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THEORISING FOLKLORE AS INTERTEXTUAL: A STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAMESE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to theorize folklore as intertextual in the context of Assamese literature. The study reconciles the theories of folklore and intertextuality.

Key words: folklore, intertextuality, literature

"A literature is a language existing not in isolation but in constant relation with other languages, other literatures." (Paz 120-21)

Concept of Folklore and the Theoretical Legacy:

It is apparent that folkloristics has been emerging now as an independent, worldwide, world-class academic discipline and the history of folklore study has gone beyond a long way ever since the term 'folklore' was proposed in 1846. The term was an initiation of the nineteenth century; William John Thoms first used it in a letter to the *Athenaeum*, a journal published from London, in August 22, 1846. (Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* 4-5). Thoms wrote to the editor:

> Your pages have so often given evidence of the interest which you take in what we in England designated as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature (though by-the-by it is more a Lore than a Literature, and would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folklore,- the Lore of the People) – that I am not without hopes of enlisting your aid in garnering the few ears, which are remaining , scattered over that field from which our forefathers might have gathered a goodly crop. (Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* 4-5)

What Thoms basically sought to imply by the term was the traditional styles of folk people. But this term gained extensive recognition only in 1877 when folklore society was established in London. Yet, as Alan Dundes mentions, there has been much turbulent debate about the definition of folklore since then. (Dundes, *International Folkloristics* vii). The twenty one concise definitions contained in *the Standard Dictionary of Folklore*, *Mythology, and Legend* reflect some of this diversity. The most common concept about folklore is that it is, by nature, oral. This criterion also leads to various theoretical difficulties. For example, in a culture without writing, almost everything is transmitted orally. But few folklorists would say the cultural materials such as hunting techniques or marriage rules are as folklore. (Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* 1)

Folklore as defined in the nineteenth century tended to be much more limited than the conception today. (Dundes, *International Folkloristics* viii).The folk were then thought merely to be illiterate peasants. Prior to Thoms, during the early nineteen century, the German term

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Volkskunde and Scandinavian notion of 'folk life' were used to refer to all aspects of peasant existence or what anthropologists call 'ethnography' now. (Dundes, *International Folkloristics* viii).*Volks* meant common people and *Kunde* meant knowledge or experience. ('Lore' suggests similar connotations that *Kunde* meant) Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, commenced publishing influential volumes of oral folk narratives and interpretations of Germanic mythology. (Dorson 1). Other terms such as 'Popular Antiquities'*,* 'Demologie', 'Demopsachologie'*,* and so on were also used to suggest the elements of folk life.

The conscious effort to collect, preserve and study the elements of folklore in Europe had deep connection with the romantic nationalism that flourished during the French revolution. (Goswami 2). The influence of the growing sense of nationalism in the European countries created a fertile environment for the study of folklore. Johann Gottfried Herder, the key figure behind the idea of Romantic Nationalism, reconciled the two movements- romanticism and nationalism and looked for relevance of folklore in re-evaluation of national heritage; study of folklore thus became an integral subject for him.

Grimm brothers' effort to popularise folk-tales, to an extent, was a part to recover the ancient glory of the nation. Similarly, the ideals of folklore espoused by Wilhelm Riehl were taken up by the Nazis. Synder remarked that under Hitler the study of Folklore was raised to special place of honour. A large part of Nazi literature designed for children was merely a modernized version of the Grimms' tales, with emphasis upon the idealization of fighting, glorification of power, reckless courage, theft, brigandage and militarism reinforced with mysticism.

Apart from the legacy of the term's existence, one of the most used discussions on folklore divides it into two constituent parts- 'folk' and 'lore'. Alan Dundes in the preface to *International Folkloristics* writes:

A "folk" is any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common linking factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is; it could be nationality, ethnicity, religion, occupation, kinship, or any similar factor. Folk is a flexible concept, and a folk can be as large as nation and as small as a village or a family. ……"Lore" refers to several hundred forms of genres, any one of which could occupy the attention of a folklorist for a literature. (Dundes*, International Folkloristics* vii)

According to Dundes, folklore genres include epic, myth, folktale, legend, folksong, proverb, riddle, folk dance, superstition, games, gestures, food ways, folk costume and many more. He further states that a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. He holds that a member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, or traditions which help the group to have a sense of group identity. (Dundes, *International Folkloristics* viii)

Benjamin A. Botkin meanwhile says that the term 'folk' in modern time implies both the rustic and town groups. (Goswami 4). From this view, the term signifies a coherent collective living that may be found in any atmosphere, town and village. In other words, it implies numerous unwritten methods for living which come out from the collective life and build folk-life. The major forces of such living are the unwritten beliefs, customs, rituals and conventions. (Goswami 4)

Richard M. Dorson segregates folklore and folk life in to four large groups, *oral literature* or *verbal art, material culture, social folk custom* and *performing folk arts*. (Dorson 3-4). He classifies oral literature in the following divisions:

- Folk narrative
- Folk epic
- Proverbs
- Riddles
- Folk speeches

Dorson regards proverbs, riddles and other elements that are included in folk-language as minor genres. Then all the divisions can considerably be seen and studied as texts.William Bascom observes that folklore belongs to one branch of anthropology,

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namely, cultural anthropology and regards folklore as 'verbal arts'. (Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* 25). For him such verbal arts are creative compositions of a functioning society which have three features:

- Dynamic, not static
- Integrated, not isolated
- Central, not peripheral

He further states that knowledge is transmitted by mouth and *imitation* plays important role in the process. He says that folklore includes folk-speech, customs, folk literature, dance, belief and so on. (Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* 28). Despite the fact that various current theories of folklore such as *historical-geographical, historical-reconstructional, ideological, functional, psychoanalytical, structural* etc. cause to be certain new perspectives in the study of folklore, it is commonly accepted that any element of folk-life should have at least four special features if that is to be included by the term folklore:

- Tradition
- Transmission
- Variation
- Group consciousness.

This notion suggests that any element having the above features may be regarded as folk-text. Now, in the twenty-first century, folklore studies has also been viewed as the discipline devoted to the identification, documentation, characterization, and analysis of traditional expressive forms, processes, and behaviours. (Georges & Jones 1). All folklore materials identified in a common way such as myths, superstitions, and tales presumably belong to the same generic set because they share some common characteristics. (Georges & Jones 93). In this context Vladimir Propp's observation on folktales becomes significant. Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) observed that the Russian folk-tales, despite their perceptible diversity, in fact revolved around certain similar functions and roles which were constant throughout the corpus. (Macey 313). Propp regarded these functions universal. He identified such thirty one functions. It reveals, thus, that folklore may bear the germs of what is now called intertextuality. The features indicated by the theory of intertextuality have already been there in

different folk-texts. But that had not been labeled as intertextuality then. In the backdrop of the term's wider significance, therefore, it is important to see its connotations in association with folklore.

Theoretical Premise: Intertextuality:

The term 'intertextuality' has been interpreted variously in recent theoretical discourses. It was first used by Julia Kristeva in her study of Bakhtin's work on dialogue and carnival. She first used it in the essays entitled "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966) and "The Bounded Text" (1966-67). The idea that she initiated proposes the text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis instead of static structures and products. (Kristeva 65). Developing Bakhtin's concept of literary language, she says that "each word (text) is an inter section of other words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read". (Kristeva 66). The concept states that texts are not self-contained systems but are differential and historical. (Alfaro 268) Rejecting the New Critical principle of textual autonomy, the idea of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system. (Alfaro 268)

At a surface layer, the theory seeks to explore relation between different texts pointing out that no text has any independent meaning. It emphasizes that any text is essentially a mixture of references to or quotations from other texts. (Macey 203). It is not simply a matter of influence which go by from one author to another, but of the multiple and complex relations that exist between texts in both synchronic and diachronic ways. (Macey 204)

Though intertextuality as a term appeared some three decades ago, and the twentieth century has proved to be a period especially inclined to it culturally, it is by no means a time-bound feature: the phenomenon, in some form, is at least as old as recorded human history. (Alfaro 269). Maria Alfaro further says that theories of intertextuality can be manifested even in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus. (Alfaro 269). Bakhtin locates in the Socratic dialogues what he terms variously as heteroglossia, dialogism. (Bakhtin 54). Later on,

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Kriseva termed it as intertextuality. From an intertextual perspective, there is hardly any way of considering originality as a trait to be cherished by authors. T.S. Eliot, more or less, has pronounced this fact stating that the most individual parts of an author's work may be those in which his/her ancestors are more vigorously present. Eliot holds in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent':

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (Eliot in Enright & Chikera 294)

Thus Eliot, as a theoretician, can arguably be said to be a forerunner of intertextuality. As a literary theory in proper sense of the term, however, intertextuality is a late twentieth century invention by the theorists such as Kristeva, Genette, Barthes, Bloom and Riffateree. The nuances carried out by intertextuality have certain significance in modern literary and cultural theory. The term was fundamentally employed by poststructuralist theorists in their attempt to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation. (Allen 30)

The theory of intertextuality, like some other literary and cultural theories, can be said to have originated from linguistic theories of the twentieth century. Ferdinand de Saussure's theories are seen instrumental while dealing with the concept. Russian theorist M.M. Bakhtin's notions of literature and language are also crucial as Julia Kristeva attempted to propagate the theory of intertextuality on the basis of her study of Bakhtin. Likewise, French theorist Roland Barthes is a major figure in the discourse. Harold Bloom, too, is important in the discourse.

Saussure's idea that a linguistic sign is differential in nature seems to contribute to the concept of intertextuality. According to this idea, Saussure suggests that a particular sign has its place in the system of language (*la langue*) due to its relation with specific sounds and words. (Saussure 23). (For example, if one writes the sentence 'The tree is green '- , he or she has to select the word

'tree' out of a set of related sounds- 'sea', 'bee', 'knee' etc. and related words like ' bush', 'trunk', 'branch' and so on) It shows that meaning in language is relational and no sign has a meaning of its own. A sign is not referential; it possesses meaning only when it gets combinatory and associative relation to other signs. Such idea of language has affected different areas of human sciences in the twentieth century. If all signs are in some way differential, it can be true in case of literary sign as well. Writers select plots, features of characters, images, etc. from previous literary texts along with words from a language system. If the literary tradition is regarded as a synchronic system, then the author works with two systems- language and the literary system. (Allen 17). It reinforces Saussure's non-referential nature of signs as the literary signs in a text.

After Saussure, M. M. Bakhtin's ideas of language contribute to the concept of intertextuality. It should be noted, again, that neither Saussure nor Bakhtin coined the term intertextuality, but their ideas of language and literature helped Kristeva and others to propagate the theories of intertextuality. Kristeva regarded Bakhtin's notion of dialogism as quintessentially forceful. For Kristeva, Bakhtin appeared to be the forerunner who had applied linguistics to society. Therefore she introduces Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (trans. 1984) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. 1984) in the essay "Word, Dialogue, and Novel". Bakhtin's approach to language is concerned with social contexts within which words are exchanged. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 32). For Bakhtin, the relational feature of language arises from the word's existence within certain society and social registers and a literary text is a place for dialogic interaction of multiple voices. (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 33). According to him, a person's speech is not merely individual but is composed of languages from diverse social contexts. This idea appears in Kristeva's 'The Bounded Text' where she considers that writers do not write text from their own mind, but they compile text from some pre-existent texts. Kristeva wrote:

> ....the text is defined as a trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of

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language by relating communicative speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances. The text is therefore a productivity, and this means: first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive-constructive), and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another. (Kristeva 38)

However, Kristeva's reading of Bakhtin is mediated by other texts and other critics' theories. Among the authors that mediate her reading, Jacques Derrida plays a crucial role. (Alfaro 276). When Kristeva utters Bakhtin's notion of the literary word as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point, Derrida's critique of voice finds a resonance there. It is important to note that post-structuralism and postmodernism do use deconstructionism as a methodology. It was initiated by Jacques Derrida with his reading of Martin Heidegger. He argues that meaning of language is to be found only in relation to language itself and not with reference to any reality or truth. This intellectual process by which meaning is uncovered through the relationship between words is the method of deconstruction. In a way, this notion signals out certain similarities with intertextuality.

It is well known that Roland Barthes tried to give new orientation to the terms such as 'work' and 'text'. According to him, the term 'work' implies the material object that offers possibility of meaning, closure and interpretation. Thus, the term 'text' stands for the play of signifier within the work and for the force of writing. In a way, his theory of the text also speaks of intertextuality since 'the text not only sets going a plurality of meanings but is also woven out of numerous discourses and spun from already existent meaning'. (Barthes, *S/Z* 6). This is intertextuality in the sense that a text may appear to be spontaneous and transparent expression of a writer's intentions but must necessarily contain

elements of other texts. (Alfro 278). He provides an example of this in *S/Z* where he picks out some of the quotations without quotation marks, cultural codes and so on in Balzac's *Sarrasine* and concludes:

> "*The text and nothing but the text*": this proposition has little meaning except intimidation: the literality of the text is a system like any other: the literal in Balzac is, after all, nothing but the "transcription" of another literality, that of symbol: euphemism is a language. In fact, the meaning of a text can be nothing but the plurality of its systems. (Barthes 120)

Although not beyond contradiction, Barthes expresses similar views in 'The Death of the Author' while he says that a text is made of multiple writings.

This is quite significant to mention that though basically the poststructuralists who sought to explore features of intertextuality, 'structuralist' theorists such as Gerard Genette and Michael Riffaterre also contributed to the theory of intertextuality. Genette uses terms like *transtextuality, paratextuality, hypertextuality* etc. instead of intertextuality. His approach to intertextuality can be considered as an attempt to delimit the definitions of intertextuality put forward by Kristeva, Barthes and so on. He concentrates basically on the literary text in the strict sense of the word. (Alfaro: 280). He considers Kristeva's term inadequate and proposes in its place *transtextuality* by which he means everything that relates one text to others. On the other hand, Riffaterre approaches intertextuality not only from the perspective of all possible relations among texts but as the main, fundamental characteristic of literary reading. (Alfaro 279)

Harlod Bloom's notion of influence has been a central concern in any discussion on intertextuality. Harlod Bloom uses the term 'anxiety of influence' to describe the young author's experience of the strangeness when he recognizes the influence of his predecessors in his own work. According to Bloom, the shock of recognition is quite strong and therefore the author may not be able to

write anything at all originally, or becomes convinced that he can only reproduce the work of his forerunners. (Bloom 28). Bloom argues that poetry in the post-Miltonic period stems from two motivations. In this context Bloom adapts the Freudian terminology- *drives*. The first motivation (or *drive*) concerns the desire to imitate the precursor's poetry, from which the poet first learnt what poetry was. The second concerns the desire to be original, and defend against the knowledge that what the poet is doing is imitating rather than creating afresh. (Allen 134). Bloom holds that one poet influences other or one poet's poems influence the poems of the other:

> Poetic Influence- when it involves two strong, authentic poets, - always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist. (Bloom 30)

This approximates the idea that poetry can only *imitate* previous texts and thus contributes to the theory of intertextuality. There are some similarities between Bloom's approach and that of Riffaterre as both of them reduce intertextuality to a model of text and inter-text. (Allen 137)

Intertextuality of Folklore:

Examining the concepts on intertextuality, it can be considered that the germs of intertextuality may be marked out in folklore itself. Folklorist Bascom's view regarding the role of *imitation* in acquiring knowledge from previous texts has resemblance with that of Bloom's. Though almost all the major folklorists define folklore differently, they come to the consensus that folklore genres include epic, myth, folktale, legend, folksong, proverb, riddle, folk dance and many more and, can be interpreted them as texts. In postmodern philosophy, the literary text becomes a cultural discourse. Moreover, postmodernists hold the view that even society can be interpreted as a text. In

folklore studies, the idea of mixing up of genres has been discussed since the time of Grimm brothers. Alan Dundes understood it from the perspective of devolution. If we consider the old idea of type and motif in folklore, we see that both are intertextual. It is being proposed in current folkloristics that we get several versions of a single tale. A large number of tales and other narratives available among the different communities in the North- East India are found to have identical types and motifs. The idea of motif as a recurring unit occurs simultaneously in many pieces of folklore. The tiger being scared by an imaginary dreadful thing ('Dighal-Thengia' in Assamese and 'Tapta' in Manipuri), the old man and the old woman being cheated by cunning animal (the jackal in Assamese and a number of tribal versions and the monkey in the Manipuri version), the step-mother's ill-treatment of step-children and the ultimate prevalence of justice (Assamese, Manipuri and various tribal versions) evidently show this phenomenon. (Datta, Sarma, Das 15). Again the story of 'Harata Kuwara' of the Karbis is parallel to a tale among the Bodos. (Datta, Sarma, Das 15). This is one level of intertextuality. Therefore it can be assumed that folklore is intertextual by nature, or intertextuality can be traced in the texts of folklore. The comparative approach in folklore has dealt with this reality without the concept of intertextuality. As a result, the semiotic dimension of inter-text has been missing in folkloristics. However a few articles in *Songs Beyond the Kalevala* (1994) represent the mythical themes of the Kalevala poetry and highlight interest in terms of ritual associations from a perspective similar to that of intertextuality's. (Siikala & Vakimo 10). Moreover, Apo outlines three strategies of analysing old texts: rhetorical analysis, contextualization and inter-textual analysis. For intertextual analysis, a number of tales must be considered because 'folklore texts explain other folklore text'.

It is worthwhile to mention that literature often has an adherence to folklore. Many of the "classics" in American literature embrace folklore. (Georges& Jones 3). A German tale about Peter Klaus, the goat-herd, inspired 'Rip Van Winkle' (1819-20). (Georges & Jones 3). Folklore appears as inter-text in many literary texts in different

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languages. Chinese poetic tradition also began with folk-poetry. (Phukan 42). Very often, the traditional tales of a folk group are interconnected. In Assam like many other parts of the world, modern writers have been influenced by folklore (anxiety of influence) and this creates another level of intertextuality. William R. Bascom has shown that different types of folklore can share similar functions. The function is the same, the form is different. (Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* 279). This idea can be used in exploring further ramifications of the theory of intertextualty. Likewise, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, Propp's view, in a way, can be related with the theory of intertextuality as each new tale stands on earlier tale.

In the context of Assamese literature and critical discourse, the issue of intertextuality first appeared in an article on Ajit Barua's poem 'Aji Akau Mejankari Enachola' written by Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami in 1978. He offers the view that commenting on poetry (or on any other literary text) now becomes quite problematic if someone takes recourse to the theory like intertextuality. (Dev Goswami, 30) Banikanto Kakoti also opined that literature is just sound and echo. (Bora, P 293) Though Kakoti didn't utter the word 'intertextuality', his view approximates what Umberto Eco speaks out in the essay "Borges and My Anxiety of Influence". Eco here explores the concept of influence and all the different dimensions of influence. He reveals how he was intrigued by the literary echoes and influences that people were claiming his work contained. He said that he read the work cited and had had that work on his mind when writing his piece. But some works mentioned by the critics had never read by him. (Eco 127). To quote him:

> It is very difficult to escape the anxiety of influence, just as it was very difficult for Borges to be a precursor of Kafka. Saying that there is no idea in Borges that did not exist before is likely saying that there is note in Beethoven that had not produced before. (Eco 134)

In Assamese, such phenomena have already been there. According to Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami, certain views expressed by Banikanto Kakoti in *Amar Natun Sahitya* are distinct echoes from the last two sections of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. (Dev Goswami 17). But these have not been looked at from the perspective of intertextuality. Therefore, it seems that there are scopes to explore folklore and intertextuality in Assamese literature, particularly in poetry. In addition, the use of folk-materials or folk-texts in literary texts can also be examined from the perspective of intertextuality.

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