

The Portrayal of Ethnic Voice in the Fictional World of Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi: Using the Folklore of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Numerous ethnic groups with diverse sociocultural traditions are found in India's northeastern area. Some literary figures who come from the tribal communities of this area have written about the rich cultural diversity and colourful customs of the various tribes. The most notable novelist in Arunachal Pradesh is Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, whose works reflect ethnic voices wonderfully and realistically. The innocent tribal people who live in the most isolated and forested region of Arunachal Pradesh are the main focus of Thongchi's fictitious universe. 'Sonam' (1982) and 'Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday' (*Silent Lips Murmuring Heart*) (2005), two of Thongchi's most well-known works, are no exception to this rule. They all highlight the social diversity and rich cultural legacy of Arunachal Pradesh. Thongchi's debut book, "Sonam," was based on the polygamy and polyandry practices typical to the Monpa tribe, which allow two or more men to share a single bride. Thongchi's masterwork is his second book, "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday" (*Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts*), which depicts the customs and daily lives of two distinct tribes, Wangi (Nyishi) and Serdukpen. The main focus of this book was a heartbreaking and tragic love story set in the transitional state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The goal of the study is to give readers a thorough understanding of the many Arunachalee tribes' traditions, customs, rites, and rituals as they are depicted in Thongchi's two well-known novels, "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday" and "Sonam." The study also makes an effort to investigate how the rigid observance of such practices and rituals contributes to problems and issues within these tribes, such as identity crises and marital conflict.

Keywords: Folklore, Ethnicity, Arunachal Pradesh, Fiction, Polyandry, Tribes

Introduction

The novel genre has traditionally been seen as a realistic depiction of a society that either fully or partially reflects human life. Several works of tribal literature have been written in North-East India that eloquently capture the vibrant customs, rites, and rituals of the tribal communities. The most well-known author in Arunachal Pradesh is Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, and in his fiction, he vividly describes the way of life and civilization of the Arunachalee tribes. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, whose work mainly focuses on the smaller groups of Arunachal Pradesh, is credited with being the first writer to genuinely share these communities' insider accounts with the public. Thongchi's debut work *Sonam*, published in 1981, marked his entry into the Assamese literary world. However, his landmark novel *Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday* (*Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts*) secured his position as the most significant and well-known Assamese fiction writer. He has gained global recognition since both books have been translated into English.

Folklore is shared by a certain group of people; it includes the traditions that are unique to that culture, subculture, or community. Tales, myths, legends, proverbs, poems, jokes, and other oral traditions are all included. They include material culture, such as the group's traditional building types.

Thongchi effectively portrays the voices of two different ethnic groups—the Serdukpen and the Nyshi—in the book *Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday*. The novel does an excellent job of describing

how these two tribes came to know the outside world after working to build a route into the mountains, particularly from Bomdila to Dirang. The protagonist Rinsin and the heroine Yama, who come from different tribal clans and meet by chance while the road is being built, are the focus of the book's main plot. Their enduring love overcomes all the barriers that their tribal society has created. The tale graphically depicts how the lovers were mercilessly split apart by their conservative community since the stringent social rules of their tribal culture had never allowed them to be together.

“Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday” (Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts)

In his book "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday," Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi honestly attempts to illustrate the vivid and varied customs, ceremonies, and rituals of two tribal communities—the Nyishi and the Serdukpen. When comparing the many traditions and rites of these two tribes, Thongchi draws several significant differences between them, and this exact disparity mirrors the issue of identity that both tribes' members deal with. Therefore, an identity crisis could also be seen as a theme in this book. It demonstrates how these two tribes worked to uphold and preserve their identities throughout the story.

The Serdukpen and Nyishi tribes have always seen themselves as being superior to one another. The Nyishi people, in particular, believe themselves to be above everyone else. In the following lines, Tadak, a Nyishi lad, boastfully claims their superiority:

“Ngishak (Serdukpen) tribe is too inferior to us. Our Nyishi tribe is superior to all other tribes in this world. We collect tax from the Bangru tribe, and this Bangru tribe again collects the same from the Ngishaks. The Bangroes, who always shiver in fear of the Nyishi, likewise in front of those Bangroes, again the Ngishak react like a mouse in an innate fear of the cat.” (Thongchi, 23)

Thus, it is evident that Tadak wanted to degrade the Serdukpen tribe by putting them outside of tribal communities around the world while also demonstrating their superiority over all other tribes in the world.

Tadak always drew comparisons between the Serdukpen tribe and other tribes to diminish their grandeur. Tadak condemns the Serdukpen people's ceremonies in a very moving way. He thinks the Serdukpen tribe's religious rituals are carried out in a very absurd manner. The Serdukpen tribe only chants mantras to worship god, unlike the Nyishi people, who offer the blood of pigs, cooks, and mithuns. Because the Serdukpen priests cannot repeat the mantras without adhering to the text, Tadak cynically claims they are not holy people. As opposed to the Serdukpen priest, who finds it difficult to repeat the mantras, Nyishi priests are endowed with supernatural strength, making them sacred individuals. Tadak, therefore, demonstrates their dominance over the Serdukpen people a second time.

The Nyishi people consider the Serdukpen tribe as having inferior eating habits to them. Because the Serdukpen people cannot cultivate paddy, they are forced to survive on maize. But because they can grow paddy, the Nyishi people have once again proven that they are the world's most incredible tribe.

Also, the marriage customs of the two tribes are diverse from one another. A traditional practice of the Nyishi people is to exchange mithuns for the bride price. However, the Serdukpen tribe practices the tradition of giving the bride the "eri silk sadar" rather than "mithuns." The Nyishi tribe took great delight in providing mithuns, and they saw themselves as a superior tribe due to this custom.

Both tribes see one another suspiciously and regard one another as rivals. When they continually ask Dilip Saikia, the field assistant, not to mix them up, it is clear that they do not want to work together. Because they were so scared of being attacked by the Nyishi people, the Serdukpen people even refused to establish their camp near their neighbors. As a result, neither of them wanted to become friends.

It appears that both tribes get friendly with one another as the book goes on. However, they were unwilling to go beyond friendship since they wanted to preserve their traditions at any cost to protect their identity. The protagonist, Rinsin Norbu, of the Sherdukpen tribe, and Yama, a girl from the Nyishi tribe, fall in love as the road is being built, despite the rigid social standards of traditional tribal society being unable to stop lovers from growing closer. All of their community's traditions and rituals are irrelevant to their love. Due to the language barrier, they cannot express their love, yet they can understand each other's feelings more clearly. They both understood that their love could never be reciprocated and that their society would never permit them to be together. Yama had intended to elope with Rinsin when her in-laws gave mithuns to kidnap her. Tadak, Yama's brother, told her in-laws about her elopement and advised them to take her away since he didn't want Yama to wed someone from the lower Serdukpen tribe. Tadak abandons his beloved sister into the sea of sorrow and misery to preserve and defend their Nyishi identity while fully aware that Yama's happiness only exists with Rinsin. Even Rinsin believed that if he wedded Yama, their Serdukpen community would suffer greatly, and their identity would be endangered. The lovers are brutally split apart due to their supposedly rigid social conventions, and the tale thus concludes on a very sorrowful note.

The status of women in the tribal culture is another significant topic theoretically covered in the novel. Every society has viewed women as simple puppet in a man's hands since the beginning. Women are constantly exploited, degraded, ostracized, and subordinated under patriarchal societies. Through Yama's persona, Thongchi depicts the wretched state of a woman living in a community where men predominate and who isn't even allowed to decide on her life partner. She is considered the 'Other' since she is a woman and, therefore, inferior. Yama and Rinsin are thus cruelly split apart by her brother.

Superstitions

In addition to depicting this tragic love narrative, Thongchi also shows the superstitious mentality of the unassuming tribal people who think supernatural forces exist and are afraid to enter the jungle after dusk. Particularly in chapter 1, when Rinsin and the other girls, Tsereng Jangmu, Chauki Wangmu, and Doima, encountered Yama in the forest, the girls mistook her for a night hag ('Banmanuh'), who had disguised herself as a beautiful lady to trap Rinsin. This superstitious nature of the tribal people is very humorously described in many chapters of the novel.

Further, chapter 7 of the book points out the same theme when Rinsin attempts to collect Yama's "lesang-mintu flower" during the road's building and is in danger. Both members of the tribe believed that an evil spirit cast a spell on Rinsin and led him into trouble. Therefore, both tribes carried out a rite to drive out that ghost. They are so naive that they never left the stone age and had no concept of money or business until Dilip Saikia, whom they called "Mohori Babu," paid them for their labor and taught them about business. These indigenous people are so calm and humble that they have no concept of artificiality or hypocrisy. Their hearts overflowed with unadulterated innocence and perfect purity. They lacked understanding and believed vehicles to be dangerous beasts that would hurt them.

These tribal people don't have access to modern technology or schooling because they reside in one of Arunachal Pradesh's most isolated regions. They had no idea there would be such a diverse population living on the land of "Donipol" (the Nyishi people's god) before they left the village and began working on the road. They believed themselves to be the only people on earth. As Yadu, Yama and Tadak's sister, puts it:

"Today, again, came a new group of people from somewhere. Completely strange in apparel, strange in conversation. Before coming here, I had never imagined such varieties of people except Nyishi in this world of Donipol. I thought Nyishi and Shulung were the only people in this world." (Thongchi, 2)

As a result, Thongchi's novel "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday" not only illustrates the vibrant and varied traditions of two separate tribes but also draws a picture of them as illiterate, terrified, superstitious,

naive, and without malice. They never want to compromise with their tribal identity since they know it. Even though the two tribes grew close, they forbade Rinsin and Yama from being married. They didn't dislike one another; they didn't want to go against the customs and traditions of their group. Their primary concern was that if this marriage happened, it might damage their identity and bring immense humiliation to their community. Their superiority will be called into question. As a result, they always preferred to stay within the boundaries of their town.

At the end of the book, Yama concluded that although a road could be built to unite the people who live in the plains and the hills, the two tribes would never be able to overcome the unseen mountain that separated them. When Yama learned that she was pregnant, she chose to give birth to Rinsin's kid because she believed it was the only way to demonstrate their undying love, surpassing all limitations imposed by the material world. Second, Yama will always use the unborn kid in her womb as a sign of protest against the two tribes' ongoing identity battle.

“Sonam”

In contrast to "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday," the book "Sonam" explicitly and truthfully depicts the marital struggle brought on by the Monpa tribe's practice of polyandry. The story shows us the mental and emotional turmoil that a young Brokpa shepherd named Lobjang is through due to sharing his wife, Sonam, with another man. Although Lobjang is a resident of Sakteng village, he must spend most of his time at the Broke, an animal farm at the summit of the Choksum highlands. When Lobjang visits his town, he always brings sheep wool, churpi, a sort of milk cheese, and mar (milk fat). He transports these products to remote locations like Tawang, Kalaktang, Rupa, and Dirang, as well as to Bhutan, a neighbouring nation, where he uses the barter system to exchange the items for a lot of rice that he has brought from Assam.

Marriage System

Sonam was a beautiful woman Lobjang married, but their separation due to his employment situation made their marriage problematic. Sonam, his young and recently married wife, resides in Sakteng, his hometown, while he must continue to work at his farm, which is a great distance from his hometown. Lobjang occasionally needs to spend more than twenty days at his property. As a result, his situation makes him very upset. His wife is constantly on his mind, preoccupying him.

Sonam wanted to go to his farm with Lobjang, but he could not do so due to various taboos that his culture upheld. The Brokpa clan believes that if Lobjang moves his wife Sonam to the property and takes up residence there, the farm's holiness will be violated. In other words, their efforts to engage in sexual liaisons on the farm would provoke the anger of the god of wealth, "Sungmu," resulting in the invitation of bad luck and the onset of epidemics that will cause the death of animals residing on that farm. The superstitious mentality of the tribal people is once again portrayed in this Monpa tribe belief, as in the earlier narrative.

Twenty days later, Lobjang left for home on a single day. He wanted to see his wife as soon as he could. After dusk, he arrived in his village. He could hear two people discussing inside his house as he approached it. He abruptly noticed that Pema Wanchu, a young man, had come out from the home and had gone without speaking to him. Because he never anticipated his wife having a sexual relationship with another man, Lobjang got very upset and disappointed. He doubted that his wife, Sonam, had committed adultery and had previously slept with another guy until he entered the bedroom and saw the impression of two bodies on the pillows and the bed. Due to this act of betrayal and disloyalty, he wanted to kill his wife but could not because he loved her more than anything. Sonam assertively says the following in her defence rather than feeling regret or doing penance:

“What wrong have I done? It’s me who sleeps alone every day, and finding me all alone in the house, the village boys always come and trouble me. Being a helpless woman, what am I to do? How can I keep them away? And that Pema Wangchu? He did not heed my repeated warnings, and I pleaded with him not to come near me. Now what should I do? You tell me! Either you take me to the Broke to stay with you or otherwise, you might as well kill me ...?” Sonam started to sob.” (Thongchi, 20)

The previous statement brings to light Sonam's pitiful situation, who, despite being married, had to live alone and insecurely without her husband. Sonam's pathetic and defenceless condition is used by the village young, who attempt to develop an illicit relationship with her. The lecherous village guys view Sonam alone at home as an edible morsel that may satiate their male desire. The entire race of women, represented by Sonam, aspire to a pleased marriage and married life. She is unable to fill her sexual urges, however, because of her separation from her spouse. This is why she gave herself to the boys looking for such a great opportunity. Sonam suffered greatly because of this while her husband was away. She was forced to fulfill her sexual need by sleeping with Pema Wanchu.

Also, Lobjang was aware of Sonam's struggles with being home alone as a woman. She needs a male friend to protect her and show her love, care, and compassion. Adopting the polyandry system, which is highly favoured among the Brokpas, is the only way to resolve this challenging predicament. In Lobjang's community, a lady who has a spouse who lives on a separate farm from her can have a co-husband for her security. Sonam was willing to share herself with Lobjang and Pema Wangchu since she also desired a co-husband.

Caste System

The caste system also plays a significant role among the Brokpas, as evidenced by the fact that many members of the Brokpa community refused to accept Pema Wangchu as Sonam's co-husband because he belonged to a caste that they perceived as inferior to them. Since both Pema Wangchu and Lobjang belonged to different castes, Kejang, a close friend of Lobjang, was firmly against Pema Wangchu being Sonam's co-husband. It would be challenging for society to determine the child's true caste if Sonam gets pregnant. Even Pema Wangchu's parents had negative feelings about this relationship. According to Pema's father, Tsewang, as he belonged to a different caste and believed his caste was superior to Lobjang's, Pema was free to wed any of his brothers' wives rather than Lobjang's.

A critical and in-depth reading of the book reveals how important the village hierarchy was in establishing social standards, particularly the marital regulations, inside the Brokpa community. It became clear when Tsopa, the head of the village, put forth some requirements to meet the intended union of Pema and Sonam. Before he could wed Sonam, Pema had to abide by some established rules. The most important need was for Pema to accept Lobjang's title and abandon his caste. Second, Tsewang, Pema's father, would disown him, and Pema would no longer get any of his father's property.

The fact that the elder husband must divide his property with his co-husband in the Brokpa tribe's marriage system is another significant concern. Tsopa then gave Lobjang the additional directive to share his responsibilities with Pema. As a result, following their marriage, Lobjang and his co-husband Pema shared everything. It is clear from what Lobjang said to Pema:

“The animals you see, the cows and sheep, the entire lot from today, are all yours. From now on, I am no longer the sole owner of the property - it belongs to us both. You have an equal share and responsibility, so look after the animals well.” (Thongchi, 36).

As the story progresses, it becomes obvious that Pema Wanchu did not adequately perform his responsibilities. Both Lobjang and Pema were required to work an equal number of days at their job and home under the terms of the agreement. When it was Pema's turn to stay in the firm, Lobjang tried to forget his responsibility because he always did his job well. Instead of defending the sheep when a snow leopard once ambushed their flock and killed one of the sheep, Pema escaped and

made it home in plenty of time. Pema was not in the mood to return to the firm when Lobjang requested him to do so to protect the animals. Even Sonam attempted to defend Pema by demonstrating her reluctance to let him leave at that hour of the night. When Sonam expressed care for her second spouse, Lobjang experienced mental and emotional pain, and his soul was engulfed in despair and melancholy.

They were all required to spend the night in the same room together on that specific occasion. Sonam and Pema slept together in the same bed. That night, Lobjang could not sleep since he could never have imagined his beloved wife having a sexual relationship. He found a horrible scene that he could no longer stand. It appears that Sonam stopped thinking about Lobjang following her second marriage. She transfers all her love and affection to Pema Wangchu, acting like he is her universe. At that moment, Lobjang's heart was crying out for justice as he lay motionless in a corner of the room. But now that he has accepted the polyandry system and is willing to share his wife with Pema, all his sobs and cries are worthless.

Although it appears that Lobjang did everything possible to complete the marriage under the polyandry system throughout the novel, he was always the one who suffered the most due to this agreement. He had different ideas about the biological father of the baby girl Sonam had when she gave birth to her. Sonam spent more time with Pema Wangchu; thus, he assumed that Pema was the child's real father. In the following remarks, Thongchi skillfully reflects on Lobjang's internal conflict:

“He was not sure who might be the child's real father. Pema Wangchu or he? Perhaps it might be Pema Wangchu's child, as he is now spending more time with Sonam. As he thought deeper, he lost his spirit and felt miserable. With great effort, he suppressed his doubts over the child's fatherhood, as it mattered no more after he had accepted Pema Wangchu as his co-husband. Whoever might be the real father, it was their child equally now”. (Thongchi, 67)

So, it is evident that although Lobjang was unsure of the child's paternity, he was willing to embrace the child as his own. However, Sonam eventually admitted to Lobjang that he was the child's biological father.

After reading the text, it is clear that the polyandry system is not a lasting fix but rather an unfixable issue that utterly destroys the husband-wife bond. The narrative shows that no protagonists appeared content with the polyandry system. They started to argue, and each time Sonam tried to defend Pema, it led to an emotional breakdown in Lobjang's mind. Pema was the first to argue with Lobjang because he had borrowed money from Ngawang and paid it back by selling a cow. When Lobjang objected to the action, Pema began accusing him, claiming that if he could sell cows to buy foodgrains, why couldn't he sell a cow to repay his loan? He added that he had the same claim to Lobjang's property. He referred to Lobjang as a miser and claimed that by keeping him hungry on the farm, Lobjang had taken advantage of him. Lobjang was incensed by this and commanded Pema Wangchu to leave his home.

Sonam, however, fiercely criticized Lobjang for treating Pema like a slave. She also reminded Lobjang that Pema was on an equal footing with him in the household and that he had no authority to expel him. Sonam was a lustful woman who wanted to keep Pema to satisfy her sexual desire. Lobjang yelled angrily to Sonam. Sonam responded when she heard this:

“What do you take me for? Do you think I am a piece of stone or a wood log? Am I, not a human being? Don't I also have feelings? What about my desires? Have you ever given thought to my suffering? You have always remained away from me. How much strength do you think you have? What should I have done? Slept with a dog...?” (Thongchi, 80-81).

Thus, although being married, she had never been able to satisfy her sexual need because her husband, Lobjang, was required to keep his distance from her because of his work. She was forced to

sleep with Pema Wangchu to replace her spouse because of this same fact. She had to keep two spouses simultaneously because of the unmet sexual yearning.

Sonam unexpectedly dies at the novel's end, leaving Lobjang to care for two kids alone. Tsering Dolma, Sonam's sister, assumed custody of Sonam's children after her death. Tsering Dolma had a radically different viewpoint on the institution of marriage than her sister Sonam. Sonam believed the polyandry system was the only way to solve her issues, while Tsering Dolma supported monogamy. She thought sharing oneself with two men would inevitably lead to problems and ruin the relationship between the husband and wife. She wished to create a new universe that would include the two kids of Sonam and Lobjang. She, however, would never let Pema Wangchu into her new world.

The father of Tsering Dolma, Ngoiru, said that Lobjang needs another Sonam and instructed his daughter Tsering Dolma, "Lobjang needs another Sonam as the institution of marriage is the main focus of the book, Sonam."

"If the world is to survive, man and woman must live together because they create life. So go ahead and begin your new life without fear, keep the world alive, and nobody has the right to destroy it." (Thongchi, 124)

As a result, after reading the book, one might conclude that Thongchi exposes in "Sonam" the adverse consequences of the polyandry system, which has been crucial to the Brokpa community. Thongchi sheds attention on the suffering and mental and emotional crisis of those who are part of the polyandry system through the male protagonist, Lobjang. Lobjang endured significant suffering all of his life. The person he loved the most—his wife—was the one thing he did not want to share. He could not stand the sight of his wife having an extramarital affair. His thoughts rebelled frequently, but he had to put up with it because the community where he lived openly supported the polyandry system and let Sonam keep Pema as her second husband.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi skillfully captured the many traditions, customs, ceremonies, and rituals of several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh in both novels. Thongchi also highlights the inherent flaws in these societal norms by mirroring the traditions and ceremonies of many tribes. The heroes of Thongchi's stories frequently serve as his spokesperson and attack the traditional and orthodox practices of these conservative tribal societies. The hero and heroine of the book "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday," Rinsin and Yama, respectively, both mutely defied the social conventions of their community and sought to do so by growing closer and having a relationship. The main character, Lobjang, never seemed content with the polyandry system in "Sonam," rather, he would be satisfied if his community forbade his wife, Sonam, from entering a second marriage. Even though he kept his mouth shut, his heart and soul cried out for justice and sought to protest at all times. He often reprimanded Sonam and Pema Wangchu to express his unhappiness, frustrations, rage, and rebellion. Because of the stringent following of these rites, members of these communities frequently experience inferiority complexes. They have identity crises and internal conflicts that cause extreme mental and emotional suffering at other times.

Glossary

Monpa- The Monpa are a significant tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, northeastern India. The Tawang Monpas are descended from Changrelung. The Monpa are considered the sole nomadic tribe in Northeast India, relying entirely on animals such as sheep, cows, yaks, goats, and horses.

Nyishi- The Nyishi is the largest ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh, northeastern India. They are found in eight Arunachal Pradesh districts: Kra Daadi, Kurung Kumey, East Kameng, West Kameng, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kamle, and Pakke Kessang.

Sherdukpen- The Sherdukpen are an ethnic group in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Their 9,663-person population is concentrated in the West Kameng district, in the Rupa, Jigaon, Thongri, and Shergaon villages south of Bomdila. These are all located between 5000 and 6000 feet above sea level.

Mithun- Mithun, commonly known as "Cattle of the Mountains," is an important bovine species in India's northeastern hill region, China, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. This superb big bovine is currently reared free-range in the highland forests at elevations ranging from 1000 to 3000 meters above sea level. Mithun is a significant part of the local tribal population's socioeconomic and cultural existence. This animal is primarily raised for meat, which is considered more tender and superior to meat from other species. Despite being produced in small quantities, Mithun milk is of excellent quality and may be utilized to make various milk products. This species' leather has been determined to be superior to cattle leather.

Donipol- Donipol is the local God for the Nyishi people.

Wancho- The Wancho people, also known as the Wancho Naga, are a Tibeto-Burmese indigenous ethnic group who live in the Patkai highlands of Arunachal Pradesh's Longding district.

Tsopa- Head of village in Arunachal Pradesh.

Polyandry- Polyandry in India refers to having two or more husbands simultaneously, historically on the Indian subcontinent or today in India. An early example can be found in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, when Draupadi, the daughter of Panchala's king, marries five brothers.

Polygamy: Marriage in which a spouse of either sex may have more than one mate at the same time

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