

# Theme of Identity Crisis in Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's Novel "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday" (Silent Lips And Murmuring Heart)

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**Abstract:** Identity crisis is one of the most controversial issues of North - Eastern region of India. Problems related to identities are beautifully dealt with by a number of novelists who belong to the tribal communities of this region. These writers wholeheartedly make efforts to highlight the colourful and diverse traditions, customs, rites and rituals of the tribal communities in their writings. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, an innovative and creative novelist from Arunachal Pradesh, is a prominent figure among them who very realistically and vividly mirrors the ethnic voices in his novels. Thongchi's fictional world is centered around the life and society of the tribes dwelling in the remotest world of Arunachal Pradesh. Thongchi has received the Sahitya Academy Award in 2005 for his famous novel "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday" (Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts). This novel throws light on the social diversity and rich cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh. Problems and issues leading to identity crisis is one of the most outstanding themes of the novel "Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday" which has been exhibited through a tragic love story set against the backdrop of Arunachal Pradesh going through a process of transition. The novel represents the identity of two indigenous communities; i.e. Wangi (Nyishi) on the one hand and Serdukpen (an ethnic group related to both the Akas and Monpas of present Arunachal Pradesh) on the other. The present study attempts to explore the issues of identity crisis between these two ethnic tribes, the Nyishi and the Serdukpen, which has been reflected throughout the novel.

**Keywords:** Identity crisis, Arunachal Pradesh, ethnic voices, the Nyishi, the Serdukpen

## 1. Introduction

Novel is a social document. It mirrors the life and society either in whole or in fragmentation. In North - East India, a good number of novels have been produced dealing with the life and society of the tribal communities. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi is one of the most prominent writers of Arunachal Pradesh who vividly describes the tradition and rituals of different tribes in his writings. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, whose theme is mostly about the little known communities of Arunachal Pradesh, is said to be the first author who has actually taken their inside stories to the outside world.<sup>1</sup> Thongchi made his first appearance into the field of Assamese fiction with his famous novel *Sonam* (1981). With the publication of his magnum opus *Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday (Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts)*, Thongchi's genius as a novelist of tribal world, reached the culmination and established him among the famous Assamese novelists. Thongchi not only won the Sahitya Academy Award for this novel in 2005 but also received national recognition for it.

Thongchi, in his novel *Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday*, very beautifully and enthusiastically describes the life of the simple and innocent tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh who discovers the outside world after having engaged in construction of a road into the mountains. The story revolves around two different tribes, the Wangi (Nyishi) and Serdukpen, who came together to build the road from Bomdila to Dirang. Rinsin (the protagonist) and Yama (the heroine) are the two star-crossed lovers coming from different tribes who happened to meet during the

construction of the road.<sup>2</sup> Their love trespasses all the barriers that had been erected by their tribal society. The novel not only expresses the eternal and undying love between them but at the same time, it focuses on how the lovers were ruthlessly and savagely separated because of the strict social norms forged by their orthodox and conservative society. The novel presents how these two tribes tried to maintain their identity by becoming an obstacle to both the lovers.

## 2. Methodology

This paper is both analytical and descriptive. In writing this methodology, both primary and secondary data have been used. The primary data is the novel *Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday* written by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi. Secondary data includes reference books and online articles on this particular topic.

## 3. Objective of the Study

The aim of the study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the theme of identity crisis as presented by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi in his novel *Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday*. The study also attempts to explore the issues of identity between the two tribes, the Nyishi and the Serdukpen, which has been reflected throughout the novel.

<sup>1</sup> <https://arunachal24.in>. Title: Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi. Time: 4:30pm.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com>. Title: *Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts* by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi. Time: 3:15pm.

#### 4. Analysis

It is impossible to give a precise and definite meaning to the term 'Identity'. Because the term 'Identity' is a very abstract idea and there is not one or single and definite sense in which this term is used and understood. In the Webster Dictionary, the term identity is referred in more than one sense. One sense in which it refers to is to the fact of remaining the same. In this sense the identity is posed in the context of flux or change. The other sense in which the term is used is in the sense of condition of being oneself or itself.<sup>3</sup>

Indigenous identity is a truly complex and somewhat controversial topic. It mainly focuses on ethnic or tribal identity which means that ethnic homogeneity, along with other factors that characterize a tribe. Identity crisis simply implies uncertainty and insecurity in a person's sense of identity due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. A crisis in identity takes place when the projected identity fails to get one identified by the other or when multiple identities create confusion and fails to project a coherent picture of a person.<sup>4</sup>

The novel *Mouna Ounth Mukhar Hriday* presents the identity of two tribes, the Nyishi on the one hand and the Sherdukpen on the other. The novel shows how these two tribes tried to protect and maintain their own identity. It also depicts a sharp contrast between the two tribes. Both the tribes stand in opposition to each other. Both the Sherdukpen and the Nyishi consider themselves to be superior to one another which reminds us of the Hegelian theory of dialectical materialism which comprises of the thesis and the anti-thesis. If the thesis is represented by the Nyishi tribe, the Sherdukpen tribe represents anti-thesis. The Nyishi people think that the Sherdukpen tribe is very inferior. As Tadak (Yama's brother) says:

"Ngishak (Serdukpen) tribe is too inferior to us. Our Nyishi tribe is the superior among all other tribes in this world. We collect tax from the Bangru tribe and this Bangru tribe again collects the same from the Ngishaks. The Bangroes, who always shiver in fear of the Nyishi, likewise in front of those Bangroes, again the Ngishak react like a mouse in innate fear of cat." (Thongchi, p.23).

Through the above quotation, Tadak tried to express their (Nyishi tribe's) superiority over all other tribes across the world. At the same time he also tried to belittle the Sherdukpen tribe by giving them a very bottom rank among the tribal communities in the world. For Tadak, the Serdukpens are very inferior tribe even than the Bangroes from whom they (the Nyishi) collect tax.

Tadak again tried to show their superiority over the Sherdukpen tribe by making a comparison between them in terms of their rituals. He distinguishes both the tribes on religious ground. The way they worshipped God is totally

different from each other. The Nyishi tribe practices the ritual of immolation by offering the blood of the animals like pig, cock and mithuns. Unlike them, the Sherdukpen like the Harang, worshipped God by chanting the mantra from the Holy books. Tadak boasted of their Nyishi priests who have some divine power which make them a holy person. But in case of the Sherdukpen priests, they do not have any divine power. Tadak made a very ridiculous comment regarding the Sherdukpen priest by saying that unlike the Nyishi priests, they are unable to chant the mantras without looking at the book. According to Tadak, nobody can become a priest without the aid of the divine power. But so far as the Serdukpen tribe is concerned, one can easily become a priest simply by learning from others.

The Nyishi people tried to portray their superiority again and again by keeping the Sherdukpen tribe in a very marginal position. In this regard, Tadak expresses his view about the inferiority of the Sherdukpen tribe in their food habits. The Nyishi people live on rice whereas the Sherdukpen people eat corn because the latter do not know the process of paddy cultivation. This very point makes the Sherdukpen tribe an inferior one in the eyes of Nyishi people.

Apart from this, another line of demarcation between the two tribes can be traced from their matrimonial ground. Among the Nyishi people there is a ritual of paying the bride price in exchange of mithuns. This ritual is not performed by the Sherdukpen tribe rather they practice the ritual of offering the "eri silk sadar" to the bride instead of 'mithuns'. According to the Nyishi people this very act of offering mithuns in exchange of bride makes them a superior one and places the Sherdukpen in an inferior position. The best example can be found in the conversation between Yadu (Yama's sister) and her brother, in chapter III, when Yadu curiously asked Tadak about whether the Sherdukpen tribe rear mithuns like them, Tadak, in response to Yadu, sarcastically remarks:

"I don't know how the Nagisak people get married. They don't rear mithuns like us. Without having mithuns, how will they pay the brideprice? With cows?" (Thongchi, pg.25).

Both the tribes consider each other as enemies. They do not want to make friendship between themselves rather they see one another in a suspicious way. The Sherdukpen people were so much suspicious about the Nyishi people that they did not want to work with them. This is evident when they repeatedly request Dilip Saikia, the field assistant for the construction of the road, whom they called 'Mohori Babu', not to mingle them with the Nyishi people.

When Dilip Saikia asked the Sherdukpen people to build their camp next to the Nyishi people's camp, they were very much afraid by the thought of being attacked by the Nyishi people. Thus, both the tribes considered each other as their enemies.

Dilip Saikia took particular care to bring together the tribes. He saw his mission to be not merely the construction of a road but to build a bridge across the diverse tribes so that all their misgivings and doubts regarding one another could be

<sup>3</sup> Dhanraju, Vulli. *Debating Tribal Identity: Past and Present*. P- 5.

<sup>4</sup> "Tribal Identity Crisis and Solution" Unit-4. P- 9.

done away with. His mission was partly fulfilled because though initially both the tribes were suspicious and hated each other, their hatred slowly and gradually turned in to friendship. But at the same time, they wanted to protect their identity by not breaking their tradition in any condition. Though both the tribes did not want to go beyond friendship even then the hero Rinsin Norbu, who belonged to the Sherdukpen tribe and Yama, a girl from the Nyishi tribe, come close to each other and their love transcends all the barriers of tradition and custom of their tribes. Though they could not express their feelings to each other because of the disparity in their languages, but it never stood as a barrier between them. Their love knew no boundaries.

In spite of their deep love for each other, they could not get married because their society did not allow them to get married. As they belong to different tribes, their tradition and culture never allow them to unite. Yama realizes that their love cannot be fulfilled or recognized in the society because of the huge mountain between them which is erected by the society. Yama wished if she were born in the Sherdukpen tribe she would be very fortunate and there would have been no barrier between Rinsin and herself. When Yama planned to elope with Rinsin, she was kidnapped by her in-laws, who gave mithuns for her. Yama's brother Tadak, who loves her the most, himself suggested her in-laws to take her away with them because he did not want her to marry a person of another tribe.

Apart from the contrast between the two tribes, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi also portrays the tribal people as superstitious and innocent beings. They are very much superstitious in nature and believe in the existence of supernatural power and fear to go to the forest when evening falls. This is evident in the chapter 1 of the novel when Rinsin and the other girls namely Tsereng Jangmu, Chauki Wangmu and Doima encountered the girl Yama in the forest. All the girls thought her to be a night hag who disguised as a beautiful lady only to entrap Rinsin. Wangmu, without any doubt, affirms her faith that Yama is a 'banmanuh' and she recalls the story of a banmanuh which she had heard from her father. She recites:

“Once a young boy was taken away by a *banmanuh* who came in the guise of a beautiful girl. She took him to a cave and kept him as her husband and how later on their children were born half human and half *banmanuh*.”

(Thongchi, p-5).

Secondly, another evidence is seen in the chapter 7 of the novel when Rinsin fell into danger in the construction site when he went to pluck the 'Lesang-mintu flower', then he was somehow rescued. Both of the tribes thought that he was pushed in to danger by an evil spirit. So in order to get rid of this evil spirit, both the tribes performed a ceremonial ritual. The Nyishi performed it by immolation of pig and the Sherdukpen performed it by lighting an earthen lamp.

The tribal people are very innocent. Living in the dark edges of society and devoid of any knowledge, the tribal people were not even familiar with money and shop unless and until Dilip Saikia, the 'Mohori Babu' gave them wages for their

work and informed them about shop. They even supposed the vehicles to be a ghost or a beast that may harm them. They are uneducated and so innocent that they never come out of their village and always lived within the periphery of their community. This is evident when Yada, Yama's sister, said from her little knowledge that the Nyishi is the only tribe in the world. She had never imagined about such varieties of tribes dwelling in the world of Donipol (the God worshipped by the Nyishi tribe). As she says:

“Today again came a new group of people from somewhere. Completely strange in apparel, strange in conversation. Before coming here, I had never imagined of such varieties of people except Nyishi in this world of Donipol. I thought that we Nyishi and Shulung are the only people in this world.” (Thongchi, p-22).

## 5. Conclusion

Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi depicted the tribal people as innocent, uneducated, suspicious and superstitious. The novelist presents how both the tribes tried to protect their identity throughout the novel. As the novel progressed, both the tribes realized that though their appearance, culture and their identity are different but both of them bear the same heart and soul as human being as a whole. But even then the Nyishi tribe thought that if Yama gets married to Rinsin, their identity as a superior tribe would be threatened. Questions will be raised on their superiority. Rinsin himself also thought that if he marries Yama then it will be a dishonor to their identity. Because, for the Sherdukpen tribe, Nyishi is inferior to them. Thus each of the tribe wants to maintain their identity as a superior tribe by remaining themselves within the periphery of their own tribal community. When Yama got pregnant by Rinsin, she thought of giving birth to the child as a symbol of their ceaseless love. A road can be well constructed by drilling or cutting the mountains and that connects the inhabitants of plains to the hills but these two tribes could not break the wall between them. But according to Yama, the child in her womb will remain a symbol of protest for the conflict between the two tribes. It proves that the conservative society may prevent the lovers from getting married in order to protect their identity but it cannot restrict them from the divine feeling of love which is beyond the rules and regulations of this physical world.

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