

The Short Stories of Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi: An Overview

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Abstract:: *Sahitya Akademi award-winning author Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi has four collections of short stories written in the Assamese language. His stories are unique in nature as they reflect mostly the indigenous lives of the Arunachali tribal communities. The style of presenting stories is usually simple, but the stories are very interesting because of the unusual settings or backdrops based on Arunachal Pradesh.*

Key Words: *Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Arunachal Pradesh, Arunachali tribes and literature, Assamese, Indigenous Life.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi is a prolific creative writer from Arunachal Pradesh who writes in Assamese. Though Thongchi started his creative life with poetry and plays and also tried his hand at translation, he is mostly known for his short stories and novels. In this present paper, an attempt has been made to look into his short stories and analyse them in a nutshell.

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi started writing short stories very earnestly after coming to Guwahati for higher study, though he started the practice of writing stories when he was a schoolboy studying in Bomdila in Arunachal Pradesh. The first published short story of Thongchi, titled "Dapon" (the mirror), was published in "Notun prabah" edited by Jatin Goswami. There is a real-life incident behind the creation of the storyⁱ. During that time, Thongchi, a student of Cotton college, went to spend some leisure time at his elder sister Thar Doima's place at the village Jigaon while he was enjoying his vacation. He had always been a voracious reader and had the habit of carrying a book with him wherever he goes. That day, he was reading an Assamese short story written by Lakshminath Phukan from the collection "Moromor Madhuree"ⁱⁱ. Seeing him engrossed in his book, his sister Thar Doima, whom he calls 'Anu Khao' (elder sister), became very curious and asked him to read the story to her too. While doing so, young Thongchi noticed tears rolling down on his sister's cheeks suddenly. She was so overwhelmed with the story that she started crying silently and spontaneously. This incident made Thongchi think seriously about writing stories on his own. Because he was blessed to be hailed from an unexplored primitive land full of untold stories, he decided to tell the tales of the indigenous people of Arunachal to the outside world through his pen. After returning to his hostel (Mahendra Nath Deka Phukan Chatrabas, popularly known as MNDP Boys Hostel) in Cotton college after that stay in Jigaon, he wrote the story "Dapon" on the background of his village, and sent it to "Notun prabah". The story got it published without any delay. Readers of Assam got a glimpse of a divergent realm belonging to their neighbouring state Arunachal through the story "Dapon". The story 'Dapon' tells the story of a remote village called Mahdala in Arunachal Pradesh where the villagers never seen a mirror before, until the village school teacher, who came from Assam to teach in that village, brought a mirror. The old lady Ledan was the first one to discover 'that strange thing' at 'master babu's (the school teacher's) house. All the villagers started visiting the teacher's house just to have look at the mirror and feel the 'magic' of seeing their own reflections. The old lady Ledan's niece Wangdan, who was known for her beauty, also came one day. But she committed suicide by hanging herself from a branch of an oak tree after looking at the ugly reflection of her face in the mirror. Her face turned ugly because of the burnt marks all over her face. One of her suitors, Chimbu tried to rape her and when she protested, he burnt her face. The end of the story is quite a shock to the readers, but the writer could make it convincing enough. Thongchi could show his potential as an up-to-snuff short story writer in the first published story itself. Later this story was included in *Papor pukhuri*, the first published collection of his short stories.

After receiving a warm response from the readers and some senior litterateurs, an inspired Thongchi wrote the second story, "Khuradeu ahibo" (Uncle will come) on the basis of some of his own childhood memories. After the untimely demise of Thongchi's father, his paternal uncle (his father's younger brother) was supposed to take care of the household. But he never bothered to do so. Rather he went to his wife's village. This incident affected little Thongchi's

mind so much that he lamented for long and longed for the affection of his paternal uncle which he never got back. This incident is described in his autobiography *Hanhi aru sakulor haihob* and the same story is described in a creative way in the story “Khuradeu ahibo”. Whoever reads both the fiction (the short story) and the facts (in the autobiography), can easily tally and relate to the background of the story. As a short story, “Khuradeu ahibo” is a strong and successful one without any doubt. This story was published in a special issue of “Nilachal” edited by Homen Borgohain. This story was later included in his short story collection *Dhar aru anyanya galpa* published in by Banalata in 2021. Another story written by Thongchi, published in “Nilachal”, that got popularity was “Xeetore xemeka rati” (moist night of the winter). The story was titled after the first three words or the title of one of the most famous songs by Bhupen Hazarika.

With such a promising beginning, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi continued writing good stories with exceptional plots, characters and unique background throughout his student life in Cotton college and Guwahati university. His stories were also published in Bhabendranath Saikia edited “Prantik”, the oldest and highest circulated Assamese fortnightly journal. But, after completing his Masters in Assamese, he returned to Arunachal Pradesh in 1977 and later joined as an administrative officer. He was busy with his family life and career and above all, he did not get the enriching environment to create literature in Arunachal Pradesh that time. He also had to struggle to get a publisher for his novel, and at some point, he was annoyed and depressed too. Eventually, in the late eighties and early nineties, a sort of writer’s block existed in his journey as a litterateur. He almost lost interest in writing any further. But, one incident changed his mind forever. A reader and fan of Thongchi, Uttam Dutta happened to meet him in Namsai and all of a sudden, he started rebuking like anything his favourite writer for not writing stories. The reader was blaming Thongchi’s high-muck-a-muck status in the administration of Arunachal Pradesh. The reader expressed his disappointment by saying that he searched for Thongchi’s story in each issue of “Prantik” but in vain. Thongchi was so much touched with the reaction of his reader that he promised him to continue writing again. After that incident at Namsai, Thongchi wrote the story “Guard” which was later included as the first story of the first collection of his short stories *Papor pukhuri*. Since then, Thongchi has been writing regularly. And till date, Thongchi has four short story collections to his credit. They are: *Papor pukhuri* (2000), *BAANH phular gondha* (2005), *Anya akhon pratiyoita* (2009) and *Dhar aru anyanya galpa* (2021).

2. Collections of Short Stories: An Overview

***Papor pukhuri* (2000):** *Papor pukhuri* (The pond of sins) is the first collection of Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi’s short stories to be published. The title is named after last story included in the collection. The collection won the prestigious Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha award, in the year 2000-2001. This award is given by The Asom Sahitya Sabha for an exalted literary work. Thongchi dedicates the book to his mother Rinchin Chojom Khrimey.

The collection includes sixteen selected short stories namely; “Guard”, “Ejonee saranarthee burheer antim iccha” (the last wish of a refugee old lady), “Smoke signal”, “Yatra” (journey), “Bipadat tinipaksha” (the three parties in danger), “Eyat seema nasil” (There was no border here), “Apel burha” (the old man ‘Apple’/Apel), “Elagee taspat” (Neglected playing card), “Cikar” (Prey), “Akhon adrishya jagataloi” (Towards an invisible world), “Kono khed nai” (No regret), “Xilat gaja bengoniari xoite” (with the begonias sprouted on stones), “Sewa puraskar” (Prize for service), “Dapon” (The mirror), “Ronga coat” (The red coat) and “Papor pukhuri” (The pond of sins).

All the sixteen stories mentioned above were published in different magazines, newspapers and literary journals except the title story “Papor pukhuri”. The place and time of publication of fifteen stories are mentioned at the end of each story. But no such information is given in “Papor pukhuri”, the last story of the collection. The time period of the publication of the stories covers a span of seventeen years, from 1983 to 2000. The stories are not arranged according to the time of their publication. “Rongakot” was published in “Rangbhumi” in 1983, but it is included in the fifteenth place. Six short stories, which is the maximum number of short stories in this collection, were published in “Prantik”, the Assamese fortnightly during 1985-2000. The magazines and newspapers where the other nine stories were published are; “Ankur”, “Prakash”, “Ajir doot”, “Northeast Sun”, “Saradiya Neelachal”, “Bismoy”, “Arunjyoti”, “Natun Prabah” and “Rangbhumi”.

The short stories are descriptive in nature, and all the stories bear almost all the common elements and characteristics of a traditional short story. But what makes the stories unique is the tales and the telling. That means uncommon plots and exciting ways of revealing the plot and taking the readers to the climax of the story. The sui generis nature of Thongchi’s stories lies in unveiling the unexplored indigenous world of Arunachal Pradesh to the readers in such a gripping manner that the readers usually tend to complete the stories in one single sitting. The stories have the power to take the readers to a different world, and in the end, the readers long for more such stories.

Four short stories from this collection are different from the other stories. They are; “Iyat xeema nasil”, “Elagee taspat”, “Ekhon adrishya jagataloi” and “Cikar”. Unlike the other short stories, these four stories are not directly based on the indigenous life of any Arunachali tribe. “Iyat xeema nasil” is perhaps the only story where the characters are not Arunachali, but Naga. But, though the characters of the story are Naga, the story does not depict the indigenous life of

the Naga community. Rather the story is more about the life of tribal people residing on the Indo-Myanmar border. The protagonist of the story, the old Naga man Ramchu (Ramchu burha) doesn't understand any politics of the geo-political border between two countries. He could not comprehend the idea of 'a free land of the Nagas' either. All he understands is that simple villagers like him cannot transport to the villages over the newly formed border like before, which he doesn't appreciate. Only because of the border, he couldn't even attend the last rites of his sister, who lived in another village. The old man Ramchu's son Kamnak works as a secret agent and provides news about the underground militants. But he betrays the Indian government by providing fake news. Ramchu came to know that his son Kamnak and his companions attacked and killed a patrolling party of the Indian army. The story reaches its climax when Ramchu burha betrays his beloved son to remain loyal to the country. Kamnak was arrested and had to go to jail because of his father. Ramchu misses his son but doesn't regret his decision. The agony of a father's heart is described aptly in the story. This story was published in "Prantik" in 1987.

"Akhon adrishya jagataloi" (Towards an invisible world) is the only short story where some sort of supernatural incident is described. Dorjee Sinjajee, the head gardener of the government apple orchard of Shergaon, went missing. But it was very unusual. He went out for his work in the morning like any other day. It was beyond explanation that the Nepali girl Maya saw him getting vanish in the air the middle of the road. The people lost hope of finding him, and his wife, Balekamu, also prepared to leave the place after a couple of months. But Dorjee Sinjajee was 'found' again by Maya at the same spot where he vanished. But he doesn't remember anything. This incident is mysterious and beyond any scientific explanation. The story was first published in 2000 in "Bismoi".

The story "Rongakot" (The red coat) gives a glimpse of the life of the *kotoki* or the interpreters of NEFA in the fifties/ sixties of the last century. Readers can recollect the novel *Mouna ounth mukhar hriday*, towards the end of the novel, the Rinchin Norbu Thongdok and Tadak Yatung becomes Political Interpreters of NEFA. They wore the iconic *rongakot* or the red coat and a badge where "Political Interpreter, NEFA" was engraved along with the logo of the Ashok *stambh* with three lions. The significant red coat is also mentioned in the 9th chapter (under the title *Gaonot mrityur kirili aru mandir nirman*) of *Hanhi aru sakulor haihab*, the autobiography of Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi. The *gaonburha* (village chief) got to wear the red coat and it is mentioned in the autobiography how the political officer came to Thongchi's village and made Dorjee Khandu Sinjajee. Dorjee Khandu Sinjajee was also given a red coat as a symbol of his position as a *gaonburha*.

***Baanh phular gondha* (2005):** The second published collection of short stories written and selected by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi is *Baanh phular gondha* ("The Smell of Bamboo Blossoms"). Thongchi dedicates this collection to his daughter Dolma Wangjom (Aanu), who always insists on and inspires him to write.

There are fifteen short stories included in *Baanh phular gondha*. The titles of the stories, along with the loose translation, are given below according to the order maintained in the collection. "Baanh phular gondha" (The Smell of Bamboo Blossoms), "Ronga torar ahban" (the call of the red star), "Ekaki bilax" (Luxury in solitariness), "March Ending", "Aitar dabi" (Grandmother's demand), "Satharar dore dujan suhried" (Two friends resembling a puzzle), "kesha-sapath" (Swear by the hair), "Maram" (Affection), "Duchinor dina aaimaneposakal" (The Aaimanepos on the day of Duchin), "Dhumuha ahar sanket" (sign of storm brewing), "Paharar cha" (Shadow of hills), "Adhikar" (Rights), "Atankabadisakalar xoite eta uजारarai nixa" (An wakeful night with the terrorists), "Aru ejon mahapurush" (one more saint), "Aakranta" (Victim)

The collection is named after the first story of the collection, "Baanh phular gondh". US-based Assamese author and translator Aruni Kashyap has translated this story the title story into English. The translated version, 'The Smell of Bamboo Blossoms', was published in the October-December issue of "The Indian Quarterly" in 2016.ⁱⁱⁱ "Baanh phular gondh" is one of the most famous short stories of Thongchi. Usually, bamboo does not bloom. And whenever it does, according to the folk beliefs, many bad things occur, including epidemics. In the story the depiction of bamboo blooming on the banks of Kameng river is given. The rats were swarming the river in hundreds in number after eating the bamboo blossoms. People hunted the rats and sold them in the markets of Along and Pasighat. The story revolves around only three central characters, Tarak, Medak and Matung Burha. Tarak Dada belongs to the Dada clan of a Nyshi community. He hails from the village Jejudada, and his wife Medak belongs to Singi clan. They had to take refuge at the old man Matung's place as they had to face severe objections from the respective communities they belong to as Medak ran away from her wedding and eloped with Tarak. Along with other villagers, Tarak also hunts the rats and sells them. Matung burha is against it. The old man believes that the blooming of bamboo is a very inauspicious omen, and there will be calamity and epidemic. The suspense is kept till the end why the old man accuses Medak of having *endur bemar*, the plague. At the end of the story, it is revealed through Matung burha's *boyo* dance that Medak was his granddaughter.

Thongchi has mentioned in the sixteenth chapter titled "monot roi jowa kisu xoru-bor ghotona" of his autobiography *Hanhi aru sakulor haihob*, that there was a sudden increase of the mice in their village around 1960. But he did not see bamboo blossom since there were no bamboo grooves in their village. They had to collect bamboo from

the peaks of the Blapsar and Bilu hills. But Thongchi witnessed bamboo blossoms when he was posted in East Kameng district, Lower Subansiri district etc. he has also mentioned that the food habit of the indigenous communities includes the meat of rat and they know different ways to catch mice and rats. There is the possibility that the blind old man Unsu Lobjang, who was apprehensive of calamities when bamboo bloomed, was in the sub-conscious mind of Thongchi when he created the character of Matung Burha for the story *Smell of bamboo Blossoms*.^{iv}

In another story *Maram* (Affection) included in the collection, gives an account of the affection between an old man and his horse Milong. Thongchi's family also had a herd of horses when they were in Jigaon. Interestingly, name of one horse was Milong.

Anya ekhon pratiyoita (2009):

Anya ekhon pratiyoita (Another competition) is the third collection of short stories by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi. The collection consists of eleven short stories as follows; "Anya ekhan pratiyogita" (another competition), "Pema cikari" (Pema the hunter), "Abaidha awasi" (illegal resident), "Antaheen asha" (never ending hope), "Bhal poti pabolo upabas kora sowalijoni" (The girl who fasted to get a good husband), "Nijorei manuh" (one's own people), "Swarup" (the true colour), "Mangso" (meat), "Pujaree" (the priest), "Atithi devo bhava" (guest is God) and "Akashijaanot" (in the areoplane).

"Bhal poti pabolo upabas kora sowalijoni" (The girl who fasted to get a good husband) is an interesting story with an unusual and unpredictable ending. At the beginning of the story, the first-person narrator is seen searching for a suitable girl, as if it was for himself. But later, it is known that the narrator of the story is an elderly person who is searching for a bride for his son. He meets his niece Doima's friend Pema. Pema is the one who observes fast to get a 'good husband. But in the end, when he meets Pema's parents to ask for 'her' hand, they reveal that Pema is not a girl but a boy in reality. This is the only story written by Thongchi where the point of gender identity arises.

The age-old Monpa tradition of performing the last rites of a deceased person by slicing the dead body is mentioned in the climax of the story "Mangxo" (meat). Later, the full-length novel *Sava kata manuh* is based on this particular tradition. The story "Mangxo" is full of contrasting depictions related to the carnivorous food habit of the central character Tayar Tarin's community and the tradition of the Buddhist Monpas, who are against hunting and killing of any animal.

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi writes in the first part of his autobiography that during his childhood days, he had developed the signs of becoming a traditional priest of the Shedukpens called 'riji' / 'jinjhi'. One of the signs is not being able to eat some 'forbidden' food such as onion, garlic, radish, non-vegetarian food etc. Another sign is the growth of deadlock in the hair. In the story "Pujaree" (Priest), these signs are reflected in Wangja, the school-going grandchild of the traditional priest Tsumbi. That means Wangja had the potential of becoming a priest like his grandfather Tsumbi in future. But Wangja's priest grandfather was not happy discovering the signs. Because he knew the hey days of the traditional priest were gone. There is no future in becoming a traditional healer or a priest in the present era of development. The story conveys many aspects of the animist Shedukpen society and the changing scenario.

Dhar aru anyanya galpa (2021)

Dhar aru anyanya galpa is the fourth and the recent short story collection of Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi. All three previous short story collections of Thongchi are directly named after any one particular story included in the respective volumes. The Naming of the recent collection is also not an exception. This collection is also named after one story titled "Dhar" which is the sixteenth and the last story of the collection. What makes the title different from the previous collections is the inclusion of "...aru anyanya galpa" (...and other stories). Though this is a very common and popular way to name a collection, Thongchi has named his collection in this manner for the first time. Though the collection is recent, one story "Khuradeu ahibo" (Uncle will come) was written way back in 1972. At the begging of the present discussion, it has already been mentioned that the story "Khueadeu ahibo" has some real-life background from the writer's own life which he mentions in his autobiography. Except this story, all other stories were written between 2007 to 2020. The time period is mentioned at the end of each story, but the stories are not arranged according to the time. They are included randomly.

The sixteen short stories included in the collection are given in the same order as it appears in the book. They are: "Coffin" (coffin), "Eliza burheer kabar" (the Grave of Eliza, the Old Woman), "Aasol bhoot" (the Original Ghost), "Paitrik ghar" (the Ancestral Home), "Chakrabritta" (circle), "Manuh" (human), "Saitanor Gharat" (in the house of Satan), "Kukur bhalpowa manuhjonee" (the Lady who Loves Dogs), "Dar-daam" (burgain), "Adda" (chatter), "Kukshan" (an inauspicious moment), "Eta galpar charitar xoite muka-mukhi" (face-to-face with a character of a story), "Mrityu" (death), "Xonor alankar nipindho moi" (I am not going to wear gold jewellery), "Khuradeu ahibo" (Uncle will come) and "Dhar" (the debt).

Perhaps the most impressive story with the most thought-provoking plot to be included in the collection is “Mrityu” (death). The story was first published in the Assamese fortnightly “Prantik” in 2020. The story addresses the issue of ‘language death’^v Indi Phinoya, who lives in the Singchung village perched in a beautiful lowland between two mountains, is the last of his generation who could speak the Bugun language. With Indi Phinoya’s demise, the language also dies. Another best part of the story is its unpredictable end. Indi, the old man obsessively started recording his mother tongue, his first language, in a tape-recorder. But he died hugging that recorder and his kith and kins buried the recorder along with his belongings. Because, according to the custom, one’s all belongings should also be buried along with the deceased person.

Thongchi has described present-day Arunachal Pradesh, particularly the situation of Itanagar, in many stories of the collection. He writes about the intolerant nature of some people and presents the uneasy scenario of today’s Itanagar in the story “Kukshan” in a very straightforward and unbiased manner. The depiction of the opium addiction and the Hawai opium business in the Mishimi hills is found in the story “Adda”.

Most of the previous stories written by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi were primarily based on the tribal life of Arunachal Pradesh. For example, in his first short story collection, *Papor pukhuri* (2000), only four stories out of total sixteen stories are not directly based on tribal life. Similarly, in the second collection, *Baanh phular gondh* (2005), out of fifteen stories, only two stories do not deal with the treatment of indigenous life. But in *Anya ekhon pratijogita* (2009), almost fifty per cent of the stories were not based on tribal life. Similarly, in the recent collection *Dhar aru ananya galpa*, out of sixteen stories, the indigenous way of life can be seen in nine stories, They are as follows; “Eliza burheer kabar”, “Paitrik ghar”, “Manuh”, “Saitanor Gharat”, “Adda”, “Mrityu”, “Xonor alankar nipindho moi”, “Khuradeu ahibo” and “Dhar”. Out of these, “Khueadeu ahibo” cannot be counted as it was written long back. Besides, the central theme of the story “Adda” is also not based on tribal life. There might be a reason behind it. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi spent his early life in the Sherdukpen village of Jigaon, and later when he started his career as an administrative officer, he was posted in various remote places in Arunachal Pradesh. Apart from his interest and spontaneous inclination towards tribal life, this background also must have enriched him. He was most certainly inspired from within to write more and more about his exclusive first-hand experiences about the tribal life of Arunachal Pradesh. But his last postings were in Itanagar only, and after his superannuation from his job, he has been living in Itanagar permanently. Maybe this obvious proximity to modern life encouraged him to observe the changing scenario in the state and in the lives of the people, which is reflected in his recent writings.

3. CONCLUSION:

After the discussion, it is observed that Thongchi’s short stories are mostly descriptive in nature. He is speciality lies in the traditional way of writing. Almost all the stories are indigenous life based except a very few. The plots are very uncommon to most of the readers as they tell the tales of an unexplored world of the primitive tribes living in the remote pockets of Arunachal Pradesh. Sense of humour is not the dominant characteristic of Thongchi’s short stories. But sometimes, it pops out in the sentences all of a sudden. (For example: In the story “Dapon”, the description of the reaction of the villagers when they looked at their own reflections in a mirror brought by the village school teacher.)

Thongchi’s short stories will remain as a treasure in Assamese literature for their uniqueness.

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- ⁱ This incident is mentioned in *Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi: Ramdhenur seture gorha ek ananya pathik*, 2012, by Dr. Jtanjali Borpujari Borthakur and the incident was also told by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi to the author of this present work.
- ⁱⁱ The story Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi read to his elder sister might be a story from Trailokyanath Goswami’s short story collection “Moroha Papori” (“Maramar Madhuree”). In an interview, Thongchi mentioned this and he also said to the interviewer Dibya Chutiya that he could not recall it exactly. The interview was published in *Satsori* (Vol.1. No. XV . 1st-15th March Issue, 2006. P. 16. While asking Thongchi about this, he told the same. Naturally it is quite possible for anyone to forget the name of a particular story from a book, or even the title of the collection. But, Thongchi clearly remembers the incident of his elder sister crying listening to the story. Because this was like a turning point in his life that inspired him to write.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Published in the October-December issue of “The Indian Quarterly” published from Mumbai. 2016. pp. 126-133.
- ^{iv} Thongchi, Yeshe Dorjee, *Hanhi aru sakulor haihob*. 2016. pp. 228-229.
- ^v Language death is a term of linguistics. When a language loses all of its native speakers, it ‘dies’. In such a situation, the language is considered as a ‘dead language’.

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