



KWTHAM KOTHOMA: FOLKTALES, CINEMA AND THE TRIBAL NARRATIVES FROM THE ORAL NARRATIVE TO THE DIGITAL STORY-TELLING

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Abstract : This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between human society and nature through the making and practice of digital filmic space of the three tribal based folktales of Tripura, Chethuang, Nuai and Kuchuk Kherengbar. The result of the study is the outcome of the fieldwork experience, the fieldwork encounter and fieldwork engagement in the process of making these folktales into the film. The study considers the film as an ethnographic study and looks at the oral tradition and the folktales in establishing the moral values of its folkloric and ecology and the indigenous knowledge that passed on from one generation to the other generation through the oral tradition. The oral tradition and the ecological knowledge had been restricted only till the minds of the audience and memory through the creative imagination. The present study encounters the intervention of digital technology brings democratization in indigenous based knowledge sharing while at the bringing redemption of physical realities through the process of archiving the folktales in the form of a film.

Keywords: Folktales, redemption of physical realities, Kwtham kothoma, Indigeneity

Introduction

Folktales feed an amusing array of knowledge on the tradition, values and socialization arrays of a community. The art of storytelling has been cultivated in all ages and among all nations of which we have any record; "it is the outcome of an instinct implanted universally in the human mind." The Tribal community of Tripura in the north-eastern part of India shares this love of storytelling. *Kwtham Kothoma* explores the three tribal based folktales of Tripura from a different narrative. The work of fiction outside the realms of oral story telling; this work attempted the process of collaborative work in visualizing them through the lenses in the form of cinema. In Tripura and elsewhere, the term '*Kerang kothoma*' has been broadly used in literal sense to mean any short narrative of fictional and fantasies stories told orally passing from one generation to the coming generation. The three folktales of course teach 'lessons' by example and punishment. Folktales effectively teach children moral and important values of our own culture and these values are imparted to them through fascinating stories and fascinating characters involving supernatural powers and linking the symbiotic relationship between man and nature. The very idea of films or cinema is

exotic form of representation that the tribes felt and how in the process of making the film that we had undergone several stages from the pre-production, production and the post production. There were hurdles in indigenous film making from both aesthetic negotiated representations to the technical changes in the region. This involves different sections; the process dealing with research and reece and the learning and collaborative process comprising of formulation of script and selection of sites and location. Second section of this experience deals with the Making that includes the preparation, the training, selection of actors and the actual production as research. The third section cover a wide range of the storyline and the filmic elements: this section of the practice elaborately describes how through stories visual imageries are creatively constructed linking stories with that of tribal culture, the location, the sets, the costumes, the ornaments, gender role and social functions, the language as people narrate stories, they intend to express and explore their ideas about the world and their place in it (Goldberg). Customs, rituals, traditions and the tribes social structure we witnessed. The last part of the study explains the periphery of the interconnectedness of each actors of the project and films, the people: the filmmakers, the team comprising both the production technical crew and the cast crew and their role and who they are.

This paper describes how film as a medium captured the image of a long imagined stories, narrating the work of art and the form and content of the art. 'Kothomas' are stories told by someone who is creative in story-telling. The art of storytelling is itself an art; the nature of narratives defined audience and that's how these stories are immortalized. Folktales are accepted on faith; they are forced to believe in child's fantasy of imaginative mind. 'Kwtham Kotham' is about the film maker inquisitiveness as researcher to know how different versions of a folktales told by different individuals represent differently at different point of time. The three popular tribal based folktales of Tripura: *Chethuang*, *Nuai* and *Kuchu-Kherengbar* is selected. The film is a confessional form of a narrative in Kokborok, a local dialect spoken by group of tribal community in Tripura. This study focuses on the process of making folktales from a popular oral narrative into a creative cinematic representation. In view of a renowned historian Prof. Sukhendu Debbarma:

"Oral tradition and oral sources of history constitute the bulk of the sources where the past history of any society could be reconstructed. Oral tradition is therefore a reliable source because non- literate societies have always from time immemorial used the oral mode, of which oral tradition is an integral part for the transmission of their history, values, customs, traditions, folklores, folktales etc. from one generation to another uninterruptedly."

(Prof. Sukhendu Debbarma, 13th February, 2020: **Extract From the Speech**)

The natures of oral traditions are very valuable in stimulating and promoting cultural heritage of any society. The genres of oral literature serve many functions in any society- in the form of education, rituals and belief, promotes and encourages conformity to cultural norms. The oral traditions, in essence, almost always tends to capture cultural reality of any society. Oral tradition covers a wider range of subject matter and can be found in a variety of forms as indicated earlier. Oral tradition is different from personal knowledge as it is an aggregate of the community's cultures handed down from one generation to another uninterruptedly. Before any information is passed for a tradition, it must have been preserved and passed down by a much older generation to another. The information must of course, is orally transmitted. The bulk of oral traditions comprise folktales, folklores and folksongs. The fundamental difference between folklore

and folktale is that the folklore refers to the traditional beliefs and stories of a community. Folktales, on the other hand, refer to the stories that have been passed down from the ancestors of a particular group of people to the younger generations. This highlights that folktales are a part of folklore. Specifically, folktales were most often employed to share a common history, to reinforce cultural values or highlight important traditions. Folktales have lived for centuries and have been told and retold. They have been found valuable and are still relevant today- in the light of the objective of the study, a detailed analysis of these three folktales (*Chethuang*, *Nuai* and *Kuchuk Kherengbar*) through the cinematic landscape as digital story-telling of the Kokborok speaking community are discussed.

Kwtham Kothoma(The Three folktales)

The three folktales visualizes the three popular tribal based folktales of Tripura, Chethuang, Nuai and Kuchuk Kherengbar from the oral narrative to cinematic landscape. Since the days of our childhood stories from the older generation had always been our passion. We consider all these older generation as our heroes. One of the reasons they have always been our heroes is the reason they could share the emergence of their experiences and imagination. They see the same thing but could share different experience and opinion, listening to them helped us shaped our perceptions of these centuries old orally told story which were restricted to only till the mind and imaginations and we could only hear them. The intervention of digital technology has re-defined the tribal society from our own perspectives. The construction of tribal culture had always been looked from different perspectives. In the olden days there were no special tool or high technology, it was an agrarian society. Yet these stories voiced for ages and passed on from one generation to the other generation yet they always remained inside. The cinema medium has created new revolution that started telling humanity our own stories and enabled us to re-presents ourselves. We have our own story to tell, we have our own history, identity, culture, religion and traditions. We have our own way of seeing and telling; others cannot destroy us, now we too can tell story of our own. The early records of photographs and videos did not tell much of our stories nor narrates our history, but depicts the colonial minds in us. Scholar Rochelle Ann Lepcha opines the initiative of the project as it reads:

“Archives Kokborok films, documentaries, interviews and video footages collected by the scholar from his fieldwork experiences, encounters and the outcome. It simultaneously invites others to upload their works on Kokborok Cinema and culture that remain scattered in the World Wide Web and details out their work and background. This provides a common platform for easy accessibility and unifies likeminded individuals: the researchers and filmmakers to preserve and archive Kokborok culture through video collectives. It brings visibility to the imagination of the creative individuals by translating their inner imagination through cinematic landscapes. The researcher envisions to link Kokborok speakers and the world outside by making Kokborok culture visible in the web.”

(Rochelle Ann Lepcha, July 18, 2020: **Face to Face interview**)

It would be worth considering that one of the greatest revolutions in tribal society is perhaps the ‘Redemption of Physical Reality’ through the cinema medium and the basic concept Siegfried Kracauer emphasized in his Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, wherein he discussed the formative was to strive for the *“artistic”* to use the influence from the older arts, while the other tendency, the *“realistic”* was to take the pride in the verisimilitude of cinematic reproduction and its ability to capture and

preserve unadulterated actuality of events and views. The early society relied on the oral tradition in preserving to record of their histories, and folklores and customs in the absence of written histories and even the early Egyptian civilization records the collection of oral wisdoms and traditions when Herodotus visited Egypt way back in 454 BC from the priests, who were the custodians of the archives. Similar is in the case of the Kokborok speaking community of Tripura, and the folktales is the reflection and the visualization of the dialogue between me as a film maker and researcher with the priest, his son in law and the priest's wife.

"It connects the digital story-telling exercise that captures the audience's attention that emotionally connect with them. With the changing time and modernization, the traditional and oldest means of transmission of these folktales from one generation to the other has been preserved and narrated in the form of a movie for the future generations to keep their culture alive. By doing so, these folktales can be pushed beyond the boundaries of the tribal community of Tripura and can be prevailed in the global platform to benefit the entire human race."

(Rani Baruah, 12th April, 2023: **Face to Face Inter interview**)

The film Kwtham Kothoma crafts an intriguing plot, well-developed characters, captivating dialogues with English subtitles, visual imagery, and effective use of cinematic elements like cinematography, sound and editing to convey the story's message or theme to the world outside the Kokborok speaking community.

Landscaping the Chethuang through cinema

The first story, Chethuang is recreated and visualized by these characters, Erena Debbarma, Dipra Kishore Debbarma, Madhusudan Debbarma, Rima Debbarma, Naruttam Debbarma, Binod Debbarma, Rahul Debbarma, Budha Debbarma, Amulya Ratan Jamatia, Parilosh Debbarma, Priti Debbarma, Rabi Laxmi Kalai, Belati Kalai, Hamari Debbarma, and Reshma Debbarma describes the story of a girl who is extremely ashamed, embarrassed and pained at her brother's desire to marry her. She takes the help of a Chethuang tree which grows up higher and higher away from her brother, family and society to the height of the clouds. The film starts with a narrator who narrates the folktale of Chethuang that takes the audience to the flashback. The story is about a family who lives in a small village, the son, the daughter, society and the resilience of a girl against the inequality in the society. The son was elder to the daughter; along with them, lived their mother, father and an old grandmother who was blind, in their family is a symbolic to the symbiotic relationship between the nature and society when the community fails the tree relieved the girl from the misery of the world. The villagers were surprised since the tree kept on growing higher and higher. The cutting of the roots didn't help in preventing the growth of the tree. Having failed to cut down the tree the father asked her to climb down the tree and said to her, "I will not let your brother marry you." The elder brother pretended to accept this fault and requested her to come down but the story ends in tragedy as a branch of the Chethuang tree fall on the elder brother and is believed to have died of his sin. The top of the tree where the girl was sitting continued to reach the height of the sky. The girl finally bid goodbye to her parents and then disappeared in the clouds of the sky. Since then, the story of Chethuang tree is remembered by the villagers in their folktale. This story, apart from showcasing the transition of a primitive society

allowing incest to a more civilized one, shows how a human being, a girl, out of her utter frustration and despise of the society around her, takes help from the mother nature and finally takes refuge amidst the nature itself.

Mapping the folktale through Nuai

The second story of the movie is about Nuai (The pelican bird). This filmic characters are played by Jesmita Debbarma, Jasmin Debbarma, Manoj Debbarma, Payel Debbarma, Madhu Laxmi Kalai, Ram Singh Kalai, Santana Debbarma, Sonia Debbarma, Mangal Debbarma, Bishwajit Debbarma, Barnajoy Tripura, Saslang Jamatia, Gomati Kalai, Mwachang Debbarma, Sumitra Kalai, Ranita Kalai, Bishwapati Kalai, Rina Kalai, Mallika Kalai, Korati Kalai, Baburai Kalai, Rohan Kalai, Mangalpati Kalai, Tapan Jamatia, Lipika Jamatia, and Manjoori Kalai. This is a story of two step sisters who were treated differently. There lived a Jhum cultivator whose family consist of his old parents, his wife and his two daughters. The cultivator was compelled to re-marry for the second time after his first wife's death. Both his daughters had a hearty love for each other. They together worked in the house and in the jhum fields offering a helping hand to their father but, their mother is always unhappy at the two step sisters for not obeying her rules. The mother always taught them to eat together at home with their elders, but they don't listen to her and eats by themselves, which makes her angrier. Khumbarti, the elder daughter of the cultivator is always being criticized by her elders and asked to change her manners, yet remained extremely careless in doing her works. She and her step-sister, one day, brought a pot filled with water, from which she unintentionally dropped water and also broke the pot while placing it down. But, her grandmother, her father and her step-mother, all scolded her for being so irresponsible despite being the elder one. No one ever praised Khumbarti for her work. She was always ill-treated by almost member in the family, especially by her step-mother. This made Khumbarti sad and jealous towards her sister, as she thinks that everyone mistreated her because of her younger sister, Khumpui. Khumbarti was forced to spend her days in the cage as a punishment for some mistakes she has done. She was to endure to all bitter days of the heat of the sun rays during the hot sunny days, cold winter nights. She wanted each member of the society to help her in getting out of the cage but was treated like an animal as nobody, came forward to free her from the cage. Khumbarti was denied to drink even to feel a drop of water during her thirst and have food during severe hunger. Khumpui loves her elder sister very gravely and shed tears for her elder sister. One fine day, while Khumpui was cutting betel nuts, Khumbarti asked her of the knife to chop off her nails. Hiding from her parents, Khumpui dared to give the knife to her elder sister, on receiving the knife, she cut the cage and escaped by herself. Khumbarti then went to the field and looked towards the blue sky. She looked at the Nuai birds, flying in one corner of the sky and would think within herself if she could fly in the blue sky like those birds. She prayed to the birds flying in the remote sky in a rhythmic tune of the song:

*Oh, my Nuai birds,
Look at me.
Bring me feathers,
For, in the blue sky
I intend to fly.*

Oh my nuai birds,

*Pick me up.
Bring me some beaks, to eat
For nuai birds I wish to be.*

*Oh nuai,
Lend me a pair of legs,
Just like you, to scratch.*

*Nuai,
Lend me one eye to see the world and fly.*

The hearts of the Nuai birds melted, as they hear to the tragic prayer song of Khumbarti. They fly down in folk and each of them presented her with a single feather. Khumbarti, thus got a loads of feathers. She collected each of them and arranged in an order. She went to her aunt and requested for asking for a needle and thread. But, she didn't have any. She went to her neighbors as well, and luckily got a spine of porcupine along with some thread from one of her sister. Khumbarti, then gathered all the feathers given to her by the folk of Nuai birds and made a fine dress of a Nuai bird by needling them with thread. When this dress was made up, she wore the dress and felt immense strength in her body, as if she was really a Nuai bird. She made several attempts to fly and and was successful by means of the two wings, sat on a tree. Her heart leaped up with joy of freedom. She moves here and there, flying over the house. Her sister Khumpui, saw her transforming into a bird and requested her to come down. Khumpui cried out loudly and called her parents, and nearby villagers. They all together, eagerly requested Khumbarti to come down. The father asks for forgiveness telling her that, he punished her not because he hated her but to correct her. Leaving behind her family Khumbarti flew away along with the Nuai birds high up in the sky telling them to live happily. Later, she became over ambitious and greedy in becoming the chief of the Nuai folk that cause her to end her life. The story ends on a tragic note showing how Khumbarti was misunderstood and misrepresented by everyone and she was held captive because of her unintentional doings. The visual image of the movie and the amount of grief that is portrayed via music, is adequate to understand whatever be the pain Khumbarti had gone through. She broke all the bars of her life and went for a free, independent life away from all and finally her own greed pushed her to death.

The world through Kuchuk Kherengbar

The third and the last story of the movie "Kwtham Kothoma" is the folktale of Kuchuk Kherengbar. This part of the movie was starred by Rangolee Debbarma, Santa Debbarma, Sudipta Debbarma, Sanjit Debbarma, Keshab Debbarma, Binode Debbarma, Birchandra Debbarma, and Partha Rupini. The film depicts and describes how a couple was transformed to a Hulok (a whooping monkey), and his wife transforming into a lizard as the man dared to pluck some forbidden Kherengbar (orchid) flowers on the assertion of his beloved wife who was attracted to the sweet fragrance of those flowers and wanted to put them around her hair. This story is about a disputes between two families, one belonging to the elite class and the other from the inferior class. One family had a daughter and the other a son. Once upon a time, both

the families reside in the same village but due to some internal conflict, the poor family left the village and started living in an isolated place far away from the village. One day, being questioned by the son of the poor family, his parents narrated him the story and the reason for leaving the big village. The father told him that he broke the customary laws of the village and in a social gathering he requested the chief (that belong to the rich family) of the village to amend the laws, which made the chief angry and ordered him to leave the village. The father decided to never return back to the village at any cost and therefore, they live alone in an isolated area. The son heard this melancholic story of his parents and had his dinner with his parents and went to sleep with a broken heart.

The story then, shifts to a girl who was guarding the paddy fields from birds, animals and other wild creatures. The boy too was guarding his crops and saw the beautiful girl from a distant location. He tried to hide himself from the girl but she saw him gazing at her. Seeing him, she said him in a rhythmic tone:

Hmm...

Your wandering gaze...

Honor me by your name...

Oh...

I would see this charming face for once...

If you stop hiding...

To which the boy also replied her back in a rhythmic tone-

Ehhh...

I didn't gaze...

Taking shade under the tree...

Ehhh...

Now I see you...

My pleasure...

Fulfill your desire...

The girl again replied-

Ehhh...

To do or not will decide later...

Will you come to me...

The boy said-

Ehhh...

I will come but do not taunt me after..

The girl said-

Ehhh...

I invite you to come here...

The boy replied-

Ehh...

The fault may be in the stars...

But I shall come now...

In the later part of the story Rwmai and Lari, both decided to elope and roamed in the forest, so that no one could see or catch them. The time passed by and as they continued roaming and hiding from the society they were exhausted and decided to take some rest. The place where they were resting was filled with a sweet fragrance of the wild orchid. They both went in search to find out the source of the fragrance where it comes

from. The lady, Lari, saw a tree bearing Kherengbar (orchid) flowers, the smell of which attracted her so intensely. She pleaded her lover, Rwmai to bring those flowers for her if he loves her. Rwmai was aware and knew that Kherengbar flower is prohibited to touch by human being as the flower is considered to be holy and one would be cursed for touching it with the holiness in him. The lady did not care about this belief and insisted the boy to bring him those flowers. Rwmai instructed her to promise that, until he comes down from the tree and reach the ground and touch the earth she shall not touch and smell its fragrance. The lady swore to keep her promise. Rwmai then, climbed up the tree and dropped the flower for Lari, though she was forbidden to smell the fragrance after seeing the flower on the ground, she could not resist to the temptation and attraction to the beauty of the orchid and broke her commitment; she picked up and smelled the flower, before Rwmai could come down from the tree. This action of her, brought their love to a different ending changed her and transformed her lover into a monkey and herself to a lizard. She cursed the Kherengbar flower because of which their love and life turned to different destiny, since, then their unique story is remembered forever and told and retold orally from generations to generations and it is a popular belief that the Kherengbar flower lost its fragrance from that day, due to her curse. This folktale has striking similarities with the Biblical story of Adam and Eve and their consequential fall after tasting the forbidden fruit. The story here, teaches us not to disturb nature. It warns us of the disastrous consequences we will face if we do not follow the rules of nature.

Conclusion

Kwtham Kothoma not only explores the Tripura folktales but also re-represents a visually captivating narrative weaving together various stories from the region. It offers a colorful portrayal of the stories, highlighting the diverse cultural elements, traditional beliefs, and the essence of wisdom and morals embedded within these tales.

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