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Local Ethos and Nature in Dhruba Hazarika's *A Bowstring Winter*

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Abstract:

Dhruba Hazarika's *A Bowstring Winter* (2006) is also popularly known as the 'Shillong novel' as it captures the very essence of this beautiful town of north east India in all its sights, sound and aroma. Woven round two plots – one of violence and revenge, and the other of love blooming amidst the coldness of dead winter – the novel presents a successful blending of human activity and nature, and thereby makes both inseparable from each other. The paper proposes an analysis of the various ways in which the characters in the novel interact with nature and how their psychological state find reflection in nature and natural objects. The paper also takes cognizance of human nature as a part of larger nature in relation to the 'ethos' of the place and cast light on how the relationship between the characters and nature reveal a polyphonic spectrum in the narrative framework of the novel.

Keywords: Nature, local ethos, violence, Shillong.

The north-eastern states of India are remarkable for the variety and beauty that nature has offered them in her myriad colours, and when one speaks of the beautiful places in this part of the country, it is simply impossible to overlook the charm that Shillong carries in the mind and eye of those who search for aesthetic pleasure in nature. Dhruba Hazarika's *A Bowstring Winter* (2006) is a racy narrative set against the charm and allure of the hill town of Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. Shillong, also known as the 'Scotland of the East', with its breathtakingly beautiful groves of pines and surrounding hills, is an exotic small hill-town situated in the Khasi Hills in the north-eastern part of India. The town can boast of a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic population with people from other parts of the country residing there along with the native Khasis who are zealously aware of their own tradition and culture amidst the influx of other cultures and practices. Such zealousness finds its reflection in the ethos of the place. This paper intends an examination of the local ethos in the backdrop of the universal themes of friendship,

loyalty and love – qualities that are hallmarks of human nature – set against the violence that runs in the underworld of gambling in the hills. It may be mentioned that in *A Bowstring Winter* the violence in the narrative does not hinder the development of the themes but provides a strong base on which the regional ethos are tried and tested. Acclaimed as a successful novel in terms of technique, *A Bowstring Winter* combines the elements of diverse genres such as “thriller, mystery, romance, drama and travelogue” (review). But amidst all these, the existential theme of the utter loneliness of man in a wide cosmos is present and the novel attains tragic dimensions at times.

For the purpose of the paper, the following definitions of ‘ethos’ have been taken:

- (i) The set of beliefs, ideas, etc. about the social behaviour and relationships of a person or group. (www.cambridge.org)
- (ii) The characteristic spirit of a culture, era or community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations. (www.lexico.com)
- (iii) ‘Ethos’ as “the moral disposition or moral character, an abiding quality”, as opposed to ‘pathos’ as “a temporary and often violent emotional state”. (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*)

Approaching the novel in terms of its regional ethos arises primarily from the fact that a work of literature is seldom free from the context in which it is born. It arises from the view that literature is not born in vacuum. Hence, to read and appreciate a novel such as *A Bowstring Winter*, which is deeply rooted in its setting indisputably requires an understanding of the local ethos which worked behind its creation. The need is not just an aesthetic appreciation, but also social understanding. In *A Bowstring Winter*, the regional ethos is so strongly present that it has been nicknamed as ‘the Shillong novel’. The local ethos is found in terms of locale, cuisine, values and nature – both human and the natural world. The blurb on the penguin edition of the novel records:

Set against the lush landscape of Shillong, Dhruba Hazarika’s tale of revenge and violence brilliantly evokes the sights and smells of North-East India while narrating a dynamic tale which addresses the universal themes of friendship, loyalty and the inherent loneliness of man.

Such “brilliant evocation of the sights and smells of North-East India” and particularly that of Shillong, the locale of the novel has been achieved by virtue of the first-hand experience

of Shillong of the author. Hazarika was educated in Shillong, at St. Edmund's College and later at NEHU (North Eastern Hill University). His years spent in Shillong and his understanding of the local ethos lend to the novel its authentic touch which none who ever has spent some time in Shillong can miss. It is an honest evocation of the streets, the restaurants with the type of food served there and the local costume. The vivid joyousness of the festive season of Christmas and New Year celebrations emerge alive even to readers who may not have visited the place. Regional flavor in the novel begin appearing from the time-frame within which the plot is designed. The *Khasi* names of the three months of the year that constitute the time-frame are given alongside their English names too. The three months, November, December and January are given the *Khasi* names of *U Naiwieng*, *U Nohprahand* *U Kyllalyngkot* respectively and provide a tightly-knit structure to the novel. These three months also mark the three parts or books into which the novel is divided. The rise and fall in the fortunes of the characters take place within these three months. With the temperature dropping gradually from mid-October, these months naturally depict the end of an annual cycle and prepare for moving into the beginning of another annual cycle. Framed from fall to a few days past New Year, it symbolizes the shedding away of old, withered things and new beginning; a new lease of life and love. It is precisely such reference to the season which demands that all human actions be counted as a part of nature. The constant references to nature in the novel make it possible for the readers to inhale the beauty and the local flavor that Shillong has to offer. But whether it is love or the violent world of bookies and gambling, all are guided by their codes and among all these, the age-old codes of chivalry and companionship range the highest.

One of the most important features of regional flavour found in the novel is in terms of local cuisine and drinks. Food and drink also occupy important positions from the fact that the novel starts with a scene in a restaurant called Kaizang, where the protagonist, John Dkhar, is present one cold November evening at six-thirty, contentedly sipping his favourite Old Monk Rum with warm water as a protection against the shivering cold outside. The mention of warm water with rum is notable here since it is in cold and hilly places that rum and brandy are drunk with warm water. The frequent references to rum also point towards the drink being popular in cold places. During day hours when it is comparatively less cold, beer is drunk by many and the mention of Sun Lager beer comes up several times in the novel. Notably, most of the times, beer is also not served chilled because of the extreme cold. But the local brew *kakyiad* is also a

favourite drink of many. It is interesting to note how Kharkongor comments upon Scotch whisky and *Kakyiad* and tells that the latter is a fine and honest drink (209-10). It should be understood that drinking is a part of culture in many tribal communities, including the Khasis. Drinking is not seen as a taboo in several north-eastern communities. Drinks are also offered during certain rituals and practices. Of course, there are many who do not drink.

Along with liquor, popular cuisine as well as native Khasi food is also mentioned in the novel. Much detail goes into the description of the process of preparing meat for roasting. In the category of popular food one can include momos, chow, noodles and fried rice; while in the category of local cuisine one can include *jadoh* and the ever-favourite *lai-patta*, a variety of leafy vegetable which requires cold climate to grow and is a seasonal vegetable in larger part of the country but grows round the year in Shillong because of the cold climate. The local essence is very well captured also with the reference to "fresh bamboo shoot". The detailed description of roasting and having food and drink outside in the evenings and sometimes late into the night lends an authentic local touch to the narrative and secondly, it also projects the simultaneous existence of the joyous with the uncertain and oppressive side of life – almost in the manner of comic relief in tragedies.

The localized nature of the novel is further authenticated with the inclusion of places in Shillong town, especially with the names of those places that are tourists' delight and have always been reminders of the town whenever they are mentioned in the north-eastern states. Particularly, places like Lady Hydari Park, William Ward's Lake and the Peak are famous as places of tourist interest. Similarly, other places like Polo Ground, Fire Brigade, Nongthymmai, Police Bazaar, Burra Bazaar and other places in and around Shillong reinforce the local touch to the novel. It seems even possible to almost construct a mind map of the town. Besides the places, the charm that lies in the biting cold of winter in Shillong with its hide-and-seek between the sun and the clouds and the quick onset of evening with the razor-like cold wind evoke true feelings of the place. People basking in the quick glimpses of the sun and preparing themselves for the Christmas and New Year celebrations ignoring the harshness of the cold season exude a warm feeling which is contagious. The bite of frosty wind is lost in the warmth of the festive season and the glow of the human spirit.

Keeping tune with the historical period in which the novel is set in, Hazarika marks the minutest of details, and he writes how the roads were ruled by Jeeps and Ambassadors. It may be mentioned here that Jeeps are still a favourite in hill towns and Shillong is not an exception. There are several families that keep and maintain a Jeep even when they have other cars or vehicles. The vehicle is pride of possession for the family. Jeep is not just a relic of the past but also a very utilitarian vehicle when it comes to scaling the hilly terrains. Also, it has now become a link for romanticizing the past. Hazarika's attention to details can be understood when he mentions that the Jeep used by James Kharlukhi and his team was a left-hand driven one and not a right-hand drive that we normally have in India. Another important point is the recurrent advice (even warning) to the drivers not to shut down the engine but to keep it running even when idle so that there may be no problem in starting the vehicles again. The reason is that most of the Jeeps run on diesel and diesel has a tendency to coagulate and invite starting problems in low temperature. These are vehicles in the rudimentary stage of development and the modern ones laden with advanced technological features.

The other and very interesting side of Shillong-life that Hazarika shows in his novel is the world of *Teer* -- a form of licensed gambling using bows, arrows and numbers. It is a world of bookies, fixers, gangs, guns and arrows; in short, it is that side of the story which contains the potential for violence. The system is run by groups or gangs that have bookies in several parts of the state to book the numbers. But problems occur sometimes when these groups begin to fight for dominance or to 'make' the numbers so that the rival group faces losses.

In the context of the novel, it is James Shullai Kharlukhi and Charley who are leaders of two such groups that are opposed to each other. It is in this rivalry that John is unwittingly caught when one evening he becomes a part of the fight between the two rival gangs in Kaizang restaurant. There begins his initiation into the world of violence, friendship and love. He is greatly influenced by the presence of Bah Kharkongor, an elderly gentleman and a great friend of James. Bah Kharkongor is a reputed *teerman*, i.e. an archer who was and still remains unmatched in his skill with the bow and the arrow. Age does not seem to have lessened his zeal for life, nor has diminished his skill in archery. This is evident in the split-second speed with which he shoots the arrow that saves the life of James during the forceful 'making' of the number. However,

while returning from the field, Kharkongor is shot by Charley, though the later survives the bullet.

It is at this junction that the Khasi ethos of man-to-man combat comes to light. Guns and revolvers, though modern and more convenient weapons, are looked down as the weapons for cowards and the superiority of the traditional bow and arrow is upheld in this regard. Using guns is seen as a cowardly act in comparison to the romance associated with the skill needed in using the bow and the arrow. The tribal ethos of man-to-man combat and traditional chivalric/heroic code is upheld here. This project the attachment of the Khasis to the world of nature that has not been yet wiped out with the onslaught of new technologies and ideas. Yet all this is marked with a sense of nostalgia and a sad recognition of the passing away of the old values. When Bah Kharkongor speaks of his skill in archery, it is usually with a sense of nostalgia. His nostalgia is representative of the nostalgia felt by the entire community. The reference to groups of drug-addicted boys loitering around the town or hunched up in corners is a sorry sight of the degradation slowly creeping into the life of the youth. The incident in the cinema hall when Charley's men and a group of boys high on grass (*ganja*) attack John and others resulting in the death of James is an ungainly incident which highlights the decay setting in. At the end of the novel too, it is the arrow of Bah Kharkongor which avenges the death of James, but the one to die is Mukhim, not Charley. The split-second gap between the release of the arrow by Kharkongor and it finding the mark in Mukhim's throat is described in a dramatic manner which seems to suspend time. In the combat over life and death, natural/traditional skill finally wins over technology, symbolizing the victory of native ethos over the modern, imported ones and upholding the spirit of the hills; it is pronounced more sharply in Kharkongor's admonition of Charley: 'Is not that the same revolver you used that day in Umiam? Like a coward, did not you use it?'(337). And as the dead body of Mukhim is brought to rest on the ground, Kharkongor asks John to put a few drops of rum into the dead man's lips telling that in "his long journey to the Peak he will need that rum", referring to the traditional belief that after death the soul takes a long journey to its final resting place. (341)

The topography of the town is clearly created when Dhruba Hazarika describes particular places and scenes. The description of Ward's Lake is one such:

Ward's Lake lies in a ravine in the middle of the town, with one end blocked by a dam beyond which is the botanical garden...As one closes in on the arched wooden bridge spanning the two banks, the spread of flowers bordering the red sandstone path that hug the perimeter of the lake offer a serene backdrop. From the slope leading to the Club, the pines loom up to the sky, their shadows in the water entwined in ripples of sunlight. (97)

It is against such a background of natural scenic beauty that Dhruba Hazarika weaves the universal themes of love, friendship, betrayal and revenge.

The two major love-plots in the novel are so well wrought that they draw all the important characters into them. The first love-plot is that of James, Charley and Nora, and the second is of James, Jennifer and John. Bah Kharkongor is drawn into both the plots because of his love for James, whom he considers his *paralok*, his true friend. The second plot concerns James, Jennifer and John finds its parallelism at certain points with the first plot. Jennifer is an extremely beautiful young lady and when she is introduced in the novel, it is clear that there is a steady relationship between her and James. Her beauty sweeps John off his feet and without realizing he falls in love with her, though is fully aware of the consequences that such desire would bring for him. Jennifer too is attracted towards him and though understated, it is clear that she feels stifled in her relationship with James. With the arrival of the festive season their love blossoms and unforeseen events create unexpected twists and turns in their lives. James is seriously wounded in an attack at the cinema hall and dies and is avenged by Bah Kharkongor and at the end. As the novel reaches its end, John is shown walking towards the home of Jennifer, a sadder but a wiser man, musing on the mysterious manner in which life and fate work, and acknowledging the power of love over us:

There were others who had come in now and John Dkhar thought of the momos and the chow, the pork and the omelettes, the endless glasses of rum and whiskey. He thought, it was a feast all the way until love came in and feasted on all of us, all of us...and realizing what he had to do, John Dkhar stepped out of Kaizang and began walking towards Jennifer D'Santos's house (343).

Thus, the novel ends with the hope that in John and Jennifer, love will find a way of keeping itself alive. Bah Kharkongor remains in his unhappy relationship with his wife, almost

attaining the level of a tragic hero and reflecting the utter loneliness of man in a wide cosmos. The universal themes of love, friendship and camaraderie are played out in a lovely yet a violent world with the local ethos blending into them. With the wonderful evocation of the local sights, sounds and the codes of unquestioning loyalty, both in friendship and violence, the novelist has crafted a tale which tales of the uncertainty that accompanies the minutes of our life.

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