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A New Historicist Perspective on Sonam: a Novel by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi

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Abstract

Any literary texts, as emphasized by new historicist, can never be an independent texts. Literary texts are but the constitution of sociocultural beliefs, religious beliefs and economic conditions of a particular time. Thus, this paper is an attempt to analyze and understand historical factors such as religious beliefs, social practices and cultural discourses that shaped Yeshi Dorjee Thongchi's views and concern in depicting Monpas' and Brokpas' life and society of a particular time. However, the novel Sonam does not guarantee the exact picture of Monpas' life in 1980s. Thus, through the lens of new historicism, this Paper will also run in parallel with the core subject to study changes that have taken place by considering the existing beliefs and economic situations a reader lives, and draw proper conclusion to deliberate on the subjectivity and objectivity of the text.

Keywords: New historicist, sociocultural discourses, religious beliefs, economy, Monpa, Brokpa.

Introduction

According to Study.com, the term 'New historicism' was first coined by an American professor, Stephen Jay Greenblatt in 1982, although such critical approach was first developed by the French philosopher, Michel Foucault. This theory is the counter theory of new criticism coined by John Crowe Ransom in 1941. Abrams & Harpham (2017) believe that new historicism instead of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context attended primarily to the historical and cultural conditions that shaped its production, its

meaning, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations. Literary texts are the product of subjectivity and will be influenced by an author's or reader's self-generated views. In the book titled 'Literary Theory', Ryan (2017) mentioned about how Stephen Greenblatt argues that literature should be understood in relation to the collective beliefs, social practices, and cultural discourses that prevailed when it was written. Thus, 'Sonam' as a literary art is not just a mere composition of Thongchi's views on polyandric culture in Brokpas' and Monpas' community, but rather contains the driving historical factors of 1980s that gave the author a structure of the novel.

New Historicist Perspective on the Novel *Sonam*

Trying to understanding and analyze 'Sonam' through new historicist lens is not possible without tracing the origin of Monpas and Brokpas. The history of their initial settlement would serve as hinges on which new historicism could discharge its lens to unearth the possible driving elements of the writer's development of the novel. Monpas and Brokpas, according to Pokhrel (2015), were first settled in Yamarong village in Tibet. They were highlanders whose livelihood was largely dependent on livestock farming. In the fourteen century, they migrated to what is now known as Arunachal Pradesh in India, and Merak and Sakteng in Bhutan. This migration of Monpas and Brokpas is associated with mythical story of a female deity called Aum Jomo and King Dreba-Yabu of Yamarong village. Pokhrel, in his newspaper article 'Brokpa's Origin Depicted in a Painting', has the following mythical story to share:

A King Dreba-yabu, who was known for his evil deeds, ruled their village. King Drebayabu's palace never received direct sunlight, as the high peak on the eastern side of the palace blocked the light. One day, the king ordered his subjects to blunt the peak. A female protective deity of the village, Aum Jumo, heard about the harsh punishment put on the people. She transformed into a woman with a

baby on her back and visited the site where people were trying to cut the peak. As if she was speaking to the child on her back, she said, “Beheading the king would be easier than cutting the mountain...” The villagers heard her and soon planned a feast for the King, got him drunk and assassinated him. However, the guilt of assassinating the king did not let the villagers live peacefully. They pleaded their *tsawai lam* (root guru) Jarepa to resettle them in a faraway place. (2015)

This mythical association of resettlement of Monpas and Brokpas at a present day locations such as Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh and Sakten in Bhutan gives one an understanding that urge to look for a new habitation was not by choice but was out of necessity. The last two lines of the story, “However, the guilt of assassinating the king did not let the villagers live peacefully. They pleaded their *tsawai lam* (root guru) Jarepa to resettle them in a faraway place”, make a profound stand to justify the claim.

Confined by the extreme geographical setting and isolation, introduction of Buddhism for Monpas, as asserted by Maltesh Motebennur (2009), happened only in the late seventeenth century, before that Bon religion was prevalent amongst the Monpa tribe that included stern belief in deities, animism and animal sacrifice to appease gods. Many orthodox beliefs of Bon practitioners were replaced by the refined concepts of Buddhism, yet few dregs of traditional beliefs and practice are evident when Thongchi (2001) in the novel has narrated about women’s limited access to Broke attributing it to fear of provoking the wrath of household deity Sungma, believing that women are biologically impure and may pollute the place:

If Sonam was taken to the farm and they started living as husband and wife the sanctity of the place would be violated. Any physical intimacy with the wife would incur the displeasure of the Sungma, the household deity of wealth, whereby, good fortune would forsake

the place and epidemics would break loose upon animals of the farm. (Sonam: p.15).

The pressure of such traditional beliefs of the community has forced Lobjang to stay away from his wife which later becomes one of the major causes of conflict. However, at present day time, such notion of impurities and befall of evil consequences on animals and Brokpas has now become void as women are also seen visiting Broke on regular basis, and there is no story revealing the malicious reaction of the deities. This proves that Monpas and Brokpas actually inhabited faulty beliefs and fear, and unnecessarily got themselves into complications that threatened their livelihood.

Belief in animism and its association to Sonam's incurable illness and outbreak of epidemic is also portrayed. One such occasion, when several attempts to kill bore no result, the snow leopard was considered as the embodiment of evil spirit: "Gradually the beast began to assume a diabolic dimension, and the villagers of the region were forced into thinking that he was no ordinary leopard but the incarnation of some evil spirit..." (Sonam: p.72). After many attempts, Lobjang finally gets the upper hand of the vicious leopard and kills it but later this action becomes the cause of Sonam's illness in the eye of the community. Thongchi himself hails from Sherdukpen clan of Monpa that practiced and believed in such Bon-religious thoughts. He might have felt counter pressure on such belief as an educated and intellectual person, and thus wished to change such orthodox religious misconception. At present, the practice of animal sacrifice for ritual has vanished but seeking blessing and protection from deities and notion of animism have still remain rooted as part of magico- religious belief.

The exploration and analysis of origin, religious history and beliefs of Monpas of Tawang and Brokpas of Sakten put readers to acknowledge the strong tie between the two tribes. Their social bond and cross boundary intermingling was not just the attribution of economic desire but more of the same origination, common socio

cultural beliefs and religious affiliations. Since the propagation of Buddhism in seventeenth century, Tawang became the religious center for all Monpas, thus in the novel, one could see Lobjang and his wife making a pilgrimage to Tawang monastery to seek blessing for fertility, and proposing promise to send their children in future to practice Buddhism. The faith in Buddhism and pilgrimage between the two tribes still continues. Especially Brokpas from Merak and Sakten of Bhutan visit Tawang monastery and other religious sites in Tawang, and Monpas of Tawang visit religious sites such as Chorten Kora and Gomphu Kora at Tashi Yangtse in Bhutan.

However, the common practice of sending, especially sons, to become a monk in those days is questionable. Although Lobjang's motive of the promise seemed different, many who took such noble step could have been driven by economic instability that existed during that particular time frame, therefore, parents' deep faith in religion is doubtful. It is evident that Monpas and Brokpas faced severe economic crisis. Agrarian was almost impossible because of geographical location and had no other options but to remain independent on livestock farming, and having more number of children could have aggravated the situation. Even at present, sons and daughters from disadvantaged family are seen becoming monk and nun. Hardly any from wealthy family go to the monasteries to become monk. Whether Thongchi viewed this practice from the same vantage point itself lies in a question.

Thongchi has best reflected the economic situations of 1980s amongst Monpas and Brokpas. The novel makes one to realize that economic conditions during that time was severely insecure. Deprived of modern agricultural technologies and accessible motor roads, agrarian was almost impossible. Brokpas were not able to tackle the climatic setting for any cultivations they desired and was left with only one choice for living, and that was livestock farming. They were heavily reliant on the animal products such as meat, cheese, butter and wool of yaks and sheep which they in the due

course of time traded with Monpas of Tawang with rice, maize, wheat and buckwheat. Lobjang's journey to Dirang district and Kalakatang in Tawang for barter trade is the perfect reflection of the business that took place between Monpas and Brokpas. Needless to mention, one of the prime factors of the commendable kinship developed between the two tribes was the trade relation they had. This could be the very idea of Thongchi to dissolve the boundary between the two Monpa tribes. Otherwise such visible negligence could have been easily avoided by intellectuals like Thongchi when both India and Bhutan know geographical belonging of the places.

Unlike in the past, present-day business relation between the tribes has drastically reduced but not completely stopped. Few Brokpas of Bhutan still trade with Monpas of Tawang, but barter system has almost become a history as every business undertaking is now done on monetary value. Only on rare occasion do they exchange their animal products with cereals from nearby villages such as Radhi and Phongmey in Trashigang. Now, with the access to modern farming facilities, modern education and motor roads, economic difficulties took the revolutionized course in the lives of Monpas. Some climatic appropriate agricultural activities could be seen taking shape, and ideas and strategies of lucrative businesses gave rise to economic status and living standard of these tribal communities, hence reforming their age old sociocultural and religious beliefs. Nevertheless, such advance flip in the lives of Monpas erodes their long held cultures and traditions which may finally lead to extinction of Monpa identity, but the better side of such change may help them blend in with the mainstream society for better life.

The most important theme 'Sonam' focuses is on polyandric culture of Monpa society.

Polyandry is a common system and a socially permissible culture among Monpa community. Such marriage culture, which mainstream society would consider unacceptable, was common in olden days among Monpas. It is clearly noticeable from the novel

that such cultural establishment during that time became necessary for unity in term of economic, property and manpower. In many cases, fraternal polyandry was the preferred one so that whatever little property a family has will remain within a house, but in the novel Thongchi mentions about nonfraternal polyandry and its problems. Thongchi as an insider has viewed the dark side of such system and has questioned the moral idea behind polyandry. How the notion of polyandry can be misinterpreted by practitioners is quite observable when the protagonist, Sonam replies:

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

Learning Sonam's reply to her husband Lobjang tells one about how in the name of socially accepted culture, primary objectives of polyandry fail to function, and instead become the source of conflict and despair. Now, owing to boost in economic capacity and development in these tribal communities, such cultural practice is diminishing.

Greener pasture, (2014), mentions that Monpa society is patriarchal. The man is the head of the family and is the one who takes all decisions. Women are confined only in household chores, and this is what exactly Thongchi has portrayed in the novel. Sonam's confinement in the house mirrors patriarchal authority of Lobjang, and not only that even the younger husband, Pema Wangchuk remains subjugated under Lobjang. Monpa does not differentiate themselves based on caste but their position were defined by their wealth. Property was inherited only by male heirs which in another word is known as patrilineal. Seemingly, polyandry culture appears

to provide freedom for women but reality gives the different views on it. Women were seen gossiping and disgusted about non-fraternal involvement of Pema Wangchuk with Sonam and Lobjang within themselves, but their voices were mute in male compound. In the novel, the firm influence of patriarchal ideology is propounded through the opinions of the characters in different situations. The best note of patriarchy is engraved in Lobjang's words when he talks with Pema Wangchuk: "Women are like dogs, whoever pats them on their back-they will meekly follow him, and will snarl and snap at him who once in his life speaks or behaves badly". (Sonam: p. 86).

Conclusion

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi hails from Monpa tribe known as Sherdukpen in Arunachal Pradesh. His historical background is no difference than that of any other Monpa tribes. As an insider, Thongchi has witnessed the life of Monpas of that particular time, and has depicted it in the novel 'Sonam'. Although the novel revolves round the ideology of polyandry and the dark sides of such culture, Thongchi's idea of the novel is not to inform about the exotic nature of Polyandry but to give an objective insight to such tribal customs and beliefs. As cited by Dutta (2011), "Sonam is not only a mere literary text with a triangular love story but a social document of the Brokpas." Thus, the novel just cannot be viewed through one way interpretation but rather must be viewed in parallel with historical information associated. This novel is not to celebrate but to dispel the notion of fascination and to reveal the reality of such practices. Yeshe Dorji Thongchi's hope for a change is evident at the end of the novel: "That preparation was an act to keep the world alive, and endeavor to build a new life, and a gesture to forget the past and shape a new future." (p. 124).

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