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## Re-reading Cultural Materialism: A Study of Bandhu Ram Basumatari's Short Story "The Cobweb of Darkness"

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### **Abstract:**

*Modern Bodo Short Stories* is a culmination of eleven short stories by a group of modern Bodo short story writers. The stories emphasize the socio-cultural reality of a Bodo society. Bodos are one of the most distinct tribes in the North-Eastern part of India. The Bodos situate their roles and ideologies by identifying themselves with their conventional norms, established legacy and cultural prosperity. The stories primarily focus on the aspect of hegemony and subordination, history and culture and self and society. The present paper intends to locate the prospect of material existence in a particular culture and its societal implications. Bandhu Ram Basumatari's short story titled "The Cobweb of Darkness" helps to generalize the notion of simple and value-based living. The structural framework revolves around the flow of truth, valour and legitimacy. The central character Dubagang contributes to the overall development of a sustained societal status. The plot of the story deals not only with the mental but also with the psychological development of characters. This paper aims to underline the fundamental role that a particular culture plays to the making of a healthy self and a structured society. The main objective of this paper is to raise awareness among people about a consistent cultural strategy and human behaviour. It also fosters the psychological experiences and the alteration of one's mindset that contributes to the value of one's cultured psyche.

**Keywords:** cultural materialism, individual, psychology, society, self.

## **Introduction:**

The study of the self and society always acts as a precursor to the understanding of a rich cultural heritage. Literature always serves as a connecting medium between humanity and society. Bodo literature also marks a trend in this respect. The technique of telling stories situates the stature of Modern Bodo writers. Bandhu Ram Basumatari is one of the most emerging Bodo short story writers in the history of Bodo literature. His writings deal with society and individuals, natural resources, cultural proliferation, sense of belongingness, grimy inferences and so on. The Bodos are one of the indigenous tribes of the North-Eastern region of India. They are known primarily for their simplicity, ethnic identity, traditional upsurge, cultural richness and historical reproduction. This paper concentrates on Bandhu Ram Basumatari's short story "The Cobweb of Darkness" and its underlying aspects of religion, culture and society. The story's narrative talks about greed, deceit, suffering, oblation and realization. The structural configuration revolves around the elements of penance, understanding and fulfilment.

## **Aims and Objectives:**

The paper mainly attempts to read Bandhu Ram Basumatari's story "The Cobweb of Darkness" from the perspective of cultural materialism. It further insists on relocating aspects like familial conflict, social involvement and relationship status. The thematic framework of the story underscores a network of deaths, exasperation, remorse and ramifications. It also asserts a platform to make the people aware of the consequences of avarice and treachery. The aspect of duplicity contributes to the overall catastrophe in the story.

Further, it also sees a dichotomy between action and reaction, irresponsibility and management, exhilaration and sobriety, offence and equity and so on. The thematic concern deciphers the underlying ethics of a Bodo society. It further suggests the precise and veritable character of Bodo people.

Cultural Materialism works mainly as a basis for understanding the distinction between culture and material life. In the domain of cultural materialism, culture is defined as an evolutionary process that depends on the phenomenon of materialism- whereas it acts as a tool to promote cultural implications. It emerges as a movement during the 1980s along with the concept of New Historicism. The term was coined by Raymond Williams. Drew Westen writes in "Cultural Materialism: Food for Thought on Bum Steer?": "Cultural Materialism

rests upon the assumption that most of socio-cultural reality is determined by and thus predictable from a knowledge of the material infrastructure” (Westen et al. 639).

Further, Cultural Materialism acts as a literary device to delineate the binary between the material human condition and the principle of culture. It is the existence of any material resources that reflects a specific culture in a particular society. Every human society remains rich with its linguistic and cultural findings and strategies. In the Introduction of *Cultural Materialism*, Hans Bertans writes about the main agenda of cultural materialism, which rests on social categorization and reconfiguration of the dominant social order (Bertans). The story also posits to reshape the social order by its casts of characters and events.

### **Representation of Cultural Materialism in “The Cobweb of Darkness”:**

The story “The Cobweb of Darkness” opens with an interrogative sentence that casts the spell of the enigma between reality and apparition, oneness and duality and scepticism and conviction. The opening lines focus on the protagonist, Dubagang, the wealthiest Mahajan of the village. Basumatari introduces him as a man of false and deceit. He is also an opportunist whose sole aim in life is to grab other’s land and property. Basumatari writes: “In short, he turned a Mahajan by exploiting others with all his tricks” (Basumatari 18). Human life is mainly conditioned by both natural and ideal. Westen believes: “human consciousness and culture are product of material life, not vice versa” (Westen 639).

Promoting varied cultural resources and situating material ideas is the main agenda of cultural materialism. It works as a phenomenon in human existence. It corresponds to the value-based truth and structured conception of life. Harris in his preface to *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* writes, cultural materialism “is based on the simple premise that human life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence” (Harris 55-59). Dubagang appears as a man in his old age with different kinds of illnesses and anxieties. The repetitive line: “They say that the spell of sin spreads out to seven generations of the sinner” (Basumatari 18) testifies to the element of acknowledgment and accomplishment within him. He seems to be aware of his faulty life and its inhibitions. He takes himself as a sinner and is at a loss by then. He claims that his present state is an expiration of his past sin. He says in utter despair: “What benefit has accrued from amassing so much of property? So, far I couldn’t even feel the least happiness. And now my turn has come to leave the world” (Basumatari 18-19). This acts as a rhetorical question that compels him to build a temple in his compound as a mark of penitence and compunction.

Moreover, Allen Johnson and Orna Johnson write in the Introduction of *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* that cultural materialism "requires an expanded understanding of the relationship between survival issues (the infrastructure) and the broader world of social relations and ideologies in which all human live" (Johnson and Johnson xi). Further, he says, "a major goal of cultural materialism is to provide casual explanations for similarities and differences in human behaviour and thought" (Johnson and Johnson xi). Similarly, in the story, the protagonist's primary mission appears to be his psychological growth toward commitment and exercise. Moreover, the temple that he builds symbolizes his conviction and credence. At first, Dubagang appears to be a paramour but gradually as he grows in age, he becomes more responsible and obligated. His stepbrother, Bargo's murder, makes him vigorously sick. His illness was called a possession "by the spirit of Bargo" (Basumatari 19). As days pass, Dubagang comes to know that it is his eldest son, Thabagang, who had killed his stepbrother, Bargo. They found Bargo's body on the threshold of their temple. The temple lies at the centre of the story. The narrative structure of the story revolves around human life, social chaos, familial fight, individual consciousness, morality and justice.

After the assassination of Bargo, Thabagang also dies of a snake bite. The poison takes hold of his entire body and he breathes his last. At this hour, Dubagang feels that the "cobweb of darkness" actually encompasses him. The story ends with specific interrogative sentences like: "What more will now happen?", "What would happen of these vast properties?", "How much of rupees had been spent since yesterday?" (Basumatari 19-20)- add to Dubagang's espousal of death. His life appears to be the embodiment of disgrace, misfortune and ignominy. The cast of incidents and events like Thabagang's untimely and premature death, Bargo's execution, Thabagang's decision to make Bargo's youngest daughter his life partner and Bargo's detestation and retribution towards Thabagang contribute to the mental and psychological thought process of Dubagang.

Further, these involve much of Dubagang's investment of money and saturation of mental peace. The story ends with a soliloquy: "Alas, the wealth earned with so much of hard work, would not be frittered away" (Basumatari 22). He becomes perplexed by the thought of spending more money. Things have already fallen apart for him. Basumatari's final lines read: "The excessive greed for money too went with his life" (Basumatari 22). The story climaxes with Thabagang's disclosure: "It is I who have killed Bargo" (Basumatari 21). This, also psychologically affects Dubagang.

The story specifies socio-cultural vision postulated by the modern Bodo writers mainly to chronicle the greed and sufferings of small village people. Williams writes in *Culture and Society*: “The history of our idea of culture is a record of our reactions, in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life” (Williams 2). He emphasizes the convergence between production and practice. He mainly shows his concern towards social order and elements that “sees culture as the signifying system” in which a particular social order is “communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (Williams 12-13). As Andrew Milner rights in “Cultural Materialism, Culturalism and Post-Culturalism: The Legacy of Raymond Williams”. Dubagang’s exploitation helps him to realize his innate material self. The element of ‘land’ asserts him to be a self-interested, selfish person. Finally, a sort of realization comes within him. It works as a power that motivates him to become a religious person.

This particular story aims to elevate the mood of the subjective self to the situational self. The incorporation of rejection and substantial acceptance formulate the concept of ‘being’ in the narration of the story. The paper postulates the configuration of the material self and the cultural self in forming familial and social history. This formation rejuvenates the idea of cultural productivity and agricultural landscape in human society in general and Bodo society in particular. The cast of characters asserts the necessity of material existence more than any cultural proforma. Characters like Dubagang, Thabagang and Bargo implicate the importance of money and wealth in human life. Dubagang’s over-ambitious nature, Bargo’s silence, and Thabagang’s retribution bestow the prevalence of corporeal pleasure and ethnic expression. The writer here provides a sequential relief to the narrative framework of the story by meting out the prospect of building a temple in one of the “corners of his compound itself” (Basumatari 19). Thereby, Basumatari offers an insight into the reconciled and transformed self of the protagonist.

The paper lenses the idea propounded by Dollimore and Sinfield in the Introduction of *Political Shakespeare* that reads cultural materialism as the one that: “registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class” (Dollimore and Sinfield viii, 149). The character of Dubagang explicates a kind of sublime and humanitarian approach by signifying the importance of contradiction and ideology, collective disposition and individual consciousness. The aspects of traditionalism and humanism contribute to the domain of cultural materialism. Realization works as a phenomenon in the character of Dubagang. He seems to utilize his power like his elder

brother and father in rebuilding his transformed self. The very line that gets repeated suggests his conversion.

Hans Bertans writes in Chapter Seven, entitled "Literature and Culture: The New Historicism and Cultural Materialism"; "Cultural materialists analyses of literary texts bring to light how these texts are (inevitably conservative) instruments of a dominant socio-cultural order, they also demonstrate how the apparent coherence of that order is threatened from the inside, by inner contradictions and by tensions that it seeks to hide" (Bertans 148). There is also a prospect of re-reading Dubagang's character from the perspective of change and transition. The main focus always remains on the sense of comprehending insight and perception. Dubagang passes through a state of repentance and a state of prescience. He acknowledges the very state of his extortion. His acquisitive nature dominates over his sound and moral sense. This paper attempts to fulfil the ground reality of the acceptance of the component of cultural inheritance. Moreover, it tries to prepare a requisite ground for accepting the endowment component and its different dimensions.

One of the most well-known British critics, Graham Holderness, explains cultural materialism as a political model of history in *The Shakespeare Myth*. (Holderness). In this sense, the casts of temples within the compound built by a refreshing mind exemplify the cultural history of the people and the society. The reference to the temple and the snake bite seems to have some impact on the treatment of justice and punishment. Basumatari intends to meditate on the value of culture and the survival of material in human life. The plot of the story incorporates the binary between traditionalism and obscurity, spirituality and decadence, faith and doubt, peace and violence, clarity and confusion and so on. Cultural materialism is a literary and critical device that paves the path for social, political, historical and economic analysis and interpretation.

The history behind the creation and the making of Dubagang's character alludes to the existence and reality of cultural and moral values. The main idea behind cultural materialism involves the using past events to analyze the present practice that usually gets revealed by the structured and balanced norms of society. The past of Dubagang aids him in pledging for a unified and harmonious society. He instead initiates the process with his family. His family seems to be the breeding ground for the upheaval of his mind and clarity of thoughts. Kibin writes in the abstract: "Cultural Materialism registers its commitment through literature to the

transformation of social order which exploits the people on the basis of race, gender and class” (Kibin).

The area of cultural materialism tries to pacify the strong bond between material practices and cultural models. In the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, G. Helms writes: “Relating everyday cultural practices to wider social formations as whole ways of life and structure of feeling has become part of cultural materialism’s contribution to the emerging field of cultural studies” (Helms 425-430). The reference to cultural practices like worshipping the local deity, offering of ‘cocks, pigeons, boars and goats’ (Basumatari 19), willing suspension of supernaturalism, the appearance of witchcraft and the image of a poisonous snake subscribe to the overall cultural prejudices that get enrolled in Bodo social customs. Dubagang suffers for engulfing himself with advantages and benefits- he was all into the material pleasures of life. Towards the later part of his life, he idealizes himself to think about his familial history and dynasty.

### **Conclusion:**

Finally, the paper concludes by staging the corresponding association between life experience and expression. The lived panorama of the people marks the legacy of both individual accounts and cultural details. The conscious self and the cultural history are the hallmarks of every community. The conglomeration between the two forms an identical altitude in a Bodo society. “The Cobweb of Darkness” caters to the formation of a societal history where there is a merge of both individual and collective psychology.

Dubagang, as a character, contributes to the element mentioned above, of intellectual and cognitive evolution. Dubagang’s character clicks a specific change at the story’s beginning. He foresees the illicit residual of his past misdeeds, thus preparing himself with a self-clarified progression. His character goes through an act of cognizance and recognition. Dubagang always seems to envision a true and faithful life. The thematic ideology also stratifies the inputs given by the characters like Thabagang and Bargo. Basumatari ends with “heavy shower” and “rain water” (Basumatari 22) which again symbolizes tradition and ancestral endowment.

However, the story pacifies the ground reality of the Bodo people and their society. The Bodo society is conventional. The story begins with land, agriculture, rituals, observances and many more. The plot of the story periodically leads to the upsurge of inconsistencies and flaws that gradually decline in the lives of ordinary people. The stories



regulate the picture of village life that casts land as a historic resource and the different enterprises like the temple as an enlightening pursuit. The cultural history corresponds to the prevalence of a healthy social paradigm that remains strong even after so many detriments.

On the other hand, material subsistence conforms to the sophisticated frequency of an artistic presence. As the story begins with simple village folk and their varied customary implications, it elevates the idea of ethnicity, religiosity and socio-cultural affinity. The insular formation of the tale seems to emit a synchronous blend of dedication and occupation, liability and disloyalty, commitment and apathy, genuine expedients and unlawful actions. The course of action deviates from a regular activity to an open-ended mechanism.

Thus, the paper appears to foresee the play of time in the lives of individuals and society. The writer aims to discern the importance of the past in deciphering an individual's plan of action and performance. When the story reinstates the present scenario, automatically, the past gets outlined. The reference to the past figures marks amendments in the present context. The charge of corruption, the extent of greed, the form of deceit, the ongoing malpractices and so on define the status of change and transition towards self-recognition and self-concession. The Bodo short story writers insist on the importance of familial unity and its implications. The writer emphasises the growing discourses of inconsistency and conflict in a Bodo society. The story mainly elucidates an awareness and perception of the ordinary people in the society. It decodes the perceived notion of proclivity to the past, and the practice of tradition and consistent homogeneity.

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