



Khamba Thoibee Sheireng: A Postcolonial Reading

Dr. Elangbam Hemanta Singh

Assistant Professor in English & Research Guide (MU)

Manipur College, Imphal, Manipur (India)

Abstract

This paper presents a postcolonial reading of Hijam Anganghal's "Khamba Thoibee Sheireng", a foundational Manipuri epic that records indigenous social life while exposing entrenched structures of power, exclusion, and marginality. Though rooted in legend and romance, the epic articulates experiences that align closely with postcolonial concerns of subalternity, labour, representation, and cultural recovery. For this study, book-1, "Cattle Herding Job" is selected from the poem, "Khamba Thoibee Sheireng" based on the English translation by Jodha Chandra Sanasam (1–14), published in 2016. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the study examines how Khamba and Khamnu emerge as figures shaped by inherited dispossession within Moirang society. Introduced as "two Kege destitute souls destined as Moirang orphans" (1), they occupy a social position marked by poverty, invisibility, and lack of institutional voice. Through an analysis of labour, gendered survival, and moral endurance, the paper argues that this epic functions as an act of indigenous cultural reclamation that restores marginalised experience to historical memory.

Keywords: Khamba Thoibee Sheireng, Postcolonialism, Subalternity, Identity, Cultural Memory.

Introduction

Based on the English translation by Jodha Chandra Sanasam (1–14), published in 2016, Book-1 "Cattle Herding Job" is chosen for this study from the poetry "Khamba Thoibee Sheireng of Anganghal", which is regarded as a romantic epic of virtue and love holds a special place in Manipuri cultural memory. Social injustice, marginalisation, and deprivation all exist beneath the surface of this epic. When examined from the viewpoint of postcolonial discourse, this epic is also about power relationships within the context of Moirang society and how they affect the lives of peripheral people.

The opening of the epic immediately establishes a world divided by class and lineage, a "Manichean world" (Fanon 41) that Fanon describes as being "divided into compartments" (Fanon 37). Khamba and Khamnu are introduced as "two Kege destitute souls destined as Moirang orphans" (Anganghal 1). Their status as orphans is more than a biological fact; it is a socio-political condition of being "hemmed in" (Said 376) by a society that has forgotten their father's former glory. Khamnu's life is defined by "menial toil" and "paddy husking", where her physical body bears the marks of subalternity: "Eroded your palm's skin

has; thinned out your head, the top has” (Anganghal 1). This physical toll reflects what Fanon calls the “sheer physical fatigue” that stupefies the oppressed. Khamnu’s labour is invisible and unvoiced, fitting Spivak’s description of the subaltern woman who “cannot speak” (Spivak 283-284) or be heard within the dominant institutional frameworks. She is begging “door-to-door for rice grains” (Anganghal 1), illustrating a state of total dependence. Khamba’s desire to enter the workforce marks the beginning of his transition from a passive spectator to a “privileged actor” (Fanon 36) on the stage of history. He tells his sister,

Strong I have grown up; let me replace you, my sister dear!
To the Kege riches, I Khuman will go earn wages,
look after you sister dear I want to, what do you say? (Anganghal 1)

However, Khamba’s entry into the public sphere is fraught with the dangers of a society that classifies people by status. Khamnu fears for him, noting that in the “Kege milieu,” he is an orphan with no one to stand and support (Anganghal 2). This anxiety reflects Said’s observation that “the colonial world” is a “world of empire” (Said 14), where the native must learn to “stay in his place” (Said 376). Khamba’s decision to seek work at the residence of Prince Chingku Naha Telheiba is a movement into “overlapping territories” (Said 93), where the world of the destitute orphan meets the world of the royal elite.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said contends that culture can never be innocent but, rather, that it contributes to “the consolidation of authority” (129) and the process of naturalising that is, behaving as though hierarchy, “a very strong spatial hereness is put upon the hierarchy” (131). Anganghal’s epic commits this act in the manner that it depicts an aristocratically privileged society as normal, while the condition of extreme poverty is not visible. The author introduces Khamba and Khamnu as, “two Kege destitute souls destined, as Moirang orphans” (Anganghal 1); thus the description of Khamba and Khamnu serves to situate them outside the protections and recognition of any social or cultural institution.

Frantz Fanon remarked in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* that oppressive regimes create subjects who experience both psychological alienation and material deprivation in ways that constrain them for being “hemmed in” (52). The earliest years of Khamba’s life exemplify how limited access to resources as well as emotional support meant that survival had become, for him, an everyday struggle instead of providing him any opportunity for bettering his circumstances. Here, we also see that Spivak’s question about the ability of the subaltern to articulate their thoughts and experiences remains relevant, since Khamba and Khamnu can exist within a sharing environment, and possess an abundance of ideas to express, but possess no means or outlets for articulating their thoughts and, or experiences within that space due to them being on a journey toward silence (286-287).

Social hierarchy is both a structural backdrop and an active force shaping individual destiny in “Khamba Thoibee Sheireng”. The foundation of social hierarchy within Moirang is based on inherited status, ritual authority and proximity to those in power. This provides very little opportunity for those who do not have lineage or wealth. As stated “two Kege destitute souls destined as Moirang orphans” (Anganghal 1), Khamba and Khamnu are placed in the lowest position within a Moirang system of hierarchy from the beginning of their lives. As such their position as marginalised individuals is not a result of coincidence; their marginalisation results from their structural position within a social system which creates value through birth.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon’s definition of an oppressive society as “a world divided into compartments... if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies” (Fanon 37-38) is exceptionally pertinent to today’s society where rigidly institutionalised social boundaries are common. In the case of Moirang, rather than using force to maintain

the established order of unequal status, social traditions create a sense of normality for the less fortunate and thus lead to an acceptance of that status, as “the established order serve(s) to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and of inhibition” (Fanon 38). The impoverished class (Khambas) are themselves invisible because of how poverty, when it exists in a large proportion of society, as we see 100% of total population, is interpreted socially as being unqualified for regular employment within the formal economy. This social blindness is demonstrated through Khamba's experience upon his entry to the elite. Further, Khamba, because of his economically restricted condition, cannot be understood as an intelligent, socially constructed individual. When, for example, he is brought before the elite, i.e., before “Prince Chingku Naha Telheiba,” they speculate about him as being either “a native of the mountains” or “a deity,” voicing their inability to conceptualize Khamba as anything other than a “native” or “deity” (Anganghal 5-6).

According to Edward Said, the dominant group is able to retain its power on the basis of creating their own interpretive “frameworks” through which the dominated group is defined. The effect of this is that the dominated group has no way to define itself and, by extension, has no “self-definition” (Said 78, 79, 418). Consequently, the identity of Khamba is constructed by others and much of what he has experienced and lived is not represented in his identity. Khamnu's experiences as an agricultural worker further demonstrate the economic model under which the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the agricultural worker and the capitalist is created. Khamnu's viewpoint about the labour she performs and the loss of economic value as a result of the production of that work the labourer may receive only “one fifth” or “two for ten” of the value of his work (Anganghal 4) is a perfect example of how the naturalisation of the exploitation of the working class has been absorbed into the working class and that there is no hope of attaining higher economic status for the labourer. The original observation in relation to the poor can only survive in full accordance with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's statement regarding the subaltern is located in society but “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”(287). The insurgent peasant is an example of a subaltern who cannot transmit a direct message as a “sender” of expression. Instead, the message is indicative of “an irretrievable consciousness” that has been lost in the course of history. While we may observe an insurgent act, we will not have access to the psychological experience that occurred at the time of the act of resistance (287). In the case of Khamba and Khamnu, their words, actions, and sufferings are all valid; however, none of these aspects of their existence holds institutional authority. The epic not only documents individual hardship but also the operation of a social structure that produce “silence” and dispossession through systematic processes.

In “Khamba Thoibee Sheireng”, the act of working has been established as being both something that must be performed because it is required by society while at the same time is a moral test for those people who are located on the margins. For Khamba, working is not merely a method used to sustain oneself; it is the sole opportunity available to him for achieving social status. His assertion that he will “dig the earth... cut the thatch ... and earn” (Anganghal 3), suggests that he is trying to obtain respect through the use of his physical body in a community that does not afford him any respect by virtue of his birth. The body of Khamba has therefore become the most significant means of negotiating one's life as a subaltern.

According to Frantz Fanon, when people are oppressed by systemic deprivation they view their bodies as burdens, but they are also the only remaining way that they can exert some amount of agency. His view is that, when oppressed people must fight to survive due to physical insecurity, survival becomes the ultimate act of resistance against the oppression they experience in many facets of their daily lives, creating what he calls a “permanent tension” due to the insecurity of basic material existence (Fanon 52). The labour that Khamba does represents this sense of “permanent tension” between his decision to work in order to protect his integrity and the resulting fatigue and exploitation that accompany that labour. Labour doesn't offer him the potential for transformation but instead only puts off when he will die.

Khamnu's voice complicates an idealised vision of labour put forward by Anganghal. As explained by Khamnu only "one-fifth" of the worth of labour is realised as monetary value (Anganghal 4), and the other four-fifths illustrate the inequality inherent in the economic relations that exist in Moirang's society. The poorest people work tirelessly, but are routinely offered less than they deserve for their hard work. As stated by Frantz Fanon, systems of oppression extract from the marginalised the value of their labour, while denying them recognition (52). Khamba chooses the path of endurance and refuses to compromise his morals through either begging or negotiating. The suffering of his body publicly represents his criticism of the way in which society determines worth by birth rather than effort. Labour is thus not the destruction of the social hierarchy; rather, labour becomes a critique of the injustice associated with the social hierarchy by exposing the humanity of the marginalised.

The experience of subalternity in "Khamba Thoibee Sheireng" varies according to gender, age and responsibilities; while Khamba is confronted with poverty through physical labour, Khamnu must experience the more hidden but no less strenuous aspects of emotional vigilance and ethical care. As an older sister, her role also includes guardianship, thereby making her an individual that experiences the gendered implications of being in a marginal position more profoundly than others do. Her subaltern position is doubled in that she not only suffers from poverty but is also subject to the expectations of women in social settings.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak stated that the subaltern woman is "even more deeply in shadow" than the subaltern man (287). This statement is especially salient in regard to Khamnu. Although Khamnu voices her opinion multiple times, she cannot yet freely express these opinions in public forums of authority. Her words of warning about hunger, exploitation, and survival are practical and pragmatic; they reflect her awareness of the restrictions imposed by the structure of society. In contrast to heroic proclamations made by others, her words are grounded in her lived experience of necessity. Her worry of insufficient labour particularly the repeated reminder that labour is valued at "one fifth" (Anganghal 4) of what it yields, demonstrates the interaction between economic exploitation and gendered role of responsibility. She must constantly prepare for scarcity, take on fear, and manage emotional labour so that Khamba may continue fighting for a better future. Her ability to endure this form of labour is largely disregarded in Moirang's societal hierarchy, which illustrates the invisibility of women's contributions to society.

Nevertheless, the sibling relationship between Khamba and Khamnu serves as a vital point for contesting those perceptions of society's support system that have failed to provide for them. Together, Khamba and Khamnu build an environment of collaboration and resiliency, guaranteeing survival through the absence of outside support. This collaboration does not consist of media portrayals of heroic acts; rather, it is demonstrated by the everyday work that is done through each other's daily support. The epic asserts that Khamnu provides evidence of gendered forms of strength and resilience that exist on the periphery of civilized society, indicating that everyday forms of resilience must exist within all people, despite what society may believe.

The method of resistance in "Khamba Thoibee Sheireng" has evolved very gradually and is based more on ethical beliefs than on military confrontations. Following Fanon's ideas, Fanon states that "the idea of social and individual liberation" is a process that creates "new men" that reshape how they see themselves through the act of "consciousness" (304). The moral integrity and patience exhibited by Khamba are an example of how actions reduce the value of elite-ego formation and the basis of legitimacy in society. The new basis for recognising people is based on their character, not their bloodline or money. This evolution of a new basis for recognition in Moirang society changes the ideology of Moirang society and allows for the possibility of moral transformation.

According to Said cultural texts can serve as counter-narrative by documenting “official narratives” the lives of those who have been left out of the accepted histories (434, 329). “Khamba Thoibee Sheireng” does precisely this as it places emphasis on those who are marginalised to record the experiences of both poverty and perseverance that are central to the Manipuri identity. It therefore becomes a mode of recovering from post-colonialism and returning dignity to the oppressed, as these people are usually omitted from history based on their subordinate position.

Conclusion:

By examining “Khamba Thoibee Sheireng” through the lens of Postcolonialism, we can view this work as an exploration of the concepts of power, marginalisation, and moral resilience, all within the context of an indigenous society. The work is not merely a romantic legend; it shows us the way that differences in status have been created by society, how those differences are maintained and eventually corrected through experience. The stories of Khamba and Khamnu are illustrative examples of this social construct of poverty and the silencing of the marginal voice, as well as showing us the ethico-political consequences of the idea that human value is determined by family heritage over human dignity. .

Looking at the perspectives of Fanon, Said and Spivak allows us to read the epic as a story about the existence of the subaltern and not just an individual who has suffered misfortunes. While Fanon emphasises the embodied struggle of an individual, he also shows the way that Khamba uses his work to demonstrate his dignity in spite of being dispossessed of his homeland, as well as his family. In addition, Said’s definition of culture as a place where power is naturalised helps to explain how the Moirang society’s system of inequality is made normal and unquestionable. Spivak’s analysis of how subalterns speak for themselves resonates with Khamba and Khamnu being less audible in society, and therefore only being able to express themselves through the authority of the elite.

What stands out about Anganghal’s work is that he does not use fantasy or denial as a way of resolving suffering. He presents evidence of suffering slowly and under specific circumstances without compromising the obvious need for equitable social justice. The use of slow and conditional recognition provides an important setting for the critical analysis of the epic poem itself. The poem is critical of both the romanticisation of poverty and the uncritical celebration of endurance, and instead of glorifying these acts as heroic the poem shows that they are moral acts of survival which have been created due to oppressive circumstances.

“Khamba Thoibee Sheireng” asserts that indigenous epics can be viewed as locations for social thought. Additionally, this epic asserts that the post-colonial theory does not exist as an externally applied theory to be used with the text; rather, the text provides meaningful insight into the structure of power, exclusion and resistance from within its own culture. Future research could further clarify how these types of indigenous narratives will expand the current post-colonial discourse, by creating a connection with local customs, historical memory and experiences, thus enhancing the postcolonial field to include not just colonial encounter but also postcolonial experience.

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