

## CULTURAL CRITICISM: *THE GRASSHOPPER'S RUN*

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### **Abstract**

*A nation's culture does not comprise one particular elite culture but also the local cultures. Cultural Materialism is also called Cultural Criticism search for exploitations and inequalities present in the text. Cultural Materialists see texts as a site of social struggles, the struggle for power between classes, genders, ethnic groups, communities and nations. The paper attempts to read Siddhartha Sharma's *The Grasshopper's Run* in the light of Cultural Materialism. Each culture has its own value and one is not superior to another. Sarma shows that though the Naga people do not belong to the supposed main stream their life has its own value. An amoral person like Colonel Mori fails to notice and accept it and kills tribals like animals. But there is Gojen Rajkhowa, the protagonist who is wise and generous and adores the Naga people.*

*Key words: Culture, Cultural Materialism, cultural criticism, subculture, marginalization.*

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Raymond Williams found that culture is ordinary, all-inclusive entity and a whole way of life. Individual culture differs and different communities show differences in culture but they share certain basic values that are common to all. Culture is not something constructed only by the elite group but the working class and masses do have their own part in constructing cultures. A nation's culture does not comprise one particular elite culture but also the local cultures. All contribute to the overall formation of the culture of a nation. It aims at moral evaluation of modern society and attempts to change the political structures of dominance. Cultural Materialism is also called Cultural Criticism search for exploitations and inequalities present in the text. Cultural Materialism believes that art always carries the message of the dominant classes whereby the working class is forced to accept it as correct and valid.

Cultural theorists exploit Gramsci's term 'subaltern' and state that there is no dominant culture and subcultures get importance. They give value to everyday life of people. Cultural Materialists see texts as a site of social struggles, the struggle for power between classes, genders, ethnic groups, communities and nations. They pay attention to the questions of power and marginalization of particular groups and seek the possibilities of resistance and subversion emphasizing the need to generate dissident readings. They attempt for transformation of a social order that exploits people on the grounds of race, gender and class. The paper attempts to read *The Grasshopper's Run* (2009) in the light of Cultural Materialism.

Siddhartha Sharma's *The Grasshopper's Run* brings into life the little-known slice of history of the year 1944, the time of the Second World War when India was under the British rule. It is the story of Ao Naga tribe and the story centres on a village which stood on a hill just west of the Dikhow River in Mokokchung. The Japanese army invaded India to

overthrow the British Raj. 'Two giants [The Japanese and the British], it seemed, had crashed together with devastating force at Kohima and then wrestled up and down the hills' (134). Colonel Shunroku Mori, an ambitious soldier- the Colonel of the Imperial Japanese Army reaches in Ao village as part of their mission. 'He was tracking the British 50 Parachute Brigade's elements, one of the few hurdles to the invasion' (2). Mori an amoral soldier who was behind mass civilian killings in China, Singapore and Burma ordered the massacre of the Ao Village.

The village was considered by everyone as a remote, protected and safe area in the hard times. But Mori suspected the British presence in the harmless looking collection of huts. 'He was certain the new arrangement would give him a chance to shine in the eyes of his superiors. The generals might disapprove of his methods sometimes, but here at the gates of India he would show them what he was' (3). He ordered the attack:

For a moment, his mind considered the possibility that he could be wrong, and he should wait for confirmation. Just as quickly, he told himself it did not matter at all. If he was right, good. If he was wrong, it was only a waste of ammunition. (3)

Mori was wrong. The British 50 Parachute Brigade under Brigadier Hope-Thompson was 120 miles away near Imphal, tracking their enemy.

But there were only more of these local hill people, little better than the Ainu back home, those half-animals up on Ezo Island. How they and these lived, if at all they were human, was beyond his understanding. Anyway, he could not let them get away to tell the British. He ordered the men to keep firing. (4)

The soldiers in awe and fear of the Colonel had heard many fearful stories about Mori and they just obeyed what he said. It took only ten minutes to sweep away the village killing eighty people of the tribe.

But the boy [Uti]...shot the first rifleman running around the corner, the ten-inch iron-tipped and rooster-feathered arrow, meant for running boar at thirty feet, sticking through his heart and out behind his back. The next Japanese did not have time to point his rifle as the boy, trying to take the quickest way out, was on him, his wood-handled knife stabbing, stabbing horizontally through his ribs, stabbing as they

tumbled in each others' grips, stabbing and tearing at his clothes, stabbing until the others clubbed him on the head again and again. (5)

Uti, the grandson of Shilukaba is an Ao. The Aos are the first-born and the eldest tribe of all the Naga tribes. 'The Colonel was, in truth, secretly amused. Plan for a brigade, he thought, and what you get is a half-animal with a knife.' (7) Mori and his soldiers captured and killed Uti.

The two characters Uti and Mori contradict each other. Uti is a Naga boy who fights alone and dies depicting his tremendous courage. Colonel Shunroku Mori, a typical backroom tactician plans, plots and is hungry as old Bonaparte. Mori from the West is a rich and educated man and he considers himself superior to Uti and for him Uti is merely a 'half-animal with a knife'. They tied Uti to a stake and cut him with bayonets. They enjoyed it and were thrilled at seeing him bleed a lot before he died. Mori acts in an inhuman way ordering the massacre of the village folks. He looks upon the people of the village as downtrodden and for him they have no value for existence.

Siddhartha Sarma writes the fiction also to show us the richness of Ao culture.

The Ao have many stories about the birth of their nation and the men who fuelled their rise and spread. Among them is the story of their greatest warrior and chief, leader of their first raid, whose marvellous exploits passed on into virtually every aspect of their ceremonies and customs. The Pongen clan, descended from that warrior, is the eldest and the most revered of all families. (54)

Shilukaba of Pongen clan has a holy lineage. Shilukaba's own son died and he named his grandson Shiluti. It was the name of their greatest warrior and hero and Uti though young was like Shiluti of the legend-strong and wise. Shilukaba wanted his people to move into the future with pride, carrying their traditions with them. He saw a beautiful tomorrow of Ao in Uti. But today Uti is dead with eighty people in a war that does not involve them. Moreover, Uti was tied like an animal and was killed inch by inch by the Japani.

The war is between the British and the Japanese and they come to Naga Hills to kill the people of the hills. 'The Japs are swarming into Assam now. We [the British] are sending men as fast as possible into those bleeding hills. ...They want Kohima and Imphal and all points west' (20).

The British and the Japanese consider themselves superior to native Indians. They are ready to kill Indians for their personal gain.

But I know this, and you know this, that for the Ingraz, our men, women and children who were killed do not matter. They will say: Oh, these many natives were killed. It will be just a number for them. If it had been their people they would understand, but those who died were not theirs, they were ours. (60)

The Naga tribes suffer. 'Everyone has left the hills. They say all the villages on Kohima Ridge are empty. That is Angami land, but even the other tribes are moving out' (41).

The protagonist Gojen Rajkhowa adores Naga culture. He leaves his studies in Bengal and reaches near Shilukaba hearing of Uti's death. The novel incorporates minor historical details. His school was shifted to outside Calcutta two years ago in 1942, after the city was bombed by the Japanese aircraft.

Calcutta was under siege. ...From 1942, the Americans had joined the show. ...On 2 December 1942 the 1<sup>st</sup> Imperial Japanese Air Force squadrons had hammered the former Indian capital with bombing raids. Their target was Howrah Bridge, and although they missed that artery, they did succeed in bleeding the city of more than 250,000 civilians who decided life was too short to be given up between the British and the Japanese. (15)

The war always adds to the power and position of a few rich with power and destroys the peace and happiness of the rest of the common mass.

Gojen and Uti were friends and Gojen's grandfather K. C. Rajkhowa met the Naga Shilukaba at Amguri down the road from Jorhat towards the Naga Hills. It was a friendship born of an equal love for the hills and respect for each other. Gojen had known Uti all his life, just as his father had known Uti's and his grandfather knew Shilukaba. Gojen was invited by Shilukaba to the morung, the dormitory in every Naga village to learn the oral traditions of Naga people, the ways of the village and of the forest:

So Rajkhowa had gone and stayed for six whole months, his grandfather approving, his father secretly envious because he had not been invited when he was little, and

everyone else in the family aghast....He learnt their stories and legends, the old way of life, the customs by which their people had lived for ages and more than anything else, the secrets of the forest. Here he found he adapted and learnt quicker than most the art of tracking, living off the land, hunting for food. (34)

The daily life of Ao tribe is shown with its uniqueness through the eyes of Gojen. Shilukaba teaches Gojen lessons of hunting. The tribesmen hunt only for food and for their livelihood and they have their own values. But others hunt because it is fun and a pastime:

In the hills, they hunt for food. Sometimes they go out for a long while, not knowing for certain if they will get anything to feed their families. They have to be very careful because a lot depends on how good they are. They take much difficulty in getting the kill. People here get good food anyway: it does not cost much for you. People like you, like the Ingraz, hunt because it is fun. (43)

The British goes with dogs and drums and they sit in a comfortable place, shoot the animal, take the skin home and even boast others about good hunting. But according to Shilukaba none of them deserves a good praise. A good hunter has to avoid bearers and dogs and do the whole work alone. They have to bear the discomfort by making the hunter and the hunted as equals. Shilukaba has shown so many men including the white and the brown how to hunt. According to Gojen Shilukaba is a modest, dignified old man and even humourous. He is ready with impeccable advice on the ways of the world and the forest. He is mindful of his role among his people and always watchful of the British and their rule. Shilukaba wants to take revenge on Uti's death. He is old and he cannot wait for others justice and court trials. He wants his people to take revenge. According to him his own people should go to Kohima and should find out the Japani officer Mori and kill him. The Nagas of the hills are very much affected by the British colonialism and Japanese invasion. It is a crisis time for them. The British enrolls tribal people to win war against the Japanese but fails to treat the Naga people with respect. They exploit the natives of India. 'In the thick of the First World War, four thousand Nagas had volunteered in the British Army, and the Naga Labour Corps was formed and sent to France' (107). The British always considers the Naga people inferior and gives only muskets to fight. They load from the muzzle and they have to reload each time. They are useless and dangerous too. But they have only such crude contraptions to fight with, whereas the British

is with modern machinery. 'But the Ingraz say, take these muskets and fight the Japani. Track them down in the forests, where they are waiting with machine guns and mortars and fight them with muskets' (104).

Shilukaba stands for a discrete tradition and according to him it has to be protected for their wellbeing. Each culture has its own value and one is not superior to another. Shilukaba is well aware of their age-old traditions and customs and that has to be preserved.

We are all Christians now, as we shall continue to be. That is a different matter. But we are also a nation, we have our traditions and customs and ways of life from far beyond, before the Ingraz built their ships, maybe even before they started living in their brick houses. (58)

But the foreign invasion is a threat to the specific traditions of Naga people.

The Naga people have a distinct culture and have a number of culturally bound stories to tell. They transmit the stories to the younger generation orally. The various clans of Naga tribes have different stories to tell and that include the story of Shiluti and the dog, the story of leaves that could bring the dead to life and the story about Molomi, an ancient story of the End of the World. In the story of the End of the World a great Fire from the East reached to the hills of the Ao and destroyed everything. The Fire was everywhere. Then Water from the West reached there. The Fire and the Water fought with each other and the Fire finally hid while the Water was looking everywhere for the Fire. The Grasshopper with his eyes saw everything. 'He had lain quiet and still, as only he can and he had seen where the Fire hid: inside bamboo and stone.... And the Grasshopper is still the most quiet and the most still, and he sees everything' (196). The Ao tribe fully believes in their stories. Uti's mother once assured Uti and Gojen telling the story of End of World that there will be always a Grasshopper. In the present story Gojen emerges as a Grasshopper and finds Mori, the killer of Uti.

Colonel Mori is a bully and a power corrupted maniac who is not even ready to pay respect to his senior officers like General Sato. He is not willing to release the men under his command for common good. 'The only thing you want to secure, Sato thought, looking at the Colonel [Mori] with increasing fury, is your own skin' (100). '...Gojen had pictured Mori as a kind of fearful, bullying man constantly on watch against just the kind of people stalking him today' (155).

He dreams to become one of the powerful soldiers of all times but has no time to think about his subordinates. According to him many would fall in the war but many more would emerge to replace them. Somehow, he wants to make himself popular his name known to everyone as a conqueror and a commander. He dreams to be remembered as a historical figure by the people of Japan.

Gojen and his tribal group attacks Mori. 'What were these savages doing here? Who were they to come and upset his world like this' (183)? Gojen explains the fact behind their mission and they are after the life of Uti. 'What was he making those noises for, the little monkey' (184)? Though Mori considers Gojen as a little monkey, he and his group prove that they are not merely little monkeys. They leave no signs of identification of Mori's murder and even succeed in fooling the British and Japanese officers.

Sarma shows through *The Grasshopper's Run* that though the Naga people do not belong to the supposed main stream their life has its own value. An amoral person like Colonel Mori fails to notice and accept it and kills tribals like animals. But there is Gojen Rajkhowa who is wise and generous and adores the Naga people. Through him we also begin to love Ao's life and manners. Ao life is distinct and it also contributes to the culture of the nation. The novelist succeeds in exploiting the little-known history of India and shows the tribal people also had their involvement in the Second World War. Thus, the author had succeeded in giving voice to the marginalised Naga people. This book is aimed at subverting the existing inequalities present in our society.

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