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The Pursuit of Identity: Ethnolinguistic Echoes in Rashmi Narzary's *His Share of Sky*

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Abstract

The paper aims to emphasize the significance of lexical retention of indigenous culture in Rashmi Narzary's *His Share of Sky* and its contribution to children's literature. An ethnolinguistic analysis of the narrative accentuates the representation of marginalized Bodo culture and traditions as portrayed in the text. The discourse used in the eight short stories of the book is multi-lingual that breathes life into the portrayal of ethnic identity of Barsau. Narzary's use of several Bodo terms throughout the narrative challenges the traditional writing methods. Interdiscursivity connotes cultural meaning to the text through an authentic portrayal of rural Kokrajhar of Assam, India. Visual semiotics has also been used to analyze the illustrations used in the narrative that further solidify the bond between the character and the young readers. The paper focuses on Barsau's character development imbibing the wisdom from Indigenous Knowledge System through socio-cultural paradigms. The symbiotic relationship between food, fairs, myths, festivals and ecology help in the development of ecological consciousness of the ten year old Barsau.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistics, Bodo culture, children's literature, visual semiotics, ecological consciousness, Indigenous Knowledge System.

Introduction

Rashmi Narzary's *His Share of Sky* is a profound study of the life of Barsau, a ten years old Bodo boy living on the banks of Jwima River in Assam's Kokrajhar district. The book is a collection of eight interconnected short stories interspersed with rich illustrations by Suhita Mitra. The book, published in 2012, has been honoured with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Bal Puraskar in 2016. The narrative is reflective of the substantial indigenous identity of Barsau, bestrewed with ecological consciousness that shapes his childhood. Inclusion of Bodo terms make it a compelling narrative thereby both preserving and promoting indigenous culture. These are echoes of ethnolinguistics used in the eight short stories revolving around the life of Barsau. It is also reflected in the description of fairs and

festivals like *jaatra-gaan*, the oral folk tales of bawnaswr, the traditional food like *pitha* or *moori*, and also in the clothing like *endi* or *phali*. As Philip Riley notes:

"The main areas of ethnolinguistics include the relationship between language and culture, communicative practices, and cognitive models of language and thought." (Philip, 2007)

Indigenous Identity through diversity in Discourse

The narrative of *His Share of Sky* is interspersed with Bodo terms, such as *Endi*- fabric made from cocoon of Endi worm, *Khamplai*- low wooden stool, *Amai*- uncle, *moori*- puffed rice, *oma* - pig, *moosou* - cow, *Anwi* - aunty, *gotho* - little boy, *jwmgra*- shawl, *siphung* - flute, and so on. The use of Bodo terms take the readers to the rural Kokrajhar in Assam. *"You definitely wouldn't feel the same intense pulse of the Bodo rural set-up had Barsau called his aunt 'aunty' and not 'anwi'. As I intended to bring rural Kokrajhar alive through the stories and not just make Barsau a kid belonging to any other place on the globe, the inclusion and retention of the Bodo terms were essential. The characteristic Bodo tone of conversation could not be effectively highlighted in any manner other than this in literature,"* as Narzary puts it. (Nath, 2017)

Narzary employs this conscious art of story-telling so as to give the readers an insider's approach to the Bodo rural setting of the stories. The Glossary of Bodo terms has been provided by the author so as to make it easier for the readers to understand the Bodo terms and feel the experiences of Barsau. The juxtaposition of Bodo terms in English narration serves to retain the cultural heritage of Assam. Interdiscursivity in the text highlights the cultural significance in the portrayal of the life and experiences of the young protagonist, Barsau. His fear, at the market, of Bawnaswr, *"the dwarf thief who crept through shadows and vanished without a trace"*, is a reflection of the impact of myth and stories on children. Through the inclusion of folk tales of *Bawnaswr* or that of *"the river spirit who could hear the cries of children"*, Narzary gives an authentic portrayal of Bodo childhood of ten years old Barsau. He internalizes these folk tales as is exemplified by his anxiety at the market place where he saw a bald child and mistook him for *Bawnaswr*;

"Barsau remembered the story of Bawnaswr, the dwarf thief who crept through shadows and vanished without a trace. As he stood in the crowded market, clutching his few coins, he felt the same chill – what if someone like Bawnaswr was watching him now?" (Narzary, 2012)

The folk tales are passed down from generations and Barsau, along with his siblings, learn from the stories shared by his grandfather. The linguistic cadence of story-telling is not limited to myths, its cultural fabrication is important as well. The cognitive abilities of children are enhanced if they are well nourished with folk tales. Folk tales and myths are inseparable aspects of children's stories passed down from generations, inculcating cultural values.

"In children literature, myths occupy a prominent place to convey stories from centuries. Myths are a part of the storytelling from the ancient times and still in today's world of science & technology it is considered as an integral part. Myths are actually traditional, typical ancient stories which are often related with the culture and religion of the country it belongs." (Bano, 2015)

The indigenous story telling traditions are not just for entertainment but they also impart moral guidance and fuel the imaginations of young minds. It plays a crucial role in the cognitive development of a child thereby impacting his identity. The rich oral traditions of the Bodo tribe is passed down from generations to generations in the form of folk lore. The stories contribute to the cognitive development as it broadens the imaginative prowess and curiosity as well as it helps in the emotional development of the children. The way these folk lore are fashioned awakens awareness about the natural surroundings. The grandfather of Barsau delivers these stories under the moonlit sky, with his grandkids sitting around the fire and enjoying home cooked meals.

"Barsau sat quietly, the fire crackling beside him, as his grandfather spoke of the river spirit who could hear the cries of children. He wondered if the spirit had heard him too, that day he had wept alone by the bamboo grove." (Narzary, 2012)

The grandeur of the art of story-telling can be visualized through the way it is delivered, bringing the kids closer to nature and surroundings. The ample use of Bodo terms in the narrative connotes cultural meaning to the text. The story of the legend of *bawnaswr* is one such example where the young readers can feel the emotional upheaval of Barsau, both the curiosity as well as fear. The diversity in discourse connotes revival of rich indigenous heritage in the text.

Reinforcement of Ethnic Identity through Visual Semiotics- Illustrations

Visual Semiotics is a subfield of semiotics that studies the interpretations of visual sign systems. Barthes talked about the concept of literal meaning and associated cultural meaning calling them denotation and connotation, respectively. (Barthes, 1977) As an interdisciplinary field, visual semiotics provides new perspectives to the analysis of visual signs such as illustrations.

"Visual semiotics should be considered not only as a sub-field of semiotics, but also as a theoretical and methodological perspective that has been adopted and adapted across disciplines (for example, art history, media and communication studies, cultural studies, and both art and design, to name a few)." (Aiello, 2020)

His Share of Sky has numerous illustrations drawn by Suhitra Mitra that appear in all the chapters. They run parallel to the text enriching the narrative with earthy tones reflecting warm use of light and shadow. The illustrations render an aesthetic approach to the narrative, effectively portraying the emotions of the characters. The earthy tones evoke the substantial natural heritage of rural Kokrajhar. The cover page of the book is a colourful illustration of Barsau walking Amai's bicycle on the unpaved road surrounded by lush green shrubs and fields. Although the cover page is colourful, the illustrations in the book are in monochrome, like drawings. The illustrations open new dimensions for the readers to connect with the narrative. The drawings connote cultural meanings associated with the storytelling. The book is a collection of short stories meant for young readers and it is important to note the lasting impact that visual semiotics has on young minds. The drawings have been skillfully included in the storytelling making the narrative more engaging for the young minds. Talking about the significance of images in connoting meaning to the text, Panzaru writes:

"They increase comprehension, recollection and retention. Visual clues help us decode texts and attract attention to information or direct attention increasing the likelihood that the audience will remember. Visual images enhance or affect emotions and attitudes." (Panzaru, 2012)

The role of illustrations in children's literature is immense in empowering the young readers to use their imagination to connote meaning to the visual representations. The first page of *His Share of Sky* depicts Barsau standing facing away from the readers, in the fields, under the stars. This monochrome illustration connotes cultural meaning to the text as it shows Barsau wrapped in warm *endi* shawl. It is important to note that in Bodo culture, women are adept in rearing "*Endi Emphou*" (Eri worm) and "*Muga latha*" (Muga worm) and weave different kinds of clothes out of the mentioned tread. (Daimary, 2017) Thus, the shawl represents the imbedded cultural traditions and the visual representation aids in its depiction. The monochrome picture also portrays Barsau wearing half pants which is later described in the First Chapter, Boil on the Butt, as:

"No matter what the season, the upper part of Barsau's bottom half was always covered by a khaki garment which was halfway between a skirt and a pair of shorts. The thick hem of this garment grazed his legs just above the knees and from there down, whether summer or winter, Barsau was always bare." (Narzary, 2012)

The intricate fabrication of Bodo cultural identity of Barsau through the use of illustrations in the text fosters curiosity and amplifies the reading experiences of young readers. Visual semiotics makes the reading experience more immersive. The indigenous identity of Barsau is reinforced through the illustrations. The ethnic, cultural and ecological aspects of Barsau's life is well portrayed throughout the monochrome drawings that depict Barsau with his friends, or walking his Amai's bicycle, or rearing cow, or selling pumpkin by the roadside, and so on. The illustrations assist in assigning meaning to the narrative, "*the viewer goes on to read the visual and recognize the linguistic meaning of the verbal captions.*" (Panzaru, 2012) Thus, an analysis of the use of illustrations in *His Share of Sky* through the lens of visual semiotics ascertains the cultural and ethnic identity of Barsau.

Shared Communal Memory through food, festivals and Ecological consciousness

The Bodo culture has been intricately portrayed by Narzary where the readers share Barsau's fun-filled experience at *jaatra-gaan*. The ethnolinguistic cadences empowers the portrayal of Barsau as a Bodo boy imbibing the rich cultural heritage amidst the various folk festivals. The fairs and festivals at rural Kokrajhar are both religious as well as seasonal. The fairs and festivals reflect the significance of agriculture and religion in their socio-cultural cadences. In the text, it is seen how the villagers get together to celebrate any occasion, be it *jaatra-gaan* or *Kheria Puja*. The cohesion in the society is deeply reflected through the mass participation of families in the socio-cultural activities. The fairs and festivals belong to all and echo unity among the people of Bodo culture. Even the market trips of Barsau speak volumes about the shared communal memory of the society;

"The market was a riot of colours and smells – dried fish, ripe jackfruit, turmeric-stained hands, and the loud bargaining of women with baskets balanced on their hips." (Narzary, 2012)

Dried fish is one of the staples of the rural Kokrajhar and it has been mentioned several times in the text. Along with dried fish, *moori* is another food mentioned in the narrative. The readers often see Barsau and his family having *moori* with salted, no milk tea, first thing in the morning. Vegetables such as pumpkin, brinjal, jackfruit, and so on are grown and sold in the local market. It is important to note that Bodo society is an agriculture based society which has been well portrayed in the book. Although the society is patriarchal, the women folk participate in the socio-cultural and religious aspects of the society. They also contribute by working in farms and also by rearing *endi* worms to weave different kinds of clothes like *gamsha*, *jwmgra*, *dokhna*, *phali* and so on. Barsau is often seen covering his upper body with *endi* shawl. In the First Chapter, Narzary mentions;

"All this clothing was held together by a final wrapping of his soft, worn-out endi shawl which his mother had woven." (Narzary, 2012)

Women's contribution in the household responsibilities is immense in Bodo culture, which is well portrayed in the text. Barsau's mother is often described in the text boiling and serving tea, cooking dinner, washing clothes, and also participating in the cultural activities like watching *Jaatra-gaan* with the neighbours. Bodo culture is driven by patriarchy but the voices of women are fully heard in the text. Barsau's mother has been depicted as a strong woman who stayed strong when Barsau lost consciousness or when his foot was hurt in the school. She follows traditional cultural practices but also makes sure that her children receive education from school and consults doctor during any ailment. She is a perfect embodiment of tradition and modernity.

Ecological consciousness is another thrust area intertwined with cultural heritage. The communal memory of the Bodo society is evoked and nourished through the food, festivals as well as environmental awareness among the people. Indigenous Knowledge System is reflected through the assimilation of culture and environment reflected through the experiences of the Bodo community. The intangible wisdom of the Indigenous Knowledge System is passed through generations through the agrarian as well as cultural practices. Children learn from their elders by observing them, helping them

and also through the myths and stories they hear. The agrarian society of Bodo foster ecological balance through their agricultural practices. The rearing of farm animals like cows and pigs, and *endi* worms further exemplify the Indigenous Knowledge System. Women of Bodo society are adept in making clothes from rearing of *endi* worms, which has become part of their culture. This cultural assimilation reflects the symbiotic relationship between culture and ecology. The wisdom of making traditional clothes from *endi* worms is an example of Indigenous Knowledge System passed down as cultural heritage in the Bodo society. Awareness about the natural environment is communicated via various festivals celebrating nature, the food habits and cultural assimilation. Ecological consciousness is important for the cognitive development of a child.

"In general terms the ecological consciousness is understood as a reflection of the psyche of a variety of man's relationship with nature, which mediate its behavior in the "natural world", and express axiological position of the subject of consciousness in relation to the natural world. And studies show that environmental consciousness is a complex mental education, which includes cognitive, regulatory, emotional, ethical, and other aspects." (Panov, 2013)

Indigenous Knowledge System is reflected through the sustainable agricultural practices and the close relationship of the characters with nature. The title of the book itself connotes that nature is an integral part of Barsau's existence. The Jwima river runs deep into the narrative sprinkling various aspects of the community. The children relax and play on its bank and women wash clothes on the washing stone by the Jwima river. Barsau's close relationship with his natural surroundings is reflected in the way he takes care of animals such as cow and its calf. He and his siblings also named their pet pig '*oma gendra*' signifying the deep bond they shared. The economic brunt is shared by the whole family when they are forced to sell pig meat. The despair and sadness felt among the children by this is significant aspect of the narrative. Barsau not only says good bye to his dear friend *Oma gendra*, he is also the one who had to sell chunks of its meat during this financial distress of the family. The hopelessness in Barsau's eyes is felt by the readers too. This dimension adds realistic portrayal into children's stories. This subtle turn of the narrative captures the childhood difficulties that underscore the emotional development of the protagonist. Ten year old Barsau's cognitive development is fostered by the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors around his life. Ecological consciousness plays a pivotal role in his identity formation as he finds solace and home under the moonlit sky, among the grass and shrubs as illustrated in the first page of the book. His relationship with nature, be it Jwima river or *Oma Gendra*, is pious and nourishes his cognitive skills, thus contributing in his holistic development.

Conclusion

The story of Barsau as narrated in the form of eight short stories is set in the Bodo rural context. The interdiscursivity of the text allows the reader to connect with the socio-cultural aspects of the life of ten year old Barsau. *His Share of Sky* is set in the rural Kokrajhar of Assam and Narazy's use of Bodo terms makes the narrative more inclusive. The discourse helps in setting the tone of the short stories thereby providing it a voice true to indigenous identity of Barsau.

The childhood of Barsau has not been portrayed as a fairy tale. It is a realistic representation of a Bodo boy who grows up in the rural, lush green surrounding, on the banks of Jwima river. The narrative employs myths and story-telling as part of the life of Barsau. He and his siblings are often shown enjoying the folk tales of *bawnaswr* or that of the river spirit. A range of emotions are felt by the children when they hear such tales, they feel scared but are also excited to know more about them. Myths and story-telling contribute in the cognitive development of children and they also inculcate moral as well as cultural values. They foster the imaginative prowess and curiosity of the kids, stimulating their emotional development. Ecological and cultural consciousness are other aspects associated with the subtle art of story-telling. The discourse of *His Share of Sky* is simple, but it leaves profound impact in the minds of young readers.

Bodo culture is also defined by its assimilation of agriculture, and religion in its fairs and festivals. The book depicts many such celebrations, most notably that of *jaatra-gaan*. The role of women in the Bodo society is also reflected through the characterization of the mother of Barsau. The quite life of Barsau is filled with joy and adventures that he experiences with his friends. The learning experience of Barsau where he attempts to show off his riding skills, later learns to ride the bicycle, but ultimately couldn't ride in front of his friends as he actually gets a boil on his butt, is an interesting reading. The chaos is presented beautifully not just with text, but also through illustrations. Visual semiotics is used to amplify the effect of the narrative on young minds. The monochrome drawings are in adherence with the narrative of the text. Visual semiotics leave a lasting impression on the young readers helping them in relating with the character.

A significant aspect of the narrative in *His Share of Sky* is that the discourse is simple but it also explores the hardships that Barsau faces. The physical as well as emotional turmoil of Barsau is explored through the use of ethnolinguistics. He is depicted not only enjoying in adventurous activities with his friends and cousins, but he also falls very sick and gets injured at school. He is a full-fledged character with a range of emotions. The chapter portraying the emotional goodbye the family had to make to their pet pig in order to survive the financial crunches, is painful for the readers too. Barsau's sadness trespasses the text and reaches the readers when they see him bound to sell meat of *oma gendra* for survival.

"Contrary to the common belief, the purpose of children's literature is not to paint a rosy picture of the otherwise hostile world or to only take the young on a fantasy trip." (Kaushal, 2020)

An ethnolinguistic approach to Narzary's *His Share of Sky* highlights the portrayal of the rich cultural heritage of Bodo society. The ethnic identity of Barsau is weaved in the discourse through the use of Bodo terms, myths, folk tales, fairs, festivals, and nature around him. Ecological consciousness that the child develops due to his inheritance of Indigenous Knowledge System through participation in the cultural activities, being part of folk lores, and his various escapades on the banks of Jwima river, has been effectively portrayed in the discourse. Language connotes cultural meanings to the text, "*language shapes and is shaped by the culture that uses it.*" (Bressler, 1994). It is resented when the readers see Barsau being excited about the *jaatra gaan*, or simply when he walks with his friends covering himself with *endi* shawl during winter. The ethnic identity of Barsau is cultivated through the use of discourse, myths, illustrations, food, festivals, and ecological consciousness. Ethnolinguistic approach to the text highlights the representation of marginalized indigenous language and culture and its importance in children's literature

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