

**Change of Mind –
A Study of *The Taste of an Hilsa and Other Stories*
Akademi Award-Winning Manipuri Short Stories**

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Abstract

The paper is the study of “The Change of Mind” from Akademi award-winning anthology of Manipuri Short Stories *The Taste of an Hilsa and Other Stories* (2009) written in Manipuri by Nongthombam Kunjamohan Singh and translated into English version by Thounajam Ratankumar Singh. The present study is from the translated version. It depicts how poor people in Manipur are triply exploited by the landlord, the political scenario and lack of opportunities. The short story depicts the helplessness condition of a poor farmer giving in to do illegal work in order to feed his family. The locale of the story is a small village in Manipur. It is a story of a man named Tomba and his predicament situation. Manipur has been deprived of

opportunity from the rest of the mainland due to its geographical location. Lack of proper connectivity with the rest of the nation is one major drawback.

Keywords: Manipur, Subaltern, Exploitation, Corruption, Relationship

Manipuri Society at a Glance

Manipur is one of the beautiful northeastern states of India with rich culture and mixture of ancient traditions and modern ways of life. Many Manipuris follow Hinduism but not based on the Indian caste system. Manipuri society is divided into the Meiteis, the Bamons, Pangans and lois (social outcasts). Manipuri society is organized form by neighborhoods, called leikei. All activities from birth to death ceremony, like birth and ear-piercing ceremonies, to festivals and cremations involved people of leikei. Manipuri society is closely knitted. The ceremonies are not completed without the involvement of leikei people. Manipur is best represented by the classical Manipuri style of dance, the Raas Lila, the love story of Radha and Krishna. Lai Haroba, Pung Cholem (Mridanga dance), Mao Naga dance, the Priestess dance of Maibe Jagoi, etc.also reflect the vibrant culture of the 29 different tribes of Manipur expressing their ways of life. Its dance, culture and tradition reflect the way of living in harmony with each other as well as with the environment, until the external forces of disturbances like AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Acts), insurgencies, bad road connectivity, geographical, ethnics' clashes, identity issues as well as step motherly treatment from the center. All these issues have disturbed the centuries old peaceful land after it has merged with the independent India in 21st September,1949.

Manipuri Women

Like any other places in the world, women do faces some amount of discrimination and Manipur is no exceptional to that. Though comparatively is less strict then the rest part of India. It does have its own share of atrocity. Among the many facets of social exclusions prevailing in Manipur, the most commonly encountered is the gender-based exclusion of women within the family structure. For an instant, a woman, who prepares food for the family, always feed the men first in the family. When the men finish their food, then women in the family have their shares. Thus putting forward the idea that male in the family are more important than the women. Though it may sound petty thing but I do believe the root cause of the discrimination starts from there. Things are changing but still this kind of behavior is still prevalent in many typical orthodox household of Manipur society. Society always demands women to be passive and submissive. It gives an impression that women have no value even in their own house.

Most of the Manipuri women face hardships in earning, feeding and serving their families. Many women are still living under the cruelty of their husbands. Women are always at the receiving end. When women are empowered economically, politically and socially to meet the hardships of gender biases, the mindset of the people – both men and women will change to make Manipur a better society to live in. Thus, Tomba is not exceptional hero in the story. He is having a typical chauvinistic attitude man blaming his wife Anoubi for poverty as well as her fertility.

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The Relationship of Tomba and Anoubi

Husband and wife is a core component member of any society. The role play by both differs but to make a beautiful home both needs to sacrifice and give their full love and cooperation to the family. The protagonist of the short story is not from a high class of the society but from a very poor family, a farmer. Tomba, father of five children at other circumstances would have been a loving and understanding husband as well as a good father. But the poor financial circumstances had made him a bitter person.

The story opens with Tomba's wife in the advanced stage of pregnancy and there is no rice to cook in the house. When asked by her husband to go and borrow some rice from others she replied that: "we had not paid back what we borrowed from Tomal, so she felt shy of going to them and request again" (26). These words were enough for Tomba to wrath against his wife. Tomba is also in a tight situation. He could understand his wife situation, yet he was not in the proper frame of mind to understand her. He feels ashamed of beating his wife in such a situation, but hunger and frustration made him raised his hand. Without delaying further, he went to one of his uncle from his leikei to borrow some rice for his family. The act that he went out looking for some arrangement of food shows that he is a loving husband and a father. He tries to do things in whatever he can, to the extent of doing illegal work in order to provide food for the family. "Again, when he saw the five children lying on a torn mat, in front of the bed and wallowing in the midst of mosquitoes, he did not know whether he should weep or be angry" (29). He is at the receiving end, a helpless father totally shattered by poverty.

The acute poverty became a source of anger and means of fighting with his wife. "You too have become too fertile. Every year you give birth. You are too desirous of getting children. You should have been born a cattle instead of a human. The cows and buffalos increase their values when they are fertile. But when a human becomes fertile, it is suffering." (30)

The above statement was uttered by Tomba to his wife who was at the verge of giving birth to their child. Any human who read that statement would condemn Tomba. He is comparing his wife with a cow, or cattle knowing the fact that he is equally responsible for the pregnancy. In utter frustration he has said that statement. They already have five beautiful children. A child is a joy for any parents but if you are not in the condition to look after them it becomes a burden. Throughout the story, we witness that Anoubi his wife is calmly taking all the rebuke and frustration of her husband.

Colonizer vs. Colonized

The concept of colonizer and colonized is brought into the study just to highlight the fact that British has left the country long back, but the residue still lingers within our society. Subaltern according to the Antonio Gramsci is of 'inferior ranks that are at the receiving end from their ruling masters'. Since the protagonist of the story is also a poor farmer and is at the mercy of the people and basically excluded from the society. His voices are not heard by the society or policy makers of the state or country. Ahanjao plays the role of colonizer and Tomba

is the colonized victim. When Tomba was in desperate need of some rice he went to Ahanjao to borrow some rice:

Ahanjao was at home sitting on an easy chair, on the southern side of the courtyard and was relaxing. He had been smoking a hookah. But he was lost in thought or had fallen asleep that he forgot to smoke through the pipe of the hookah even though he was holding the pipe. (26)

He requested his uncle Ahanjao stating that he will do whatever he says provided he helped him with a bag of rice since he is in acute need of rice at that moment. Ahanjao took the opportunity to used Tomba and told him that he is ready to help him provided he smuggled out “five or six *mounds* (forty kilos in Manipuri language) of tea’ (27). Tomba was little apprehensive since he was already caught once, and the case is still continuing in the court. He requested him to give some other job but Ahanjao was not ready to listen to him and sent him off saying that he should think properly and meet him again the next day. Tomba knew he cannot back off knowing the fact that if he is caught this time, he might stay in jail for the rest of his life, but he has to give in to the temptation of Ahanjao helplessly for the sake of his family. There is no way out for the poor farmer like Tomba, they are victimized like the subaltern without a voice of their own. They fall easily to the trap of the greedy landlord like Ahanjao.

Corrupt Society of Manipur

The corrupt society of Manipur is ambiguously depicted in the short story through Tomba, when he was offered to smuggle 40 kilos of tea bags at night. Tomba was a bit hesitated to do so and pleaded him to give another job. Ahanjao said smiling:

“Man, you think properly and say. What I am saying is not to create problems for you. When the whole country is suffering so much, a sum of twenty or thirty rupees is a sizable amount. When so many people do not have sufficient food for themselves, who will engage other labourers to work for them? Now –a-days, it is better not to pray for others. Are you not a man? The police is there only for man; the jail is there only for man. Be a man. Man. is there any rules that a man once caught, should be caught repeatedly? (27-28)

The lines above clearly depict the role of the so called ‘big shot’ in the society trying to bully the poor section of the society. Black market is all connected from top to bottom and they trap the poor people to do all the illegal business. The poor are in need of money and there is no alternate for them. Ahanjao later tries to explain Tomba that “black market is done not only by the people like you and me but also by the big people like kings and ministers. All the big bureaucrat officers are dreaming of beautiful cars and buildings at the cost of lakhs and lakhs of rupees. They are all from black money” (28). The so called ‘big shot’ of Manipur indulge in black market they are filling up their own bank balance at the cost of public’s properties. The center is also giving a silent treatment towards the problem of Northeast states like the Manipur government who are dumb and deaf towards the under-privileged section of the society. The main focus of the short story is how ultimately Tomba fall the victim of the corrupt society, making him to do the illegal things for survival. There are many places in village of Manipur,

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where they have not seen the light of education. Education is one important factor to bring changes. Corruption is deeply rooted in Manipuri society. This cancerous alignment is spread throughout Manipur attacking more on the under-privileged section of the society. The mindset of the bureaucrats needs to change. They should work for the betterment of the poor lot rather than filling up their pockets.

Conclusion

The story is simple, with a strong message to the corrupt people of Manipur. Had the situation been different Tomba would also have a pleasant life like any other people. Children would not have been an issue between husband and wife if they have abundant of money. Tomba was exploited only because of money. The people of Manipur need to realize the intensity of this cancerous alignment and stand up to fight for it. Or else the huge gap between the poor and the rich will widen tremendously. We should try to free our society from oppressing the poor lot, helping them for their development. Participation of women in the development of a society is crucial. Here, in the story Anoubi is a passive receiver, though she tried her best to look after the family. If she had worked together with her husband and had knowledge regarding family planning the predicament of her husband's lot would have been in a better situation. Women also should stand up walk hand in hand with their counterpart in order to bring about changes.

Women should equally take up responsibility along with their partners. Women those who are not educated should actively participate in the entrepreneurial activities which will help in improving the economic conditions of the family and makes them independent. Becoming economically independent will give them confidence and self-esteem. Change is not far from us, if individual actively participate in the development of a society and fight against corruption and exploitation of the poor people.

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