

ETHNIC LIFE-SCAPES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RONGBONG TERANG'S NOVEL *RANGMILIR HANHI*

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Abstract- This paper makes a textual reading of the novel *Rangmilir Hanhi* by the renowned Assamese writer Rongbong Terang and attempts to bring out the ethnographic markers inherent in the text. An ethnographic text like *Rangmilir Hanhi* represents an ethnic group of North-East India with their peculiar and distinctive life-style. In this novel, Terang provides an insider's nuanced depiction of the lives, social customs and the gradual changes and transformations in the Karbi society. The paper will trace the narrative strategies and ideological content in the text through which the writer has represented the Karbi folk life, especially of the people living in the Rongkhang area of Karbi Anglong in the pre-independence era, and the dilemmas, anxieties and the shock of the inevitable modernity entering their lives. To analyze the cultural specificity and complex life-worlds portrayed by the author, the paper is structured around a number of themes which are prominently focused in the text, i.e. the correlation of ethnicity with nature/landscape, highlighting of socio-cultural practices as representational forms and thereby transforming them into objects of ethnographic concern, socio-psychic split in the ethnic community after the insertion of Christianity, and lastly, the economic structure of the Karbi community. The paper examines these diverse thematic strands to shed light and analyze the rich sociological and anthropological elements and representation of ethnic life-world of the Karbi people in the novel.

Key words: Terang, Karbi, ethnicity, ethnography, socio-cultural practices, modernity.

I. Introduction

Rongbong Terang is a renowned name in Assamese literature hailing from the hill district of Karbi Anglong. He has written a large body of work—novels, short stories, articles—and through his writings he has come to be seen by many as the symbol of unity between the hills and the plains. While his most well-known and beloved novel is *Rangmilir Hanhi* (1981), some of his other important novels are *Neela Orchid* (2001), *Jaak Heruwa Pakhi* (2005) and *Mirbin* (2009). An ethnographic text like Rongbong Terang's *Rangmilir Hanhi* (henceforth cited as *Rangmili*) represents an ethnic group of North-East India with their peculiar and distinctive life-style. In this novel, Terang provides an insider's nuanced depiction of the lives, social customs and the gradual changes and transformations in the Karbi society. The Karbi folk life, especially of the people living in the Rongkhang area of Karbi Anglong in the pre-independence era, the dilemmas, anxieties and the shock of the inevitable modernity entering their lives form the core of the narrative. Dwelling on the term 'ethnic', E. Hunter and Phillip Whitton writes:

This term refers to any group of people within a larger cultural unit who identify themselves as a distinct entity, separate from the rest of that culture. Along with this element of self-identification, this group usually has a number of other characteristics which show its distinctiveness and put social distance between itself and others. These characteristics may include a separate language (or dialect), distinctive traditions and social customs, distinctive dress, foods and mode of life, and a circumscribed land base. In some stratified societies ethnic groups may be identical to social classes or castes. In the modern world, ethnic groups are present in many societies for two major reasons: migration of peoples from their original homelands to other countries; and incorporation of several small separate cultural units into one large nation-state. (86)

Attempting a textual exegesis of ethnic life-scapes of the Karbi community as represented in *Rangmili*, the present paper also embroils itself in some relevant urgent issues.

II. Methodology

This paper makes a textual reading of the novel by Terang and attempts to bring out the ethnographic markers inherent in the text. To highlight and analyze the cultural specificity and complex life-worlds portrayed by the author, the paper is structured around a number of themes which are prominently focused in the text. Apart from close textual reading, the present work draws from a few scholarly works on ethnography and ethnicity.

Entanglement of Nature and Culture in Karbi Society

Terang's *Rangmili* is as much about native beliefs and rituals as it is about nature and landscape. Thus ethnic life scapes get correlated with nature writing in *Rangmili*. The novel testifies to this fact with its unique topographic description. The sylvan fragrance of the jungle correlates with the three raw necessities of survival---jungle, food and fire (Terang, 1). The river *Borpani* teaches them the mystery of the creation of the universe with her pure, motherly touch. Life and *Borpani* coerces and merges into one for the Karbis but the same river becomes force majeure when it brings many diseases with it like cholera and small pox (Terang, 2, 3). Nature lingers furtively throughout the novel like Thomas Hardy's Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*. Saarik Terang discovers a close relationship between his youth and the buffalo herd. Again parallelism of human life frame and natural frame is made by Terang when the old Saarik Terang realizes that his youthful days are lost in uncertainty like the rays of the setting sun have faded crossing over the horizon (Terang, 4). This parallelism between human world and natural world pervades the ethnic life scape portrayed in *Rangmili*. Life goes on as the river flows on. This incessant continuity depicts inter-relatedness between the course of the river and the life-force. The small boy Hemai likens his condition in Kampur with the caged bird.

Jackson has demonstrated that the vernacular landscape is one where the community is united by common customs. (Jackson 151). The tribal beliefs and practices related to the ethnic life scape of the Karbi society can be well explicated with reference to vernacular landscape. The vernacular can be translated in terms of the common cultural practices of the Karbis. One common trait among the Karbis which unites them is their dependence on agriculture. Home-brewed rice beer is the common item for special occasions like birth, death and marriage events. The laughter and tears of the Karbi society are intermingled with the magical rhythm of rice beer

(Terang, 19). Even the religious beliefs of the Karbis are shaped by their mode of survival. Animal sacrifice is the common feature of the Karbi religion showing the importance of livestock in their lives.

III. Self-Representation of Ethnic Life-scape

The ethnic life-scape in *Rangmili* reveals indigenous self-representation by a regional writer. Such an attempt manifests itself in a plethora of socio-cultural practices and cultural artifacts. Each and every *chang-ghar* of *Rangmili* is redolent with the mesmerizing tones of *Hachcha-Kekan*. The celebration of *Hachcha-Kekan* in the household of Saarik Ternag figures an ethnographic representation which gives rise to a total cognition of ethnic self. This joyous post-harvest celebration is described with minutest detail. (Terang, 128-134), The aestheticized representation of the Somangkan festival marked with vigorous dance, moves of the young boys and girls and remembrance of dead ancestors' acts as an intensive cultural force in the sphere of ethnicity in *Rangmili*. (Terang, 167-176) In *Rangmili*, the elaborate descriptions of Sojoun puja (Terang, 28-36), Hemfu puja (Terang, 82-85), Wolo-Keter puja. (Terang, 179-186) encompass certain signifying practices of the tribe. Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya in *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India* remarks, "Even though the reference of such signifying practices is vanishing from tribal life, the continuation of such signifying practices becomes the visible marker of distinctiveness of the community". (101) The cultural artifacts' mentioned in *Rangmili* acquire their representational form and become objects of ethnographic concern. One such figure is Jambili Athon. The jambili athon represents the self-portrayal of the entire Karbi culture. The five branches carved with Bhimraj birds symbolize the five clans of Karbi community. (Terang, 168) The representation of native cultural objects like colourful Dahi (embroidered clothes) (Terang, 133), Harfumang (a big earthen pot where rice beer is stored), (Terang, 129), Pelu (a cotton cloth to lie on the floor on certain occasions) (Terang, 129), Peng Jongfong (a red and yellow cloth used by young girls to cover the upper part of the body) (Terang, 37), Ikkpo (a black coloured coat worn by Karbi men) (Terang, 168) reinforces how the identity of an ethnic community is moulded by certain ethnic markers.

IV. Interiorization of the Native

One crucial question that *Rangmili* deals with is interiorization of the native. The process of interiorization is very much related to issues like native culture and native beliefs. *Rangmili* shows how the insertion of Christianity creates a social and psychic split in the ethnic community moulded by pagan ethos. The interiorization of the natives is threatened by the insertion of Christianity and this is conveyed in *Rangmili* between characters like Kang Timung and his wife, Kajir Bepi. The conversation reveals how the tribal gods and goddesses of Tika Pahar are enraged when churches are established in the hills. Kajir bepí remarks that the emergence of Christianity causes to the dismay of Hemfu, the Karbi God (Terang, 12-14). This aspect portrayed in *Rangmili* simply relates to the imposition of imperialist importance which ultimately leads to implosion of the whole culture. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* remarks, “Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps impelled by impressive ideological formation which notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with that domination” (124). The colonial process gives rise to appropriation and expropriation which results in a social and psychic split. The whole of Karbi society is agitated because of their encounter with Christian Missionaries. The Habe-Pinpo (the judicial officers of Karbi social system) associates their poor economic conditions with the emergence of the Christian Missionaries (Terang, 3). Whereas Habesiko, the village chief and his followers adhere to old ethos, Saarik Terang and his group gradually encompass the new norms brought about by Christianity. This rift is shown with the contestation between Jirsong (the Karbi system of educating the young ones the responsibility of life and society) and School, the Christian institution of education. Habesiko claims that the economic condition of the Karbis can be improved only with the Jirsong system but Saarik Terang counter-reacts with his belief that only schools can contribute to the eradication of the problem of economic backwardness that pervades the whole of Karbi society. Saarik Terang is inclined towards the regenerative effect brought about by the Christian Missionaries (Terang, 3, 35-36). The scene in which Saarik Teron encounters the Christian ‘Saahab’ for the first time is replete with suggestions. The Christian Missionary depicted here adds the title “Hemfu”, the Karbi term for God, before the name of Jesus Christ to capture the attention of the Karbi people. The saahab speaks to Teron in Karbi

dialect (Terang, 52, 53). The scene indicates how the Christian Missionaries assimilate the native interiorisation by speaking in native dialect. Rongbong Terang points out two different processes in the acceptance of Christianity by the natives. Whereas Saarik Teron denies to abandon his old religious beliefs while advocating for the positive results of Christianity, the character Lawrence Hanse completely converses to Christianity and by altering his name from Lonkam to Lawrence becomes a passive victim of deculturation. Saarik Terang's thinking that the emergence of Christianity has both positive and negative consequences emphasizes the fact (Terang, 76). The projection of the scene in which the Christian Missionaries choose the Tika pahar as the main site for their reformation mission of the natives whom they take to be poor and backward is indicative of Edward Said's concept of orientalism (Terang, 70-72). The concept of Antonio Gramsci's hegemony becomes relevant when some of the Hindu Karbis Longbor, Jangphong Senar and Sarsing Rongpi unwittingly get attracted to Christianity and start criticizing the native rituals in spite of the struggle between tradition and modernity that go in their minds (Terang, 157-161). All this point out to the mode of cultural transmission informed with the accommodation of Christianity within the tribal ethos.

V. Depiction of Economic Structures

The effect of ethnicity in *Rangmili* is realized in terms of economic structure of Karbi community. The economy of any North-Eastern ethnic community can be seen in terms of its geography. Ricardo Hausmann emphasized in inter-relationship between economy and geography in following words: "Economic development experts promise that with the correct mix of pro-market policies, poor countries will eventually prosper. But policy isn't the problem-- ---- geography is. Tropical, landlocked nations may never enjoy access to the markets and new technologies they need to flourish in the global economy" (Hausmann 45). *Rangmili* depicts the Karbi economy in stark realism. The whole of Karbi life is dependent on rearing livestock and agriculture. The novel depicts well how modernization influences the economic course of ethnic life. The weekly market (saptahik mongolboriya haat) portrayed in *Rangmili* is the only means of communication between the plains people and the hills people. The weekly market (haat) ensures the exchange of goods between people from various areas including Sochheng, Rongmandu, Untili etc. The tribal people can figure out and imagine the presence of a wider world through this meeting ground of trade and commerce (Terang, 140). This episode reflects on the

detrimental effects of geographic limitations on Karbi economy. The tribal old man's preference of earthen utensils to aluminum utensils displays the native people's aversion to modern economic changes (Terang, 143). However, the course of ethnic life cannot remain uninfluenced by modern economy. The Karbi women's longing for glass bottles rather than the earthen pots to store home-brewed rice beer testifies to this fact (Terang, 32). *Rangmili* depicts the Karbi economy in stark realism. It reconfigures the extent to which Karbi economy is dependent on agriculture. *Rangmili* demonstrates how the entire village of *Rangmili* decided to evacuate the place of "Hamren-Um-Tili" due to the increasing infertility of the land. These migrated people built up the new village named Rangmili on the bank of the river Borpani. Thus, *Rangmili* defines the inter connectedness of the migratory process and agricultural economy of Karbi society, a distinct ethnic group of North-East India.

VI. Conclusion

In a way, it can be called a regional novel because, like Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels, Terang's text also provides detailed descriptions of a particular geographical area, its environment, topography, as well as the way of life of the people in that area, their linguistic, cultural, economic, spiritual and social aspects, customs and mannerisms of the Karbis. There might be a large number of autobiographical materials in the novel—he knows many people from that area as he himself married from that part of Karbi Anglong. Moreover, he has used his childhood memories in depicting a lot of natural descriptions of the place. But he has skillfully bound these disparate elements together with the thread of imagination and produced a novel that is rich in sociological and anthropological elements and representation of ethnic life-world of the Karbi people.

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