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Nature, Culture, Memory And Social Change: A Study Of Haripada Debbarma's 'Jalai Tokpupu'

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ABSTRACT

Haripada Debbarma's 'Jalai Tokpupu' (2000) is a short story that brings together memory, education, cultural heritage, nature, traditional life, and the social changes brought about by modernity. The story unfolds through the memories of Monai, who is reminded of his childhood after listening to a traditional Jaduni song of Tripura sung by a talented singer on a festive occasion. His recollection becomes a means through which the writer reconstructs the rural world of Ramnagar and its neighbouring areas such as Twidu, Dunachar, Pakili, Hapingkami, Chandaraikami, and Pengkami. The small rivers, forests, trees, birds, varieties of vegetables, agricultural activities, Jhum cultivation, traditional songs, customs, beliefs, and everyday practices of the people together create a vivid picture of the earlier rural environment. The character of Dukmali is particularly significant in representing the preservation of community identity, customs, beliefs, and traditional knowledge, even without extensive formal education. In contrast, Monai represents the transformative role of education and broader social consciousness. Born and brought up in the village, Monai later continues his education in Agartala, which enables him to develop a wider outlook and critically observe the differences between his childhood surroundings and the changing realities of modern life. His observations also reveal the transformation from a largely agrarian and Jhum based economy, where people depended considerably on forest resources, to a market-oriented urban environment where even commonly available vegetables have become costly commodities. Through Monai's recollections and observations, Debbarma therefore draws attention to the gradual transformation of the natural, social, and cultural landscape of Tripura. This paper examines how 'Jalai Tokpupu' uses personal memory as a literary device to preserve the image of a changing rural society while simultaneously reflecting upon education, cultural identity, traditional knowledge, environmental transformation, and the impact of modernity.

Keywords: 'Jalai Tokpupu', Cultural Heritage, Modernity and Environmental Transformation, Social Change.

INTRODUCTION

Short stories occupy an important position in literature as they provide a concise yet meaningful representation of human life, social relationships, cultural practices, and changing realities. Through characters, settings, and everyday experiences, short stories often preserve social and cultural elements that may gradually disappear with the passage of time. Haripada Debbarma's 'Jalai Tokpupu' (2000) is a significant Kokborok short story that presents a vivid picture of Tiprasa life and its close relationship with nature and traditional culture. Set in and around the natural surroundings of Ramnagar, the story portrays forests, rivers, trees, birds, seasonal activities, traditional food, fishing practices, dress, games, songs, and various social customs. The relationship

between Monai and Dukmali introduces themes of love, emotional restraint, social expectations, and family responsibility. At the same time, the story reflects the gradual transformation of the traditional environment and way of life. The disappearance of Jalai, the decline of Jhum cultivation, and the reduced presence of certain birds and animals indicate ecological as well as cultural changes within Tiprasa society. Education is also presented as an important force of social development through Monai's life. Furthermore, traditional songs, ceremonies, and cultural gatherings preserve collective memory and reveal the artistic heritage of the community. Thus, 'Jalai Tokpupu' is not merely a love story; it is a meaningful literary representation of Tiprasa society, nature, culture, memory, and the transition from traditional life towards modernity.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the representation of Tiprasa society and traditional rural life in Haripada Debbarma's 'Jalai Tokpupu'.
- To analyse the relationship between human life and the natural environment, with particular emphasis on Jalai, Tokpupu, rivers, forests, wildlife, Jhum cultivation, and other elements of the ecological landscape.
- To explore the portrayal of traditional Tiprasa culture, including food habits, fishing practices, dress, games, folk songs, Jaduni, festivals, marriage customs, and community relationships.
- To examine the relationship between Monai and Dukmali in terms of love, emotional restraint, social expectations, education, and personal responsibility.
- To investigate the transition from traditional Tiprasa life towards modernity, particularly through changes in the natural environment, the decline of traditional practices, the spread of education, and changing social and economic circumstances.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and textual analytical approach. The primary source is Haripada Debbarma's 'Jalai Tokpupu'. The researcher has carefully read and examined the story and analysed its major themes, characters, cultural practices, natural environment, traditional life, education, and social changes. The analysis is based on the researcher's own reading, understanding, and interpretation of the text.

'JALAI TOKPUPU': STORY

Haripada Debbarma's 'Jalai Tokpupu' is a memory-based story that presents the natural environment, traditional culture, social life, education, and changing experiences of the Tiprasa community through the memories of its protagonist, Monai. The story opens with a traditional Jaduni folk song that recalls a disappearing natural landscape and awakens Monai's memories of childhood. The loss of the Jalai and the fading call of the Tokpupu bird become important symbols of environmental change, cultural memory, and nostalgia.

The story recalls the settlement of Khampar kami in Ramnagar and its surrounding areas, including Twidu, Dunachar, Pakili, Haping kami, Chandarai kami. Twisakwthang, and Twidutwisa are rivers. Rivers, forests, agricultural fields, trees, flowers, birds, and animals form an essential part of village life. Fishing was an important activity, and people used traditional methods such as Siching. Fish were eaten fresh or preserved through Watolok. Jhum cultivation, hunting, and the communal sharing of food reveal the self-sustaining character of traditional rural life. Traditional games such as Guti, Swkwai, and Temrog, together with clothing such as Riginai, Risa, and Ritrak, reflect the cultural practices and social identity of the community.

The story also depicts the everyday relationships of villagers. Women gathered near ponds and trees, discussed clothing and family matters, while traditional songs, Jaduni performances, Jatra, marriage customs, and community celebrations provided important forms of social and cultural interaction. These details preserve aspects of Tiprasa oral tradition and collective memory.

Education gradually becomes an important force of social change. The educational environment associated with the Janashiksha movement encouraged children to attend school. Monai's educational journey from the village school to further studies in Khamar and eventually college represents the aspirations of a younger generation seeking education and self-establishment.

The emotional centre of the story is Monai's unspoken love for Dukmali. Their childhood relationship gradually develops into affection through shy gestures, indirect conversations, and shared experiences of the natural environment. However, Monai gives priority to his education and future establishment, while Dukmali eventually marries an Army employee. Their love therefore remains unfulfilled. The Riginai would be given by Monai becomes a symbolic expression of his feelings that he cannot openly communicate.

As time passes, Monai notices changes in the natural environment and the disappearance of familiar birds, animals, and landscapes. Yet the call of the Tokpupu continues to bring Dukmali and his childhood memories back to him. The bird thus becomes a link between his past and present.

Overall, 'Jalai Tokpupu' is more than a story of unfulfilled love. It brings together **nature, cultural memory, traditional Tiprasa life, education, social relationships, folk culture, and the gradual transition from tradition to modernity**. Through Monai's memories, the story preserves a changing cultural and ecological world and gives literary expression to the emotional experience of losing both a beloved person and a familiar way of life.

MAIN ANALYSIS

➤ Jalai and Tokpupu as Symbols of Memory and Loss

In 'Jalai Tokpupu', the Jalai and the Tokpupu bird function as powerful symbols of memory, loss, and changing nature. The Jalai, once a familiar landscape of shrubs, small trees, and wild vegetation, represents the natural world of Monai's childhood. Its disappearance indicates not only environmental transformation but also the fading of an earlier way of life. Similarly, the Tokpupu's call becomes a sound associated with childhood, village life, and Dukmali. Whenever Monai remembers the bird, memories of his past return. Thus, the relationship between Jalai and Tokpupu connects environmental change with personal memory and emotional loss.

➤ Nature as an Integral Part of Rural Tiprasa Life

Nature in the story is not merely a background against which events take place; it is closely connected with the everyday life of the Tiprasa community. Rivers, streams, forests, trees, birds, animals, flowers, and agricultural fields form an essential part of village experience. Twisakwthang and Twidutwisa, for instance, are connected with fishing, travel, childhood activities, and social interaction. The children's journey to school through forested areas also demonstrates their familiarity with the natural environment. Seasonal flowers, fruits, birds, and animals further shape their daily experiences. Through these details, Debbarma presents a traditional ecological relationship in which human life and the surrounding environment remain deeply interconnected.

➤ Food, Fishing and the Traditional Village Economy

The story provides valuable insight into the traditional food practices and local economy of rural Tiprasa society. Fishing in Twisakwthang was an important activity, particularly during the rainy season. The abundance of different varieties of fish allowed villagers to consume fresh fish regularly and preserve the surplus for later use. The traditional Watolok method reflects indigenous knowledge of food preservation. Hunting also contributed to communal food practices, as the meat of animals such as Mothwna could be distributed among village families. These practices demonstrate a largely resource based rural economy and reveal the importance of sharing and collective participation within the community.

➤ Traditional Culture, Dress and Community Relationships

'Jalai Tokpupu' preserves several aspects of Tiprasa cultural life through its descriptions of clothing, ornaments, games, songs, festivals, marriage customs, and everyday interaction. Garments such as Riginai, Risa, and Ritrak, along with ornaments such as Wakhum, Balik, Lomphu, and Ganthi, are associated with identity, beauty, social occasions, and gendered cultural practices. Traditional games such as Guti, Swkwai, and Tem represent the recreational life of village children. Similarly, Jaduni songs and cultural performances preserve collective traditions. These elements show that culture in the story is experienced through ordinary social practices rather than existing only within formal ceremonies.

➤ **Monai and Dukmali: Unspoken Love and Social Responsibility**

The relationship between Monai and Dukmali represents a form of love that remains largely unspoken. Their affection develops through childhood familiarity, shy gestures, indirect conversation, and shared memories of the natural surroundings. However, Monai does not openly express his feelings because he considers education, employment, and personal stability necessary before establishing a family. Dukmali's eventual marriage to an Army employee brings the emotional conflict to its conclusion. The Riginai that Monai offers as a wedding gift becomes a symbolic expression of feelings that cannot be spoken directly. Their relationship therefore illustrates the tension between personal desire, social expectations, and individual responsibility.

➤ **Education and the Transformation of Social Life**

Education represents an important dimension of social change in 'Jalai Tokpupu'. The development of an educational atmosphere around Ramnagar gradually encourages both boys and girls to pursue schooling. Monai's own educational journey from the village school to further studies in Khamar and eventually college demonstrates the changing aspirations of the younger generation. Education becomes associated with self-development, employment, and the possibility of creating a secure future. At the same time, Monai's education contributes to his inability to remain within the traditional rhythm of village life. The story therefore presents education not simply as individual progress but as a force contributing to wider social transformation within the Tiprasa community.

➤ **Tradition, Modernity and Cultural Memory**

The story presents modernity as a gradual process accompanied by both opportunities and losses. Education, employment, changing settlements, and movement beyond the village indicate new possibilities for the younger generation. At the same time, the decline of Jhum cultivation, disappearance of the Jalai, reduced visibility of familiar animals, and fading traditional practices suggest the loss of an earlier ecological and cultural world. Monai's memories preserve what is no longer fully present in his surroundings. Even the Tokpupu's call becomes a bridge between past and present. In this sense, 'Jalai Tokpupu' transforms personal remembrance into cultural memory, documenting a society undergoing significant environmental, social, and cultural change.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

➤ **Nature and Cultural Memory**

The study finds that nature functions as an important carrier of cultural memory in 'Jalai Tokpupu'. The Jalai, Tokpupu, river, forests, trees, birds, animals, and seasonal landscapes are closely associated with Monai's childhood memories. Their gradual disappearance represents not only environmental change but also the fading of a traditional way of life.

➤ **Representation of Traditional Tiprasa Life**

The story preserves significant aspects of traditional Tiprasa society, including Jhum cultivation, fishing, hunting, food preservation, traditional games, clothing, ornaments, marriage customs, and community relationships. These elements demonstrate how everyday practices contributed to the social and cultural identity of the community.

➤ **Education as an Agent of Social Change***

The study reveals that education plays an important role in the transformation of rural Tiprasa society. Monai's educational journey reflects the growing aspirations of the younger generation. Education provides possibilities for personal development and future employment while simultaneously creating a gradual shift away from the older patterns of village life.

➤ **Unfulfilled Love and Social Responsibility**

The analysis shows that Monai and Dukmali's relationship represents an unspoken and ultimately unfulfilled love shaped by social and personal circumstances. Monai's decision to continue his education and establish himself before pursuing family life demonstrates the conflict between emotional desire and social responsibility. His silence transforms personal love into lasting memory.

➤ Tradition, Modernity and the Loss of the Past

The study finds that 'Jalai Tokpupu' portrays modernity as a process involving both development and loss. The spread of education and changing social opportunities coexist with the decline of Jhum, disappearance of natural spaces, reduced presence of wildlife, and weakening of traditional practices. Through Monai's memories, the story preserves aspects of a changing Tiprasa cultural world.

CONCLUSION

Haripada Debbarma's Jalai Tokpupu is a significant literary representation of the changing social, cultural, and environmental life of the Tiprasa community. Through Monai's memories, the story brings back a world in which nature and human life were closely connected. The Jalai, Tokpupu, rivers, forests, fields, birds, animals, and seasonal flowers are not merely elements of the natural landscape; they are closely associated with childhood, community life, and cultural memory. Their gradual disappearance therefore suggests a wider transformation in both the environment and traditional ways of living.

The story also preserves various aspects of Tiprasa cultural life, including Jhum cultivation, fishing, hunting, food preservation, traditional games, dress, marriage customs, folk songs, and community relationships. At the same time, the spread of education introduces a new direction in the lives of younger generations. Monai's educational journey reflects the growing importance of learning and individual aspirations within a changing society.

The relationship between Monai and Dukmali adds an emotional dimension to this social narrative. Their unfulfilled love remains connected with memory, responsibility, and the circumstances of their time. Ultimately, Jalai Tokpupu goes beyond a personal story of lost love. It becomes a reflective account of a community standing between tradition and modernity, while preserving through memory the cultural and natural world that is gradually disappearing.

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