

Myths in Manipur Literature

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Abstract. The origin of literature is the presentation of different stories of the myths, which are also connected with religions, rituals. These stories refer usually to prehistoric periods, apparently outside the human world, yet basic to it. A theory of Myths says that the myths are distorted and fragmented historical accounts, exaggerated to superhuman proportions. Myths, thus, arose from the intensification of human qualities, representing our desires, hopes and aspirations. Gods are the embodiments of the feelings of mankind. Moreover, the hostile forces of nature were given human attributes and primitive people started worshipping them as Gods. Myths as had always been associated with religion, also generally had certain moral tags, often in contradiction to scientific and the technological ideas of the modern age. On the other hand, many people consider myths as the imaginative stories. Myths, no longer, could be considered as a part of the reality, even though they are the important part of the culture. The origin of the mythical Gods in the narrative4s and the narratives, in turn are part of the literature. So we can say that God is the creation of literature. Systematic study of the myths started only in the 20th century.

The pattern and trends of myths in Manipuri Literature are remarkably similar to those of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Japan & Korea. God is immortal and can incarnate in many forms. General incarnations of God acted like human beings and they always lived together with mankind in the ancient days. Many of Manipur emerged during this period, when Gods were traversing the ancient land of the Meitei (Manipuris). *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the Royal chronicle records the history of Manipur from 33 A.D. One of the prominent books of the ancient myths of Manipur is *Panthoibi Khongul* which depicts the creation of the universe. Although the work was probably written in 17th century A.D., the legend of the Goddess Panthoibi has seen in existence right from the beginning of civilization of Manipur. Other important works include *Numit Kappa*, *Thawanthaba Hiran*, *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba*, *Tutenglon* and *Chainarol*. These books give us ample account of the early history of Manipur and the culture of the people of Manipur. Another important cultural and religious festival of Manipur is *Lai Haraoba*, which is, perhaps the only indigenous festival of Manipur before the arrival of Hinduism. This festival is the oldest socio-religious ritualistic ceremony from where the performing arts tradition of the Meiteis including several dance forms had originated. It is the most important social festival of the land and still in vogue. Then with the arrival of Hinduism in the 17th century a tremendous change had occurred in the religious practices of Manipur. The forced conversions of the majority of the people to Hinduism and its aftermath had been narrated in many accounts of Manipuri literature. These new traditions along with the old traditions of pre-Hindu period, sometimes, form a beautiful amalgamation in Manipuri Culture.

Keywords: Manipuri God, Myth, Manipuri Literature, Meitei Culture, Lai Haraoba.

1. Introduction

The myth, as we understand in its broadest sense, is a sacred narrative explaining the growth of mankind and the world of man, even though many scholars try to define it as a traditional story in different ways. So far there hasn't been any singular and universal theory of the origin of myth. An interesting theory about the growth of the myth argues that the myths are the distorted and fragmented accounts of true historical events, which in course of time have been magnified and elaborated until the figures in those stories assume the superhuman qualities. And the reason for our intensifying their qualities is simply our desire to achieve those qualities. Thus the incidents in the myths incorporates our hopes and aspirations, pains and pleasures, anguishes, frustrations and the failures. Besides, the abstract ideas and the concepts that we had have been given human attributes in the myth and, thus, creating allegories. Myths, in a sense, arose from the personification of the powerful feelings of mankind. Gods have been developed from the legends about

human beings, as suggested by Euhemerus (c. 320 BC) a long time ago. Euhemerism, however, because of its lack of popular support, doesn't hold any verisimilitude. More popular concepts of myth are found as allegories for natural phenomena or allegories of philosophical or spiritual concepts. Myths have also resulted from the personification of the natural forces and objects. The powerful and hostile forces of nature were regarded by the ancients as gods. The primitive people worshipped the natural phenomena such as fire, sun, air, water, earth, and the sky as manifestations of gods. Such mythopoeic ideas had the tendency to observe the inanimate objects of nature as persons, and not as mere things. All the natural occurrences have been described as the acts of gods; thus myths have been originated.

2. Manuscript

The literatures of the world in the beginning are filled with the presence of myths in different aspects and are concerned with the oral tradition based on religious rituals and ceremonies. In fact, literature started as narratives of the religious rituals in many cultures of the world. These stories ostensibly delineate the religious beliefs but practically unfold the views of the people regarding the historical events and the natural surroundings and the quality of life. The myths and the legends simply tries to relate the events, conditions, and deeds of the people, apparently outside the human world in certain cases, yet basic to it. The incidents and events of the myth appear to have been occurred at a point of time beyond the historical period, often associated with the creation of the universe and the world or at a very early pre-historic time. If we have to trace the growth of the history of myth in literature, we come across a number of chaotic accounts of super human characters or even gods and goddesses, indulging in significant activities of creation, destruction and preservation.

In the beginning myths were associated with religious rituals and the ceremonies. Many of these rituals have been explained in the myths as the mythical events have been commemorated by the rituals. Thus, mythology is almost tied to religion as they cannot be separated. For example Greek mythology cannot exist without ancient Greek religion, as all religious histories are myths. Myths deal with the creation of the Universe and the growth of the world. As myths are stories, the non-narrative part of the religion, such as the ritual itself, cannot be myth. When the ancient man, who was surrounded by the hostile forces of nature and the environment, found their lives being influenced by the forces beyond their control, they have a need to provide some explanation and accounts for the good and evil things happening to them and embodying their experiences too. This phenomenon was perhaps the first step for having beliefs and religious rituals. Such beliefs were based on the implicit assumption that, in spite of all our power and wisdom we are really diminutives against the mighty power of nature. Our sense of helplessness and limitations necessitates the invention of the gods. Supernatural and mystic elements in such a grand design also made us believe in magic, as suggested by the anthropologist James Frazer. He was of the view that, the ancient people have tried to understand the unexplainable laws of nature as magical laws; Later with the growth of logic and science, people gradually became to loose faith in magic and start to invent certain myth about god. The former magical rituals become the religious rituals intended to appease the gods who have become invincible for mankind. Frazer wrote:

- “Thus religion, beginning as a slight and partial acknowledgement of powers superior to man, tends with the growth of knowledge to deepen into a confession of man's entire and absolute dependence on the divine; his old free bearing is exchanged for an attitude of lowest prostration before the mysterious power of the unseen, and his highest virtue is to submit his will to theirs. But this deepening sense of religion, this more perfect submission to the divine will in all things, affects only those higher intelligences who have breath of view enough to comprehend the vastness of universe and the littleness of man” (*The Golden Bough*, page 58-59)¹

When we make an attempt to explain the experiences of our life, both the favourable and the adversaries in magnificently constructed and intricately woven stories of gods and goddesses, we are actually making art and literature. Gradually, such artistic creations have become the rare treasures of mankind. Our great religious scriptures are the finest examples. The function of the myth is to understand the religious rituals and the quality of life that we aspire to possess awakening the sense of awe before the mystery of being. Joseph Campbell wrote, “The first function of mythology is to reconcile waking consciousness to the

mysterium tremendum et facinans of this universe” (The *Marks of Gods* Vol 4.0.4)² Myths also explain the shapes of the universe and validate and support the existing social order. It helps us in understanding our morality against the so-called scientific and technological trends of the modern culture.

And the galaxy of deities, which we find in the mythologies along with other ghosts, spirits, goblins and monsters. are the creations of our belief and imagination. They reflect our lives; they are the symbols of our hopes, our miseries and sufferings, our fears. With our desire to lift the quality of life we live, we gradually have started incorporating the lofty ideals and our desire for everlasting peace and happiness. Thus, the abstract thoughts and strange rituals in religion, art and literature were invented. So myths are narratives relevant to a particular society in which they had been originated and are often considered to be truthful accounts of the incidents that happened in the past. The only measure of truth, however, is our own perception of truth. The poet, Ezra Pound once wrote about the myth:

- It was only when man began to mistrust the myths and to tell nasty lies about the Gods for a moral purpose that the matters became hopelessly confused. Then some unpleasing Semite or Parsee or Syrian began to use myths for social propaganda, when the myths were degraded into an allegory or a fable, and that was the beginning of the end. And the Gods no longer walked in men’s gardens. The first myths arose when a man walked sheer into ‘nonsense,’ that is to say, when some very vivid and undeniable adventures befall him, and he told someone else who called him a liar. Thereupon after bitter experience, and perceiving that no one could understand what he meant when he said that he ‘turned into a tree’ he made a myth- a work of art that is- an impersonal or objective story woven out of his emotion, as the nearest equation that he was capable of putting into words. The story, perhaps, then gave rise to a weaker copy of his emotion in others until there arose a cult, a company of people who could understand each other’s nonsense about the gods. (*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* ed. T.S. Eliot, Faber and Faber Ltd. London, 1968. pp. 431-432)³.

In the 19th century, myths were regarded as fabricated stories prompted by the obsolete mode of thoughts before the birth of scientific ideas. Some scholars claimed that the primitive mentality is a condition of the human mind, and not a stage in its historical development. James Frazer saw myths as associated with magical rituals based on mistaken ideas of natural laws. However, in the 20th century a systematic study of the myths has been taken up seriously and scholars have tried to find out the underlying patterns of the myths of different cultures and religions of the world. Such studies can be stretched to far-fetched interdisciplinary areas permeating every aspect of the culture and society. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the pattern of the myths in literature particularly in the context of Manipuri or Meitei Literature.

Manipur has got a rich cultural heritage because of its strategic location and being situated in the ancient land routes of the people having different cultures and religious. Manipur was one of the three silk routes in the 12th Century A.D. And Manipur shares a number of common features in its religious and cultural practices with a number of countries like China, Myanmar, Thailand, Japan and Korea. as well as India.

The God always lived together with mankind in the ancient days in their various incarnations possessing super human qualities even though they acted like human beings or other creatures. Many of the great myths of the land emerged during this period. They all described the incidents of the pre-historic times. However, as recorded in the Royal Chronicles of Manipur known as the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*⁴ which records the history of Manipur from 33A.D. the gods often took possession of a portion of the land in Manipur and ruled their shares as kings. In course of time the gods gradually disappeared from the world of mankind. There are a number of interesting stories in this regard in the annals of Manipuri Literature. We find a lot of indisputable references to these theories of myths in the remarkable works of ancient Meitei Literature. One just prominent example is one of the ancient works named *Panthoibi Khonggul* composed in the 17th Century. However, the legend of *Panthoibi* in Manipuri culture had been in existence right from the beginning of civilization of Manipur. The oral tradition of literature which had handed down to successive generations as a legacy of the cultural heritage of Manipur has been crystallized in the written form of literature only in the later period of civilisation when we began to use the alphabets and letters. But the history of the Goddess *Panthoibi* is intricately woven in our culture as the genesis of the Bible has become a part of Christian culture. According to the beliefs of the Meiteis the creation of the Earth and the Heaven by the God has been symbolically presented in the history of *Panthoibi*. There are various episodes in their history which points to

the eternal conflicts of the forces of evil and good too, more prominently reflected in the *Leiharaoba*. Abput Lai Haraoba Saroj Parrat writes:

- “The *Lei haraoba*, which may be translated as “the pleasing of the gods’, is probably the greatest single key to Meitei history and culture. Despite two and half centuries of Hindu dominance, the *maibis* (priestess) and *maibas* (priest), largely through the rituals among which the *Lai Haraoba* stands supreme, have successfully preserve the essence of Meitei civilization and the world view. The festival is a vast complex of oral literature, ceremonial and ritual, dance and music, which enshines the soul of the people, and which demonstrates their extraordinary aesthetic capacity. [*The pleasing of Gods*, Introduction XIV]⁵”

Another important work which is concerned with the appearance of Gods in the valley of Manipur [Manipur is not the original name of the land] is called *Poireiton Khunthok*, composed around the 1st Century A.D. Poireiton brought a great change in the history of civilization of Manipur even though he didn’t become the king. The Original name of Manipur is Meitrabak (The land of Meitei) and the Manipuris are Meitei. The importance of this book is not in its historical accounts but in its artistic presentation of the historical facts and as a great and priceless treatise of literature. In 1969, this book was completely revised and rewritten in modern Manipuri with notes by a group of scholars. Since then people have been discussing it as a great work of literature.

Some important works that are concerned with the early periods of the land are *Thawanthaba Hiran*, *Numit Kappa*, *Naothingkong Phambal Kaba*, *Totenglong* and *Chainarol*. *Thawanthaba Hiran* gives an account of the people and the society of Manipur in the 12 Century A.D. when the Manipuris started having some relationships with the countries around her and began to worship the Gods from those strange places. There had been some gradual assimilation of the South-East Asian culture in Manipuri culture along with some Hindu traditions. In *Numit Kappa*, another interesting book, we find an account of how a great archer, Kwai Nungjeng Piba had shot one of the two suns which had been shining in the sky all throughout the day and night. Practically there was no darkness. But it was essential. So it was imperative that one sun should be shot down. Besides, it also gives us an idea of how the art of archery had been practised in ancient Manipur and India and its importance in war. Perhaps that may be the reason why a number of Hindu gods and goddesses had been adorned with bow and arrow. The killing of one of the Sun gods, Taothuireng by the great archer Khwai Nungjeng Piba has been symbolically presented in the text. After the fall of the sun, the mother of all gods, Thongak Lairemma called the sun,

- “O Sun, by reason of thy disappearance, the land of the Meiteis is in darkness day and night. Bring thy warmth over this land and over its villages’ [*The Meitheis*, P 127]⁶”

Allegorically, this book has also presented a truthful account of the society in the medieval period. *Naothingkong Phambal Kaba* deals with the coronation of King Naothingkhong in 763A.D. it gives an account of all the religious rituals practised in Manipur. Some of these rituals are still observed by the Manipuris with great conviction. *Tutenglon* is another important work of literature, where the two brothers started cleaning the rivers of Manipur with the help of the God in heaven. The god Soraren who rules the heaven was approached by the brothers Tauthingmang and Yoimongba [According to the Royal Chronicle, Taothingmang is the king who ruled Manipur during the 2nd half of the 3rd Century A.D.] to help them in cleaning the rivers. The God agreed and they successfully completed the task. It shows the devotion of the rulers to the Gods. *Chainarol* is the art of combat. The inevitable presence of god in the martial arts and the duels, which is very popular among the Manipuris, can be seen in this book. This is a very important treasure of Manipuri Literature. Although the book appears to have been composed in a later period, it gives an account of the tradition of fighting from the early period to the 17th Century, just before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur. There are ample evidences in the book, where the names of many places in Manipur had been given following the combats. These combats, in some way or another, were always instigated by the gods and they frequently made interferences in the combats.

With the arrival of Hinduism in the 17th Century there had been a tremendous change in the religious practices of Manipur. The forced conversions of the majority of the people to Hinduism and its aftermath had been narrated in many accounts of Manipuri Literature. The practices which had been adopted willy-nilly by the people in course of time became the established norms. These new traditions, along with the ancient

indigenous traditions, were in existence simultaneously in Manipuri culture. In some aspects we find a beautiful amalgamation of pre-Hinduism myths and Hinduism myths in Manipuri culture.

3. Conclusion

Thus, the origin of God can be located in the narratives and the narratives in turn are part of the literature. In a sense, we can say that God is the creation of Literature. If there were no Vedic Literature, the Hindu Gods might have never been there. Perhaps that is the reason why Jacques Derrida called God, 'a philosophical fiction' and 'a transcendental signified' which lies beyond all meanings. His famous concept, 'the metaphysics of presence' simply emphasises our desire to create God. Although these concepts mainly deal with philosophy, it is difficult to isolate literature from philosophy in certain contexts. As literature deals with language and words, the philosophical concept of God has to be found in the composition of words. In the Bible, the word has been identified with God. God's manifestation in literature has thus been depicted in the Western myths. Similarly, in the East too, there are ample evidences to suggest this very belief. The sacred book of the Hindus, *The Bhagavata*, which is worshiped by the Hindus just as they worship their Gods, is the home of the Lord, as the Lord Himself entered into the words of *The Bhagavata*. This is what we call a Grand Narrative.

So in all cultures in the portrayal of God, there are certain elements which are common and significant in the sense that mankind shares one earth, one sky and one sun. And human nature is same irrespective of the caste, culture or creed in all places. However, when we look at a particular aspect of the presence of God in Literature either in subdued or explicit form, it is the artistic representation, which is more important. In fact, literature can only artistically present God.

4. References

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