

REVISIONING THE POEMS OF DR. LAMABAM KAMAL SINGH: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Manipuri Society underwent changes during the Colonial (1891 – 1947) and post-colonial period as a result of internal and external factors like advent of new religious cult viz. Hinduism, introduction and development of western education and the process of Christianization in the hill areas, and the outbreak of the Second World War (1939-1945). As a result, remarkable changes are visible en-suite in the societal structure, norms, values, political affairs, religious and cultural aspects of Manipur in the pre and post-independence days. Besides, with the efforts of many enthusiastic young poets who were enlightened with modern education, remarkable changes in the field of education, art, literature, language, etc. began to evolve in Manipur. Among them Dr. Kamal Singh (1899-1935) is worth mentioning. He became a perennial fountain during the period of literature draught in the history of Manipuri literature.

Key words: Hinduism, Christianization, norms, perennial, literature.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important genres of literature is poetry. Generally, the term literature denotes a body of writing by a people or by peoples using the same language (Encyclopedia Britannica: 2005). Human life is the source of literature. In fact, literature is the image of a dynamic society (Babu: 2001). A society is truly reflected in its literature. Engels remarked that he could fully understand the then French Society from Balzac's novel, but he could not do so from a book of history (Nabachandra: 2001). Thus, as society creates literature it reflects the society, its good values and defects as well.

On the other hand, the role of literature in helping the creation and production of a new face of society partially or fully is remarkable. Such term is coined by the sociologists as social change. Change, either progress or decline is a feature of human civilization (Kamei: 2008). Social change may be defined as the process which is

discernible significant alteration in the structure and functioning of a particular social system (Kuppuswami: 1979). In other words, writers also had the role to make a changed and fully developed society. An inspiring poem creates general influence on society. Shelley has called poets the unacknowledged legislators of mankind (Mangaraj Subrat: N.D) Thus, writers too act as important agent of Social Change.

Dr. Kamal Singh (1899-1935) was a pioneer of Modern Manipuri poetry. Within his short span of 36 years he had produced some classics of Manipuri literature – a novel *Madhavi*, a compilation of poems *Lei Pareng*, (Garland) (1929), a drama *Devjani* a short story, *Brajendragi Luhongba* (The wedding of Brajendra). He became a perennial fountain during the period of literary draught in the history of Manipuri literature. Recognising his contributions in the field of Manipuri literature, he was honoured Kaviratna by the Manipuri Sahitrya Parishad.

METHODS AND MATERIALS:

This interdisciplinary research work is neither a book review nor a literary criticism. This work of mine is a humble attempt to study the relationship between literature and society through historical perspectives. Research techniques such as descriptive as well as analytical are employed while writing this paper for obtaining a scientific conclusion. The present study mainly based on books, seminar paper, journals, etc.

DISCUSSION

Dr. Kamal's poem first appeared in the journals such as Meitei Chanu (1922), Jagaran and Yakairol (1930). During his school days, he composed his Lei Pareng as if selecting a flower from here and there from the flourishing garden of Manipuri Literature and offering the same to the temple of its literature (Kamal: 1939). He is a romantic poet and his works show it. Love of nature and idealism, patriotism, universal love, etc. are recurrent subjects of his poems. Hence, *Manipuri Sahityagi Itihas* has all praise for Kamal in the following few lines:

“Instead of avoiding life, Kamal intimates with it; instead of discarding miseries, he worships it.” (Tombi and Ibohanbi: 2001)

Like the English romantic poets – Wordsworth and Shelley, Kamal was overwhelmed by the beauties of nature. While depicting the social condition in the midst of nature, there comes a time when the natural phenomenon has been interwoven with those of his characters and experiences. The degenerated social life of his

time had been discussed with a view to bring them closer to nature. This is expressed in his earlier poem, *Chandranadi*.

The more desolate scene of a neglected Champak tree that grows near the hillside of Canchipur reminds him of the selfishness and dereliction of a degenerated society. This is shown in his poem *Chingya Leihao*. The time was such that as the British had ushered in a new era of colonial dispensation, people in the State of Manipur started changing their way of life, mode of thinking – most particularly in the sense of their tradition and values. The following lines echo this sentiment:

*“For only a blossom flower
Ten others are destroyed
For only a beautiful leaf
Ten twigs are broken. [Translation](Kamal op.cit)*

Unknown to the society, the poet saw the miseries felt by the poor, the cries of the oppressed, pangs and sorrows of human life, etc. Kamal also felt the imperfection of the first half of twentieth century Manipur. As described by other poet, writers and essayists, he also depicted the extreme ‘discrimination of caste and creed prevailing in his society,’ Reflecting the artificial condition of the societal norms which ostracised men and women, he wrote the poem *Nirjanta*. A free English translation of the Manipuri version of the poem runs as follows:

*“The history of society
is not perfect, not perfect.
Talks in the villages
are not resplendent, not resplendent
Living in this society
I am filled with anxiety
And desire to wing away
And wail with loud voice.” (ibid)*

This shows a gulf of difference between outward appearance and inward reality of humanity.

Kamal was much influenced by the various qualities of Manipuri women. Though looked soft, weak, dependant and simple in the outward appearance of Meitei woman, they inwardly faced struggle against the harsh

realities of life like a soft flower amidst the frost of winter. Thus, the poet compared the qualities of Manipuri women with the soft nature of *Leipaklei* (*Kaemferia galangal* linn.). He praised her in the following lines in his poem, *Leipaklei*.

*“It’s soft leaves protect from the summer rain,
It’s soft buds break open the hard earth,
It’s short stem defies the April storms,
Cares not for shelter nor afraid of being trampled
It’s Leipaklei that bravely exists of her will
Never look them down as the weak, O youths”.* [Translation]

Thus, the poet depicted the status of the Meitei women as a symbol of brave and forbearance.

In the poem *Canchipurgi Lemhoubha Makhak* (The remnant of Canchipur), the poet also lamented to see the ruin of the old palace at Canchipur that was once flourishing in the days of yore. This poem reminds us of the day of the royal site of Canchipur which symbolises the long period of the history of Manipur from Rajashri Bhagyachandra (1759-1761) (Iboonghal and Khelchandra: 2012) to the reign of King Chandrakirti (1850-1886) (ibid). Remembrance about the past glory of Canchipur is recurrent theme in many of his few poems. Over and above his love for the past glories of Manipur, he had strong sense of self identity, even in the realm of language of literature which had been neglected for long under the influence of the prevailing political and cultural undercurrents.

Like Chaoba, his introspections reveal that Manipuri literature is also resplendent with the sweet melodies of its own bards. This is expressed in his words ‘not to visit foreign lands in search of the *Koyal* (Cuckoo) (Meitei Kokil). Here Meitei Kokil symbolised the true Manipuri poet who was born and brought up on the soil of Manipur. He found that the State was a granary filled with its traditional values, societal norms and flourishing civilization. Hence, he felt that the State itself was the living source of inspiration in the realm of literature. He without any hesitation stated that those poets born out of the womb of this soil had nothing to copy the societal norms, values and belief of other States. This idea is well expressed in his poem *Chandranadi*. The following lines endeavour to give vent to this feeling:

*“Forsaking the motherland at the cost of one’s life
Man goes in search of wealth.
Let’s unearth O beautiful one precious fame*

Lying buried inside the motherland.” [Translation] (ibid)

As a lover of his mother tongue, he got disillusioned to see the state of ruin with expressive use of loan words in its literature. He handled the poems with a healing touch of tradition to revive Manipuri literature in response to external influences. Such type of inspiration of the revivalism of Manipuri literature may clearly expressed in the following lines from his poem ***Meitei Chanu (Meitei Women)***.

*“After a long period of time
The mother muse of Manipur Literature
Has endowed her temple,
With basketfuls of flower
Let’s worship her. [Translation] (ibid)*

In his later poem ***Chirbidai***, the poet exposed the prevalent social problems because of ethnic variation, selfishness, meanness and untouchability. Moreover, the narrow concept of castism made a great impact on the mind of the poet. Such downtrodden life due to cast, ethnic and racist found expression in this poem:

*“In this human birth
Better unborn to be born a lower caste!
From the society you’ll be excommunicated,
Calling you a ‘Polluted Caste’”. [Translation] (ibid)*

This parochial view of the then Manipuri society was strongly criticised by the poet. On the other hand, he welcomed a broad outlook and nobility of feelings with a vista of future development. This view is reflected in the following lines from ***Chirbidai***:

*“The degenerated society
Falls as low as a creeper
A noble nation
Grows up same as the tree”. [Translation] (ibid)*

In this connection, L. Damodar Singh comments on ***Chirbidai*** saying that this poem is an objective co-relative with his aspiration for a new order of mankind freed from the bondage of falsehood and tradition

(Damodar: 2000). In short, a vivid picture of rebellion against the then prevalent superstition and misconception, and for a newly revived society with full of aspiration can be seen in this poem.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, in the works of the pioneer poet of Manipur, Dr. Kamal Singh, several facets of Manipuri society are clearly reflected. His poems also portray the emergence of a radical change in social and cultural aspects. The waning stage of Manipuri language and literature due to the excessive influence of Sanskrit and Bengali language has clearly been delineated in the poems of Kamal. Moreover, the humble and tragic situation of his motherland under the British colonial rule, the humble, downtrodden and deplorable features of the life of women in the man dominated Manipuri society etc. have also been clearly reflected in the poetic works of Dr. Kamal. Conclusively, it can be summed up that in the light of the study of the above mentioned poems of Dr. Kamal, it is revealed that these poems serve as a mirror of the modern Manipuri Society.

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