

Interrogating Nativism: Issues of Appropriation

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Projects reclaiming native and tribal literature are laudable as efforts at stemming the epidemic of cultural amnesia among colonized nations across the world. Ganesh Devy elucidates 'nativism' as "a language-specific way of looking at literature" (Devy 120). He discards the value of a "concept-specific method of universal criticism" and instead lauds a nativist critique of all regional literature that "understands writing as a social act, and expects of it an ethical sense of commitment to the society within which it is born" (120). He rejects the blanket application of western critical theories on Indian regional literature with the claim that: "Literature growing out of one type of underlying linguistic and metaphysical structure cannot be understood and studied by criticism growing out of another and alien type of underlying linguistic and metaphysical structure" (124).

Devy's explication of the term 'nativism' is particularly relevant to the way in which tribal and indigenous literatures and oral narratives of pre-literate societies are perceived and very often "studied" and "interpreted". There is a very clear distinction one needs to make between projects of documentation, transcription, translation and research article production in this context. Any kind of transcription, translation or transliteration stops with trying to record, document and retrieve. In the case of research, the story reads differently. Each researcher has his or her own agenda, and picks only that literature that lends itself to the perspective or literary theory that he or she wants to employ. While some try to faithfully stick as far as possible to the original work in the native language or dialect, the research article sometimes gets written arbitrarily, and attempts to force motifs, themes and intentions on a literature that never intended to be used for purposes such as these.

The work done by academicians, especially those belonging to literature as a discipline, needs to be interrogated. It cannot be disputed that research showcasing tribal and lesser known regional literature certainly provides a forum to the voices of the silenced and pre-literate societies heretofore unheard. The issue that this paper engages with is the fashion in which such literature is appropriated for “research”. It seeks to interrogate the process of sample selection and rejection, and raises certain important questions. What are the criteria for selection a researcher should ideally adopt? Should the sample selected for study necessarily be exotic as a piece of cultural trivia? Why should a plain or banal tribal song or poem or dramatic piece be rejected just because it does not have “meat” in terms of literary elements such as a metaphoric or symbolic value? These are just some of the questions thrown up by the challenges inherent in the appropriation of tribal literature and philosophies to literary studies.

Richard Dorson believes that folk lore is not something far away and long ago but real and living among us, for here the past has something to say to the present (cited by Shah in a review: 2005). The researcher’s choice of the literature he takes up as a sample to illustrate a perspective is often not arbitrary but very carefully made. It depends on how exotic or symbolic the sample is, and how neatly it slips into the desired slot as exemplification for the chosen point of view. I would like to take up a tribal song to illustrate the point. Legend has it that this song was sung by a particular African tribe whenever a member committed an aberrant act, and also during important moments in that person’s life such as marriage or death. Each individual has his own song that was arrived at by divination by the mother when she was pregnant. The song thus becomes a leitmotif that binds you to your roots, your values and to the path of righteousness.

All the above information about the so-called “African birth song” seems highly credible and fascinating till one reads up on the African poet Tolba Phanem who is apparently credited with the retrieval of this song from an oral tradition. My searches threw up an interesting blog that served as

an eye-opener. The write up of a bilingual consultant, educator, speaker and budding therapist, named Aida Manduley was illuminating. Manduley is a frequent blogger and spends a lot of her time browsing through Tumblr, a microblogging platform and social networking website, and found the following post about an African birth song:

[T]here is a tribe in Africa where the birth date of a child is counted not from when they were born, nor from when they are conceived but from the day that the child was a thought in its mother's mind. And when a woman decides that she will have a child, she goes off and sits under a tree, by herself, and she listens until she can hear the song of the child that wants to come. And after she's heard the song of this child, she comes back to the man who will be the child's father, and teaches it to him. And then, when they make love to physically conceive the child, some of that time they sing the song of the child, as a way to invite it. And then, when the mother is pregnant, the mother teaches that child's song to the midwives and the old women of the village, so that when the child is born, the old women and the people around her sing the child's song to welcome it. And then, as the child grows up, the other villagers are taught the child's song. If the child falls, or hurts its knee, someone picks it up and sings its song to it. Or perhaps the child does something wonderful, or goes through the rites of puberty, then as a way of honoring this person, the people of the village sing his or her song.

In the African tribe there is one other occasion upon which the villagers sing to the child. If at any time during his or her life, the person commits a crime or aberrant social act, the individual is called to the center of the village and the people in the community form a circle around them. Then they sing their song to them. The tribe recognizes that the correction

for antisocial behavior is not punishment; it is love and the remembrance of identity. When you recognize your own song, you have no desire or need to do anything that would hurt another. And it goes this way through their life. In marriage, the songs are sung, together. And finally, when this child is lying in bed, ready to die, all the villagers know his or her song, and they sing—for the last time—the song to that person.

You may not have grown up in an African tribe that sings your song to you at crucial life transitions, but life is always reminding you when you are in tune with yourself and when you are not. When you feel good, what you are doing matches your song, and when you feel awful, it doesn't. In the end, we shall all recognize our song and sing it well. You may feel a little warbly at the moment, but so have all the great singers. Just keep singing and you'll find your way home.

Manduley busts the “authenticity” of this blog. On reading Manduley's piece it became clear that this so-called “African birth song” was nothing but a half-baked invention by the White man that essentializes the “African experience”. It does not even attempt to give any real details but relies on collective ignorance about Africa that centres the world on a White axis. The text does not provide any sources or even name this African tribe. Certain other sources do but then they name it as an Ubuntu tribe, which, interestingly does not even exist. What exists is an Ubuntu philosophy. “Ubuntu”, incidentally, is a Nguni Bantu term meaning “human kindness”, and has inspired a whole movement that believes in a communitarian and relational approach towards life.

The story thus uses “exotification”, according to Aida Manduley, in the manner of the Noble Savage Myth and the ignorance of those who read it, makes them feel warm and fuzzy. Stories such as these become viral and end up being used by students on their power point presentations and academic assignments. The song has even been translated into

Spanish and Portuguese. Pieces such as this African song get reblogged, and also use the image of a random, unnamed indigenous woman from the Himba tribe. The problems are compounded because in the eyes of many non-African people, Africa is perceived as just one huge jungle where everyone looks and acts the same, with women roaming around topless, feeling connected to Mother Earth, and giving birth in very spiritual ways replete with superstitious beliefs and practices.

The picture of the poet in question, called Tolba Phanem, on the website, is actually that of Aminata Traore, the Ex-Minister of Culture from Mali and *not* Tolba Phanem, a women's rights activist and poet as certain websites claim. There is no such person as Tolba Phanem. who apparently, is a figment of Alan Cohen's imagination. He mentions her in issue no. 33 of a digital magazine called "Pathways to Family Wellness".



Something even more disturbing emerged on further reading. The Birth Psychology website cites the apparent "source" of the "African birth song" as a book by Sobonfu Some titled, "Welcoming Spirit Home: Ancient African Teachings to Celebrate Children and Community" but

when Manduley consulted the book, she found to her surprise that though the book does describe other ritual birth practices, it does not actually make any mention of this particular song. The example is only being used here in order to reiterate that a lot depends on a researcher's value systems and ethical orientation. The task of the researcher thus entails a huge responsibility, one that demands an acute self-reflexivity to ensure credibility. Nila Shah in her review of *The Tribal Literature of Gujarat* by Bhagvandas Patel and Hasu Yajnik appreciates such honest initiatives: It is heartening to observe that the study of folklore ... has ceased to be an amateur's pursuit and has begun to take its place as a scientific discipline (Shah).

Conferences such as this one are rare, and therefore laudable initiatives that seek to explore indigenous literature from tribal and aboriginal cultures around the world and are certainly the need of the hour.

References.

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