



AN ECO-FEMINIST APPRAISAL OF TEMSULA Ao's SELECTIVE POEMS

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ABSTRACT

India's northeastern part has an infinite dreamland with undulating hills, scenic landscapes, lavish green covers, serene lakes, snow-clad mountains, exotic flora and fauna longs relentlessly for satiating the aesthetic aspirations and soothing the humankind from the fret, fever and worries of life. The cultural unity in diversity, traditions, food and homely hospitality of the people make you fall in love with the region and it appears to be a home away from home. The North East region is referred to as the the eight sisters comprising of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Sikkim. The reason for pleasant surprises is constantly pushed to the margin for its lack of affection to the superimposed norms and concept of 'Indian-ness'. The portrayal of the region is in a fashion which Homi Bhabha would call 'Totalization of Culture'. Tribal literature of North East remains a contested terrain as both the terms 'North-East' and 'tribal' hints at an attempt to assess the region. If tourism is promoted and infrastructure developed, this region shall no wonder turn into one of the most visited tourist destinations not only in India but across the globe.

Northeast India is one of the most culturally vibrant regions. It is the combination of people belonging to different ethnic groups, culture, communities. It is a place of eternal beauty and diversity. Temsula Ao emphasizes the idea that nature and women should emancipate from the traditional and cultural shackles by dint of their strong determination as they face many failures, disappointments and losses. Their determination and longing give strength to fight for their self-identity and recognition. As a Naga woman, Temsula Ao is concerned about her region and the condition of land, forest, animals, hills and mountains, and surroundings. She rejuvenates the beauty of nature in the hands of women through her poems. In her short stories, she projects women as protectors of nature safeguarding the whole human habitation with her knowledge. In her writings, Temsula Ao represents the women who have the remarkable tendency to protect nature, encompass individuality, are brave enough to fight for their liberation and have the intelligence to secure their men and

village by their instinctive knowledge. Invariably, Temsula Ao reforms the role of women in Ao – Naga society through her writings.

This paper analyses Temsula Ao's *Songs from the Other Life* (2007) as the quintessential Tribal English poetry of North East India. Despite the distinctiveness that marks the poetry of each of the poets of North East India, certain unifying traits are found in the poetry of the region. In Ao Naga Oral tradition, the quest of identity and selfhood, the hybridization of indigenous culture is presented as an outcome of modernity and Christianity.

The paper also attempts to estimate the real picture of the postcolonial nation and how one can make the use of language given by the colonial masters in the tribal world of North East India. It shows the greatness of Temsula Ao as a poet and ethnographer and her compelling poetry not only asserts the distinctiveness of tribal literature of the North East but also has an aesthetic universality.

KEYWORDS: Other Identity, Cultural unity, Hybridization, Totalization, Indianness, Post -Colonial, ethnographer, Pan regional

LITERATURE REVIEW

Annie Zaidi expressing her views on feminism shows conformity with Temsula Ao when she says “Women bring to their writing the truth to their bodies and an inquiry into the different ways in which gender inequality shapes human experiences. Many women writers also place women protagonists at the center of their work and many stories set within the household have the power to illuminate how women’s lives are shaped and controlled”.

Most of the women writing in the late 19th and 20th century were based on prejudiced social structure that we can only imagine today. Some women who had formal education also wrote and through their writing addressed the social and cultural issues. These women inspire us even today as they wield their pen as a sword to combat the inequality in society, maltreatment of women and their persistent struggle as women of the world.

Recent writers in India such as Arundhati Roy and David Davidar show a direction towards feminism and cultural lag in their works. In 1997 Arundhati Roy booked a prize winner for her *The God of Small Things*; calls herself a “homegrown” writer. Her book shows the setup of the physical landscape of Kerala. In 2008, Jahanvi Barua, a Bangalore-based author from Assam has set a critically acclaimed collection of short stories *Next Door* on the social scene in Assam with insurgency as the background. In 2013, Aruni Kashyap has also based her first novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* on the society and psyche of the people of Assam at the backdrop of insurgency.

Women have a close involvement with natural resources in day-to-day life. Women’s perspective about nature is different from men’s perspective as women give importance to protecting nature by their priority and choices in which men fail. Eco-feminist offer an intricate relationship between women and nature. Ecofeminism reflects the connection between women and nature constructed by society especially as a result of contemporary patriarchy. In her first five sections of five poetry collection of Ecofeminist concern, Temsula Ao, gives glimpses of influence of Indian women writers in general and North-East women writers in particular. The sections focus on ecofeminist theories and theorists. In her short story, *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) Lentina is presented not only as a part of nature itself rather she beautifully describes how Lentina becomes one with nature in the form of a laburnum flower at the end of the story. Through this, Lentina attains liberation from conventional patriarchal society.

In 2014, Temsula Ao wrote a book *Once upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Boldly Rags*, where she states that for her it is an attempt to recall from a fractured childhood that was ripped apart by a series of tragedies. Ao's works bear testimony to the constant negotiation with a political scenario, contested identities, violence, insurgency and social realignments in the lives of the people.

Eco-Feminist study of Ao's Poems:

Temsula Ao is one of those poets who write to awaken the souls of their society and to alert them about the quintessence of a tribal community, Temsula Ao writes with the responsibility to preserve and pass the oral tradition which she has inherited from her forefathers. She is one whose poems reflect a deep concern for the changing social scenario, especially in the face of wind that appears to threaten the roots linking the tradition. Temsula Ao's poetry is a revival of lost identity by reciting her cultural legacy and making it relevant for the new generation. Ecofeminism is an integral part of Women's Movement and Temsula Ao as an eco-feminist addresses the serving of Women and Mother Nature, and the exploitation of the both.

Temsulo Ao aims at savoring the image of the Northern East that seems barren in terms of violence and depicting the traditional and cultural wealth her region possesses. The Northeast has its variants and yet it's a vibrant place to look upon. It is like the multi-colored rainbow and each of the seven states in the region brings out a diverse flavor. The insurgency and violence coupled with the endangering of the traditional culture in the face of invasion by an alien culture which is marked by modernity and globalization the gross misrepresentation of the heterogeneous characters of the region under the homogeneous "Northeast" showcases the woes of this region. Quoting Samir Kumar Das in *Governing India's Northeast*, "It is true that in scholarly circles Northeast continues to be dismissed as 'an elusive construct' with its wide division and remarkable differences that refuses to give themselves any generic and pan-regional character". Mitsuye Yamada rightly remarks that one of the most insidious ways of keeping women and minorities powerless is to let them only talk about harmless and inconsequential subjects which Ao in her works tries to breakthrough. Moreover, G J V Prasad , an eminent critic and environmentalist describes it in his introduction to *Book of Songs* that it is a potential threat to the already endangered culture of the northeast. Temsula Ao expresses this fear of loss of identity in an article in 2006.

Temsula Ao is one of the most eminent contemporary folklorists, academics, and poets who writes the inherent instability of any oral tradition in her works which needs no further elaboration. Talking in the context of Nagas too Ao presents the inevitable variables. She is the poet who emphasizes an undeniable fact that the rhythm of the tradition is disrupted and its relevance is certainly diffused and diluted. Often, old songs and dances are prepared in haste and are not presented in the way they should have been portrayed.

And talking about, another level of tradition as is visible in the works of Ao, it can be said that moral values imparted by the traditions are still relevant and they continue to govern the people wherever they may live, not because they are the values of a certain people but because they are universal values.

Temsula Ao's most widely known works include two collections of short stories called *These Hills Called Homes* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) and an essay called *Henry James Quest for The Ideal Heroine*. Added to this ,*Songs That Tell* (1998), *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs from The Other Life* (2007) are some of her notable collections of poetry. Naga by birth, Ao's works heavily reflect the culture, traditions, practices, and beliefs of the people of Nagaland, a tribe with its own overflowing culture. Temsula Ao deals with issues concerning the tribes in many ways. This paper aims to read that the poetry of Temsula Ao in the light of these concerns that plague the region and explore how she uses her poems with a motive to revive and vindicate a culture under threat of being

lost forever. This paper analyses the role that Tamsula Ao plays, using the medium of her poetry, in resurrecting a history lost for want of documentation and fortifying a culture fast losing its moorings to commercialization and becoming alien in its land. She has been studying and recording the Naga myths, folktales, rituals, traditions, and belief system, which was published by her in *Ao Naga Oral Tradition*. Her writing presents images and themes of Naga's folk culture. As a representative of her people, she infuses in her poetry the voices and concerns for her people and her land. Referring to the poet in the introduction to the *Books of Songs*, Prasad remarks that she searches for the past that has disappeared into the mist of the time, for it is in the very unreliability of that history that her people's troubled present arises. All her poetry collections bear the word 'Songs' in their titles which is reflective of the oral tradition her poetry is rooted in: "poems are songs in oral culture and Tamsula Ao sees herself as a Naga woman poet in search of tradition". She makes her intention clear in her introductory poem of her first collection titled *Songs That Tell*:

*Songs
Which sometimes
Imitate
Greater bards
To indicate
Similar response
To corresponding chords. (14 to 20)*

In the lines, the poet refers to her ancestors as the 'Greater bards' whom she wishes to follow to endure the tradition of her community. These 'songs' for her is a way of reviving her kinship with her community, of experiencing and responding to their joys, pains, and sorrow similarly as once her ancestors did. She aspires to uphold the tradition and merge her voice with it. Her future reiterates this point later in the poem, in her songs:

*...now vibrate
For a kindred heart
Who knew and understood?
Long before I knew them (32 to 35)*

'Kindred heart' is an allusion to her forbears and her poem carries a vibration of the songs that have been sung in the past. She renounces her individuality for the sake of belonging to the tradition and in that merging alone does she revive her lost identity. This historical sense that the poet exhibits has been expounded by T.S.Eliot in 'Tradition and Individual Talent' where he says that sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes the writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

"The Stone –people from Lungterok" by Ao is a poem about the creation of the myth. According to Mark Bender; "The poem draws on tradition-rich imagery of assemblies of stones that mark sites associated with origins of the ancients". According to the Tamsula Ao, their first forefather emerged out of the earth from a place called Lungterok. In this poem, the poet conjures up a remarkable image of her ancestors. She portrays them as possessors of special skills for survival well versed with the secrets and wisdom of nature. The poet always refers here to the martial traditions of headhunting that was famous once in the Ao Naga culture.

In "Heritage" the poet expresses the irony of having to witness an artifact which is belonging to her tribe being displayed in a European museum behind the 'glass cage'. She is caught between the opposing forces of

close familiarity and alienation even she experiences helplessness and despair at watching her heritage symbols locked and displayed as in the following lines:

They languish, these uprooted
treasures of my heritage
caged within imposing structures
In designated spaces (“Heritage”)

The poem comments on the exoticization of cultural facts which deal from the source, ridding them of their true identity and reducing them to their objects of display. The poet also views the exhibition of her heritage icons as an insult and threat to her identity and having overcome her initial shock and feeling of helplessness, resolve to bring “purloined treasures” back to their place of origin. This delicate relationship between identity and culture is threatened in the age of globalization, which despite having increased the option for identification on a personal and collective level, also contributed toward the fragmentation of identity, through her poetry attempts on a personal and collective level to revive the lost identity of her tribe by creating awareness about her cultural roots.

“History” from the *Songs from the Other Life* is a poem that discourses of reconstructing a history long-neglected and on the verge of being forgotten. The songs assume a life of own expression through the poet’s word after lying silently in her being dormant seeds awaiting germination. Folklore constitutes an important part of the cultural heritage and is transmitted across generations through the medium of oral traditions. As such folklore plays a significant role in constituting the identity of a particular people. The poet wishes to keep this tradition of her folklore alive through her poem. As discussed in the poem she holds the tradition high above the individual self which becomes a medium for the tradition to continue being passed from oneself to another. The generation passing through the tradition change invents new parlance to suit its need and taste; however, the song remains the same. The views are reflected in the following lines:

They now resonate
In words of new
Discernment
To augment the lore
Of our essential core (“History” 9-13)

In another poem titled “*My hills*”, the poet presents the loss of peace and verdure in her region. She reflects upon a sense of alienation that haunts her in the present and longing for the bygone days. The poet draws on natural imagery to depict the once paradise-like state that prevailed in the region as evident in lines from Ao’s poem:

But to-day
I no longer know my hills,
The birdsong is gone,

Replaced by the staccato

Of sophisticated weaponry. ("My Hills" 19-23)

In "*The Old Story Teller*" Temsula Ao shows her role as keeper of her cultural heritage when she says "I have lived my life believing, storytelling was my proud legacy". Using flower verse, the poet starts with an enthusiastic note of responsibility that she shoulders for keeping her tradition alive. The poem begins in a casual style talking about how the poet inherited the legacy of storytelling from her grandfather and inserted it into its theme without fanfare. The poem explains the origin of the oral tradition of her Naga community. It maintains that in ancient times, the tribes possessed a script that was displayed on hiding for everyone for reading and learning purposes. The poem makes references to the traditional myth about the creation of the tribes and the commonality of human and animals. Towards the end of the poem poet shows the generation disbelief in the cultural history of the tribes:

*The rejection from my own
Has stemmed the flow
And the stories seem to regress
Into un-reachable recesses" (47-50).*

So, the tone of the poem turns somber towards the second half with the poet empathizing with the insignificant existence of the boatman. The boatman turns skeptical about his role of ferrying the dead to the afterworld and wonders if he had ever been redeemed himself.

The study reveals that Temsula Ao is a poet who writes to give voice to her community. She is one such artist who writes with her responsibility to preserve her oral tradition that she has inherited from her forebears. Her poetry is an endeavor to revive a lost identity by reworking her cultural legacy and making it relevant for the new generation. She portrays her region for the wealth of cultural history it possesses.

CONCLUSION

Temsula Ao is one of those poets who write to awaken the souls of her society and to alert them. Coming from a tribal community, Temsula Ao writes with the responsibility to preserve the oral tradition which she has inherited from her forebears. She is that one individual whose poems reflect a deep concern for the changing social scenario, especially in the face of wind that appears to threaten the roots linking with the tradition. Temsula Ao's poetry is a revival of lost identity by reworking her cultural legacy and making it relevant for the new generation. Temsula Ao aims at an image of the Northern East that is barren in terms of violence and her poems also depict the traditional and cultural wealth her region possesses. The Northeast has its variants and it's a vibrant place to look upon. It is like a different color of the rainbow and each of the seven states in the region brings out a different flavor.

Ecofeminism in Ao's text beacons at the patriarchy which devalues women, and therefore, actually devalues nature because nature is seen as mother of humankind. It is a truth that women and nature get trashed

together in the modern society. Anything patriarchy associates with women-caring, compassion, maternity, emotions, looking after nature is also trashed. To survive the climatic emergency, we need to know we are part and parcel of Mother Nature. Temsula Ao's concern and love for nature and tradition inspires the readers to value nature and women alike for the all round development of the society and the world as a whole.

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