Linthoi Chanu.

"The Hound" centres on the life of Pirel, a college going student who belongs to a poor Meitei family consisting of his parents and a younger sister. He works hard for his family but his hard work never pays due to his alcoholic father who would only put his family in more debts. Thus, Pirel's endless struggle in life has forced him to lose all hope in life. In his state of hopelessness and despair, he tries to end his life, but the Guardian Deity of his community comes to his help and prevents him from taking his own life. The deity appears in the guise of a hound/dog to help His people in need. Thus, Pirel is saved by the happy dog with its happy vibe that helps a suicidal person in times of feeling low and hopeless.

The communities of the Adis and the Meiteis lead an agrarian life. In the story of "Pinyar the widow", Dai states:

In our villages, the 'fields' are patchy clearings that dot the thickly wooded hillsides far from our homes. Every household has plots here for growing vegetables and herbs. These are open workplaces that their owners grow so accustomed to that they set from home

very early to work all morning, weeding, clearing and planting. They carry their food with them, and when the sun is high overhead, they shelter in small thatch shacks and eat their midday meal and stretch out by the fire, sipping black tea. This outdoor life in the clear and silent space of the high valleys is addictive, and some villagers often spend the night in their solidarity shacks. The others, who leave, pile all the days picking of green chilies, pumpkins, yam and ginger into their baskets before setting off on the long trek back to their village (Pensam 27).

This agrarian life is closely associated with the rituals and festivals that form an integral part of the land's culture. In the story of "The Hound", Linthoi describes the Meitei practice of annual ceremony of *Ekoukhatpa* as a part of the community ceremony of *Lai Haraoba* which is a religious festival of appeasing the spirits and Gods-- as "a form of seeking blessings and displaying gratitude for his or her protection" (Chanu 31).

Along with the rituals associated with the agrarian life, the two writers foreground the traditional customs and myths through the lore that resides in the collective memory of the community. Myths like that of the supernatural beings called the miti-mili reflect the facet of Adi culture. For women like Pinyar, the widow in Dai's story, the myths are not just stories but something that always have an immediate effect on the day-to-day lives of the people. In the other story, "The Hound," the ceremony of *Ekoukhatpa* is initiated with a procession of people dressed in festive attire and *Harao Phi* (a special type of clothing used only at the times of *Lai Haraoba*) led by the *Amaiba* and *Amaibi* followed by the ritual sermon. Beliefs in spirits like that of miti-mili and the Hound and their influence on the people is an important aspect of the Adi and the Meitei communities.

"Pinyar, the widow", narrates the life of a widow, Pinyar in the village who has been widowed at a very young age. She has already a son named Kamur with another man, Orka who is from a village beyond the Siyum hills. Pinyar's family does not agree to the liaison, however when Pinyar was already pregnant with Orka's child, her family negotiated and solemnised the marriage. But misfortune strikes her and her husband leaves her and takes away their son with him. Only Pinyar has to be blamed for this misfortune by her clan. Then after some years, she then becomes the widow of Lekon. As a daily duty, one evening when she has been returning from the fields, she was run over by a man screaming "Fire" - her house was burnt down that day. The fire started from the thatched roof and engulfed everything easily because of the bamboos. However as per the customary law, she was banished to the outskirts of the village. The story also emphasises on how Pinyar's son Kamur who lives a settled life in Pigo town, kills his wife and children in a sudden fit of madness when possessed by the spirits; consequently, shamans and priests perform different rituals to appease the spirits in order that they leave Kamur.

Mamang Dai and Linthoi feel that the above-mentioned folk tales should be guarded. The narratives highlight different customs and practices prevalent in the communities. Certain customs may seem bizarre to an outsider as she/he/it would judge from her/his/its standpoint. Through the effort to retrieve and re-present the myths, legends, beliefs, rituals, festivals, customs and practices which reflect the lives of the marginalised people, Dai and Chanu have shown the gradual disintegration of the old patterns of living in their communities.

The writers' attempt to re-enhance the native theology that once informed their traditional way of life, the traces which can still be found in the oral lore of the communities, can be termed postcolonial in nature. The significance of the oral tradition comes from the urge to identify oneself or a community as

belonging to a particular place with a particular set of beliefs, by reposing faith in the legends and myths. In fact, these stories are the cultural markers and are perceived not just as stories, but as beliefs that determine a way of life. Thus, the writers' attempt of recovery and revival of their cultural values and tradition through their stories enables them to decolonise their colonised minds that feel ashamed about their own history and traditions. They, with their focus on such mythological significance of their cultures, (in their works) have tried to fulfill the dreams of the masses of their communities to keep themselves intact with the fading cultural enigmas. This is what Freud and Jung have defined as 'collective consciousness'; even though the stories are written by just a writer, it seems like a community has been speaking to the readers, narrating their own stories of the ways of living.

The sense of omnipresence of some psyches is relatable to the nature of people belonging to the Adi tribe and the Meitei community. It seems that these people have seen the features of God in the natural elements i.e. the forest, the trees, the animals, the fish etc. Then if it is so, it explains a lot of incidents that are encountered in the selected stories such as the madness of Kamul after spending time under the huge plant of aubergine in the story of "Pinyar, the widow," from *The Legends of Pensam*. Such incident when associated with the unnatural ability of the natural forces which can act like God becomes the archetypes of beliefs in the lives of the people of these communities. This instinct is not of an individual, but of all the masses. Therefore, the instincts and the archetypes together form the 'collective unconscious.' An examination of the beliefs which have been presented by the Arunachali writer and the Manipuri writer renders the instincts and the archetypes acceptable by all, and as of regular occurrence. These archetypal occurrences do not need to have logical reasoning as they solely rest on their belief systems. The writers, in their stories, mention

only few myths and legends; however, there are many more such legends that constitute the cultural existence of these communities.

Jung, in his theory, identifies five basic archetypes which exist in mythology, fairytale, and dream of a person: the self, shadow, the anima and animus. The self is "the innermost nucleus of the psyche" (*Man and his Symbols* 193). It is the archetype of growth which consists of both the conscious and unconscious psychic energy. The archetypal symbols of the process of self are stone, circle, square, mandala, sun etc. (Glossary of Jungian Terms). The self is the symbol of totality sometimes in dream appears as the old wise man or guru or the spirit of nature. This self in fairytales, myths and dreams, is often symbolised as the helpful "animal representing our instinctive nature and its connectedness with one's surroundings" (*Man and his Symbols* 204). It is visible in the belief of the Meitei community and the significance of 'The Hound' as a guardian to a pitiful boy, Pirel. Thus, the "relation of the self to all surrounding nature and even the cosmos probably comes from the fact that the 'nuclear atom' of our psyche is somehow woven into the whole world, both outer and inner" (*Man and his Symbols* 204).

The archetypal collectivity of self is seen in the manner of how the lives of the Adi tribe and the Meitei community works. The beliefs of the communities and their acceptance by its people are kept at the core and thus, the people of these two communities become devotees to the natural elements. To maintain their relation with the nature, they have identified the nature as something omnipresent and bow to it. This is the psychological foundation of the rituals and practices that are performed in regard to the customary laws of these communities. Besides, the identification of the archetypes of Carl Jung can be applied to the natural elements which are a prominent constituent of these particular folklores. The tribes/communities have this old, ancestral belief of animistic faith, considering the animals

and plants, trees as their gods and goddess which make them maintain a very powerful relation with the God's creations. Thus, it can be said that such beliefs make a powerful psychological impact on the importance of following the tradition. This traditional animistic faith is the strongest form of religious belief in this region.

In the history of Indian English Literature, there is not so much mention of the Northeastern writings. It is evident that this particular region of Northeast India is already marginalised politically. Also, the Northeastern region is not only politically marginalised, but also in terms of the literary creativity. The language in the literature written in English does not imply any unordinary perception. However, there is still a gap in understanding of their writings despite the easy language used in them. There is not so much concern and critical analysis about the connection of the works and their historical context and the psychoanalytical perspectives. The sense of passing through the expressions and the background is somewhere left behind. More than the self-expressions or the conventional consciousness, there is a lot more of the mind-journey that has been penned down.

In any themes of the writings from this region, there is always a connection to the cultural background of the story. In fact, in the cultural systems of the various communities of this region, there is always a powerful enforcement inherited from the ancestral oral traditions. The literary works may be fictional. Still, there is a lot more understandable standpoints with respect to the inherited myths, legends and folktales associated with the particular community in the fictional writings. Hence, it can be said that the literature of Northeast India is not only about the unsettling relationship that the states have with the centre, rather it is also about the ethnicity, the harmony with the nature, and relationship that the individuals have individually or collectively with the traditional beliefs and lifestyles that the

land provides them. The challenge is not only about the marginalisation from the mainland of the country, but it is also about responding to the encounters with cultures from outside the borders of the land, in its own distinctive manner.

In the story of "The Hound," Pirel is poverty-stricken and also a victim of the lowest economical strata of the society. With the unfair treatment and fate that have been fallen upon him in his life, he, out of great despair, was going to take his own life by jumping into a huge community lake. But out of nowhere, there appeared a huge black dog/hound and distracted him with his happy-friendly nature with its tail wagging, saved his life and accompanied him till he reached his home. When he was finally home, the dog suddenly disappeared and there was no track of it. Many days later, he was enlightened by an old man of his locality that the guardian deity of their locality "always makes sure that our town is protected. There are several stories of him guiding lost people and such" (Chanu 29).

In the Meitei community, "every house and clan have their own guardian deity, a unique banner and serpentine sigils" (Chanu 31). This tradition forms an integral part of the Meitei Faith. Therefore, here in this story, the writer gives the glimpse of the interconnection of such deity and the inhabitants of His area-- how a lost soul still has faith and belief in their guardian deity in times of despair and how He guides them upon such hard times. This, as a whole of the Meitei community, shows how such engraved belief system makes a unique identity of the community in association with their customary laws. Therefore, Chanu points out the importance of acknowledging ritual ceremony like 'Ekoukhatpa' in this particular story. In Chanu's story, the archetypal representation of 'the self' as proposed by Carl Jung is evident in the form of the characters of the old wise man giving wisdom to Pirel as well as the character of the helpful animal-- the huge

black dog, symbolising our instinctive nature and its connectedness with our surroundings.

Folklore validates the cultural rituals and customs of the people. People find it difficult to quest for the cultural diversities physically. So, readers derive it from the literary works of the writers from the respective communities and regions. In the other story, "Pinyar, the widow", the readers are able to witness and understand the customary law of how Pinyar has been banished to the outskirts of the villages after her house gets burnt down by fire. She is not allowed to go anywhere or to meet anyone or nobody can eat with her because it may provoke the spirit of tiger that causes fire and tends to spread to others' houses. The cause of the fire may be something else, but this primitive way of reasoning makes the unpredictable life of the tribes easy to deal with the uncertainties of life. Thus, folklore is not only in oral forms, but here it is seen that it can also be presented in written forms, like the way in which Mamang Dai has done.

Another instance that can be derived from the selected stories is the representation of the *Lai Haraoba* in Linthoi Chanu's *Wari*. Many people do not have this particular concept of celebrating the guardian deity of each community. However, this is something which is considered to be a very important part and parcel of the Meitei culture. Here, Linthoi Chanu's fictional work embodies the common legends of the Meitei community. With regard to this particular ceremony, nobody finds to have a scientific fact or reasons why such ceremonies have been performed. Yet it is quite regarded as auspicious and important by everyone belonging to this community.

In terms of geographic distribution, the oral tradition can have differences and commonalities from one place to another. In fact, the writers have retold the commonalities found among the folklores of the two different states of Northeast India. Also, the difference that can be seen here is the one that exist

between the collective folklores of this region of Northeast India, and that of the mainstream India on the other hand. Even if the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur are different in terms of food, culture, clothing, tradition, rituals, customary laws, lifestyle and everything, what they share is the common interest that constitutes the folklores of their respective places. Their folklores are built with the norms of the lifestyle that their particular communities are supposed to follow, the knowledge that are passed on by the past generations, the rituals that have to be performed with regard to various occasions and most importantly the constant awareness about the wilderness of the natural habitats- whether it appeals to protect the nature or whether it tells to be aware of the wilderness. One thing that is uniquely different from the other communities' cultural folklores is the folklores of this region never get old.

One of the main objectives of studying the folklores by these writers from the psychological perspective is to examine the way how the folklores present the collective dream of the community. According to Johann Gottfried von Herder (who is known as the Romanticism's father), myths originate from the human's need to escape from life's reality, or dream pattern has learned to human the method of myth creation (Yahyazade 71). In addition, Freud furthers the point by stating that people tend to feel safe to have their desires and wishes in their dreams, rather than exposing to the world. Similarly, myths are also a form of dreams designed and desired instinctively by the people within themselves with a fantasy of bringing the myths into limelight as a prestigious identity of the respective communities. Thus, myths and legends of such communities and their people become somewhat like the 'distorted dreams' as said by Sigmund Freud. Their events and characters are symbolic. In fact, they are the history which have been internalised and become a part of the people's psyche to convert to subconscious

which implies that whatever there are in the people's subconscious become their history and that history of the subconscious are the constituents of the myths and legends. Therefore, the study of dreams makes it possible to understand the myths and legends as the hidden desire buried inside within such creative writers who represent different communities with vigorous culture and heritage.

Both the writers give their present generation perception regarding the myths and legends they have presented in their tales. With the coming of modernisation and its impact, the upcoming generations tend to ignore their traditional customary laws. But writers from the Northeastern states of India find it more precious and important in presenting these traditional myths and legends because somewhere down the globalisation, the people from this region have a connection with these folklores without any factual or scientific explanation and reasoning. The mainstream people of the country may try to identify the Literature in English of Northeast India as the only literary work that is based on protest themes with regard to the social and political condition of the region or its ethnography. However, this new way of studying the folklores from the psychological perspective presented in such folklores has brought into limelight the necessity of considering the collective dream of those respective communities.

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