



Retelling Assamese Folk-Myths: An Analysis of Imran Hussain's Short Story "Bak: The Water Spirit"

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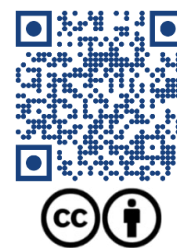
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Abstract— Assam has a rich heritage of folktales. One such folk belief is that of the existence of Bak which although related to superstition, is part of Assamese folklore and social life. Benudhar Rajkhowa in his "Assamese Demonology" classifies the bak as a terrestrial aqueous spirit. This spirit, fond of eating fish, is believed to reside in pools and tanks, lakes which have grown old and are beginning to sink. Imran Hussain is a contemporary Assamese writer whose works embody Assam's socio-political and cultural scenario. One of Hussain's stories, "Bak: The Water Spirit" revolves around a young boy Goroi's search for his father. The story is based upon the mythical tale popular among the fishermen of the Kolong and Kopili rivers of Assam. This paper shall attempt to analyse how Imran Hussain has tried to retell the folk myth of Bak, the water spirit to portray certain contemporary concerns.



Keywords— *Folktales, Retelling, Demonology, Mythology, Contemporaneity, Society*

I. INTRODUCTION

Folktales or folk-myths are traditional fictional stories and anonymous narratives transmitted orally from generation to generation. Superstitions and unfounded beliefs are important elements in the folklore tradition. Assam has a rich heritage of folktales. One such concept or belief is that of the existence of *Bak*, the water spirit, which although related to superstition, is part of Assamese folk lore and social life. Imran Hussain is a contemporary Assamese writer whose works embody the socio-political and cultural scenario accompanied by a sensitiveness to the various discourses and trends of thought characterizing thoughtful writing. One of Hussain's story titled "Bak: The Water Spirit" revolves around a young boy Goroi's search for his father. The story is based upon the mythical tale popular among the fishermen of Kolong and Kopili rivers of Assam.

II. OBJECTIVES

This paper shall attempt to analyse how Imran Hussain has tried to retell the folk-myth of *Bak*, the water spirit in his short story. This paper also attempts to

analyse how Hussain has portrayed certain contemporary concerns by retelling the said folk-myth.

III. BACKGROUND

Demonology, the branch of the science of religions relates to superhuman beings which are not gods, deals both with benevolent beings which have no circle of worshippers or so limited a circle as to be below the rank of gods, and with malevolent beings of all kinds. Demons, when they are regarded as spirits, may belong to either of the classes of spirits recognized by primitive animism ; that is to say, they may be human, or non-human, separable souls, or discarnate spirits which have never inhabited a body.

According to Benudhar Rajkhowa, it is impossible to attempt any classification of spirits, much less one based on natural history. However, for the satisfaction of his readers, without entering into the niceties of distinction, Benudhar Rajkhowa in his "Assamese Demonology" classifies Assamese spirits into "sub-terranian", "terrestrial", "aerial" and "celestial". Terrestrial spirits include: (A) Aqueous ; (B) Sylvan ; (C) Household.

Within the domain of Aqueous spirits fall spirits such as *bák*, *dôt*, *jakh*, *datial* or *jan kakhoria*, *jalshai* and *jalnarayan*. Rajkhowa classifies the *bak* as a terrestrial aqueous spirit. *Bak* is although related to superstition yet it is part of Assamese folk lore and social life. It is believed to reside in deserted pools and tanks, lakes which have grown old and are beginning to sink. The spirit is also believed to bury fishermen who go to fish during night, by turning his back onto the mud of the *beel* (lake-like wetland). The spirit also kills men who fish in rivers by drowning them in the water. The spirit sometimes makes clucking noise. Its feet are turned backwards and its body emits an offensive smell which is translated to the very water over which he wanders. This spirit fond of eating fish, catches fish by netting and sometimes even consumes fish caught by the fishermen. There is an Assamese proverb which runs thus:

Háhar oparat siül rajá,

Potá pukhurit búk ra já ,

A jackal is the lord of poultry.

A bák is supreme in a deserted tank.

This spirit is believed to carry a pouch on his shoulder which is termed as '*bakor julunga*'. People believe that if this bag is snatched away from the spirit and kept inside a mustard bamboo basket, the spirit takes the form of man and begins to engage in all kinds of household chores.

IV. ANALYSIS

Hussain's story titled "Bak: The Water Spirit" revolves around a young boy Goroi's search for his father. The story is based upon the mythical tale popular among the fishermen of Kolong and Kopili rivers of Assam. Taking the character of *Bak* or the water spirit as the leitmotif, Hussain weaves a tale of family feud and betrayal, which leaves behind as its victim the orphaned child Goroi. The story revolves around Haren, the fish merchant, Tikheroo, the fisherman and cousin to Haren, Pabhoi, Tikheroo's mother and Padumi, the young beautiful wife of Tikheroo.

At the very beginning of the story, Haren, the fisherman, is depicted as the *Bak*: "In the flickering moonlight that came filtering down the slender leaves of the thin bamboo grove, his ugly body, wet with dew, shone eerily. His human form seemed imbued with a ghostliness" (Hussain, 2003/2015, p.1). The lake, whose part flowed into the Kolong, is portrayed as the lifeline of the Kaiberta, Kalita and Lalung - the indigenous people of the surrounding villages. It was in this lake that villagers caught fish with their net, bathed or fetched water. But everybody feared the north-eastern bank of the lake near

the edge of the cremation ground where stood an ancient Ow tree. Even the sylheti fishermen did not venture to fish here after sunset. The place was believed to be haunted by the villagers.

The villagers could not enjoy the joy of fishing in the lake for long as the government levied a tax on the lake and the lake was auctioned off. Tikheroo's cousin Haren who passed his days in quarrelling and nights in opium smoking became overnight the new mahaldar of the lake along with two other fish merchants from Morigaon. Haren got the most productive north-eastern part starting from their village and ending by the Ow tree near the cremation grounds of the village. Haren stopped the villagers from fishing in the lake and soon fishermen from Sylhet and Bihar began to invade the lake. Haren and Tikheroo's families were not in good terms as they had some family feud. Yet, Haren now engaged Tikheroo for fishing in the lake not out of any feeling of kinship but because he knew that Tikheroo's dexterity in fishing would be an asset for him in his business. So, he came to Pabhoi, his aunt and Tikheroo's mother and implored her to forget all family feuds. Though at first she turned a deaf year to Haren's pleas, yet she could resist no longer and acquiesced to his request of living in the same compound. With the help of Tikheroo's acumen, Haren could rise in his business within a very short span of time. By the year's end, Haren could buy many a plot of land in and around the village. Soon his stores overflowed with rice and his fishing business spread to Morigaon, Jagiroad and as far as Guwahati. The newly rich Haren changed a lot in manners and dress as he stopped frequenting the opium dens and his manners changed as he put on airs as if he was the great businessman like Bholá Saud. On the other hand, Tikheroo's health deteriorated due to excessive labour. Haren's wife Seuti had given birth to a tadpole-like premature still born child following which she had showed no signs of motherhood. Though they had consulted renowned faith-healers, but to no avail. As such, Haren had sent Tikheroo to Mayang in search of a cure. The old faith-healer sent a cure of potherbs mixed with the flesh and blood of the rhino for Haren. Along with the cure, he also sent his beautiful young daughter as a bride for Tikheroo.

Though Tikheroo married the girl, yet he could not enjoy the bliss of married life for long because barely two years after his marriage, Tikheroo left home one night for fishing and never returned. When Tikheroo didn't return even after three days, a worried Pabhoi informed the villagers. It was then that Haren revealed the truth, which seemed like an unbelievable tale. He informed that some three months ago, while both he and Tikheroo had gone for fishing in the lake near the cremation ground, he had

found Tikheroo devouring the raw fish by the light of the moon. Haren realized that having strangled and killed Tikheroo and taking his shape, the spirit was now on the boat in the image of Tikheroo. Seeing that the spirit was busy eating, Haren hurriedly rowed ashore and quickly grabbing the magic pouch of the spirit, made his way to the granary in their house. When he threw the pouch into the big casket full of mustard seeds, Haren saw through the slits in the bamboo wall that the water spirit was weeping piteously asking for his pouch to be returned to him because he was powerless without it. But Haren did not return the pouch as a result of which the water spirit, unable to change back to his own form, remained as Tikheroo in their house for the last six months. Haren had remained silent not knowing how to disclose the truth to the young bride. It was during this period that the water spirit had impregnated Padumi with child. This was what the family including Pabhoi came to believe and therefore called Padumi's child 'Goroi' as the son of *Bak*, the water spirit. Pabhoi would mutter in her dreams "He (the water spirit) killed my son to live with her and then ran away, taking the magic pouch with him. What do I do with this boy now?" (Hussain, 2003/2015, p.17). When Goroi heard his grandmother, too, reiterating the fact that he was indeed the water spirit's son, his heart sank.

But in reality, Haren had concocted this fairytale only to fulfill his vested interests. Goroi was in fact, Haren's son. While Tikheroo remained in the *tongi-ghar* (stilt house made of bamboo) guarding the fish during the night, Haren had entered Padumi's hut and defiled her. To Padumi, the thought that someone other than her husband had touched her never occurred because she in her drowsy state thought it was some evil spirit who had come to her. Haren was in fact guilty of murdering Tikheroo. That night when Haren had rowed the boat along with Tikheroo, he had hit Tikheroo behind the head with the oar and killed him.

Unfortunately, Goroi who was thought to be born after his father's death comes to believe that his father is indeed *Bak* – the spirit of water. On a quiet moonlit night, Goroi, heartbroken by the insinuations and barbs of the villagers, jumps into the lake, hoping to meet the father he has never known in life. He is closely followed by his actual father, Haren and both meet their watery grave at the bottom of the lake. Hussain depicts the tragic end of both the father and son in these words: "Feeling that his long wait for his father had ended at last, in the dark depths of the water, Goroi held him to his breast in such a strong embrace that Haren was stilled" (Hussain, 2003/2015, p.25). The story ends in a symbolic manner:

"And then the mirthful fish swam around the embracing figures of father and son, as naked and stiff, they whirled

round and round descending further into the depths of the lake". (Hussain, 2003/2015, p. 25)

The narrative of this story is characterized by a rich tapestry of imagery, reflecting a distinct kind of magic realism through its suggestive use of imagery and symbols. The writer demonstrates a proficient command of language structure, crafting a world that is at once vividly realized in photographic detail, yet simultaneously unfamiliar, unknown, and shrouded in mystery. The writer's adept mind is evident in the way objects are imbued with an autonomous existence. This is particularly noticeable in the depiction of the lake's dark depths, home to a unique ecosystem of fish and weeds, which serves to underscore the author's emphasis on the inherent 'otherness' of objects and the enigmatic nature of their being. The moonlight casting an eerie glow on the lakeside as it filters through slender bamboo leaves, the 'orphaned fish' swimming gleefully around the drowning father-son duo, and the sickle-shaped moon exuding drops of bloodlike moonbeams are all potent images that infuse nature with a distinct spirit and life, yielding an almost epiphanic understanding of nature's essential otherness (Goswami, 2015, p.170).

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, this paper has attempted to show how an author may return, revitalize, and reconstruct mythology and make required modifications to an old narrative and extend it or build a new story entirely. Imran Hussain has used the popular folk-myth of *Bak*, the water spirit in his story but he has kept the essence of mythology intact even if the story and retelling are changed. The mysteriousness and otherness of objects inherent in the original story are recreated with imagery and symbols. The folk-myth is recounted not just because of a fascination with or interest in the mythological past but also as comments on the current situation. The contemporary concerns such as the changing dynamics of a fishing community are portrayed through the story by retelling the folk-myth of the *Bak*. The rise of a cunning fisherman like Haren into a rich mahaldar falling victim to his own greed along with the life of a simple fisherman like Tikheroo meeting an unfortunate death are tales woven in the narrative of the story. The reader simultaneously gets to explore the lives of the fishing community through the narrative.

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