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The Search for Cultural Root in Desmond Kharmawphlang's Poetry

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Abstract

The threat of imperialist western values has endangered the indigenous ways of life in the North East of India. Poets writing in English from the North East of India have often raised this issue in their poetry and challenged the domination of these imported values. Desmond Kharmawphlang, one of the more articulate voices in the context of imperialist culture, both within and outside of the country, investigates the folklore and myths of the tribal Khasi culture in the North East and offers the values glorified in these indigenous tales as a significant alternative to such imperialist cultural practices. The lament of the loss of the poet's cultural root in his poetry is therefore an important poetic leitmotif. This research paper is an attempt at an interpretation of this aspect in his poetry.

Keywords

Cultural Root; Desmond Kharmawphlang; Tribal Khasi Culture.

Introduction

The folklorist and the poet meet in Desmond Kharmawphlang's poetry. The appearance of myth and tribal folklore is a recurrent feature in Kharmawphlang's poems. Yet the myth and the folklore featuring in his poems do not function as a route for Romantic escapism. In "Tyrchiang", for instance, the poet sees his people making an effort to re-interpret and re-live their mythic past as a way out of the hue of the baffling cultural confusion. This sense of cultural rootlessness encompasses the poet too and an effort is made to repossess "the mythical past flourishing in timeless villages as high culture" (Ngangom & Nongkynrih 144) in the poem.

The Art of "Khiew Ranei"

The traditional art of "Khiew Ranei" or terracotta pottery has been glorified in the poem "Tyrchiang." The title of this poem refers to the Tyrchiang village which is near Lyrnai village, originally famous for earthen ware by the NH44 of the Shillong-Jowai road in West Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya. The art of terracotta pottery which is practiced in this part of the world has a long history. But the decline of local demand for terracotta pots among the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes is putting this fine art into danger. The Meghalaya government is making a conscious effort at reviving this art of late. This ancient art has its relevance in the socio-cultural life of the tribes in Meghalaya. Some terracotta pots are indispensable in the preparation of certain rice powder made local delicacies like Pu-tharo, Pu-maloi, and Ja-shulia.

Although Lyrnai village was the main producer of terracotta pottery, the residents of the village itself stopped using them. But the demand for terracotta pottery has not declined too much in other place of Meghalaya. The good news

is that people living in some other villages like Tyrchiang have started producing terracotta pots.

Myth and the Art of Pottery

The art of terracotta pottery has mythological significance. There are “coils of mythology” created with “dough of clay” for- “the pact made with gods/ on mud (144)”. Besides the use of the terracotta pots in the preparation of certain local delicacies, they are used in religious rituals as well. The Doloï or the chief of Nartiang uses the earthen ware made in Lyrnai village in some important religious functions. The Chief of Nartiang orders them in large quantity as the ritual remains incomplete without these pots. People following the traditional animist religion use the terracotta pots to keep a piece of the ruptured umbilical cord of the newborn baby which is preserved for a ritual performed during the welcoming ceremony of the newborn. Although the process of preparing these pots takes a long time, the mythical significance of the pots glorifies the daily sweat of the potters. The eternal and the temporal, the “coils of mythology” and- “the lust and laughter/of these potters (144)”- become one. The potters collect the clay used in the pottery from Sung valley which is believed to be the only place where the right type of clay required for the pots is available. The hardship of the making of the pots gets lightened by the divine significance of the labour. The transitory character of the potter’s life gets a universal signification with their creative power expressed in terracotta pottery.

Celebration of Freedom in the Art of Pottery

The potters at Tyrchiang are free to work at their own pace. They work together sharing their private stories. The place of work transforms into a healing ground where the stress and worries of their private lives are offloaded as- “Stories twine and untwine as/spirals of wet earth are kneaded,/shaped and rolled (144).” The potters at Tyrchiang are at liberty in terms of the design of the pots. The art of pottery flourishing at Tyrchiang bequeaths the potters

the freedom of imagination and creation. The potters virtually weave their imagination in clay. There is no hard and fast rules governing their creative urge as their creative process is not controlled by an artificial machinery and tool. The uniqueness in the art of terracotta pottery is that spinning wheel and other tools are not used in the making of the pots. The potters use their bare hands to make the pots. If anything that guides their craft, then the guiding principle is the cycle of the seasons. Nature is the foundation upon which the edifice of their art is built. The preparation of the terracotta pots is seasonal. The wet pots are burnt in fire pit and these fire pits are made in an open space during the dry seasons. Even the colours used in the pots are derived from nature as the bark of a certain tree is squeezed to extract the colours.

The Cultural Root

The traditions and practices of the past are given earthen shape by the potters. They re-live the traditions of their tribal past and they become united with their cultural root. The artistry of their craft enables them to create beauty and the rootedness of that craft in the cultural traditions of their tribal root gives their craft cultural significance. In the art of the potters at Tyrchiang, “Myths construct themselves” in the hands of the potters giving a shape to their imagination. They are not lost in the maze of cultural confusion like the poet. Their art offers them personal pleasure and the rootedness of their art in the tribal traditions of their culture enables them to create “the metaphors of substance.” The traditional values worshipped in their art provide meaning to their work. They are bound together by that art and the bond that exists between their art and their cultural root saves them from falling off into a cultural nihilism so characteristic of contemporary modern life.

The Shame of Rootlessness

The poet is ashamed that he has been uprooted by modernity and city life as he writes,- “Tyrchiang, the wind among your/pines, shames me with its/simplicity...(144)”. The poet is no longer a part of the cultural tradition at

Tyrchiang. His values have been shaped by the practices of the modern life dependant on western ethos. But the poet is unable to transport himself completely to the new modern ways of life as his ancestral cultural roots bind him to his traditional values. He finds himself in an awkward position as he is no man's land, neither here nor there. He writes,- "...I whose roots draw/deep from books to prop up/my tribal bones (144)". The modern education that he received from a socio-political system established along a western model glorifying western values comes in the way of realizing the essence of his cultural root. But he understands the significance of his native cultural values and practices.

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