

Literature as Social Agenda: The Poetry of Temsula Ao

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Abstract: The French philosopher Louise Gabriel Ambroise once commented that literature is an expression of society just like the word is the expression of a human being. This especially gains enormous significance with respect to the literature from the North-eastern part of India which is often and unfortunately described with epithets such as terror, violence, fear, loss, “soaked in blood” (Misra xxiv) etc. This is mainly owing to the violence perpetrated by insurgency of the militant outfits fighting for ‘freedom’ of their land from Indian government and counter-insurgency operations of the latter. Besides, a deep sense of alienation and denial infests the area due to its landlocked geography and apathy of the Indian government. The endangering of the traditional/indigenous culture in the face of invasion of an alien culture marked by modernity and globalization coupled with the gross misrepresentation of the heterogeneous character of the region under the erroneous homogeneous ‘Northeast’ label further adds to the woes of this region. It is only natural hence that most of the literature emanating from this region carries a deep-rooted concern for the social issues that plague these areas. Temsula Ao, from Nagaland, is one such accomplished writer who strives to bring about a social change in her region by creating awareness about all the issues mentioned above. This paper is an attempt to explore and foreground such social concerns in her poetry collection titled *Book of Songs*.

Keywords: northeast, culture, modernization, identity, folk traditions, society

According to the French philosopher Louise Gabriel Ambroise, ‘Literature is an expression of society just like the word is the expression of a human being.’ This especially gains enormous significance with respect to the literature from the North-eastern part of India which depicts “perceptions of the traumatic experience of a people living in the midst of terror and fear and yet cherishing hopes that human values will triumph some day and new dawn of peace would emerge out of this trial by fire” (Misra xix). The region has suffered from a severe identity crisis as a consequence of “re-drawing of boundaries that began with the Partition of the Subcontinent...” (Misra xvii). The unfair representation of the region in the nationalist discourse has had an adverse effect on the psyche of the people who felt wronged by an indifferent Indian State. As Rakhee Kalita puts it, “The story of these people is the story of history’s accidents, of an arbitrary line drawing boundaries across geographically and culturally contiguous lands dismembering the natural and inevitable growth and movement of a community—a consequence of colonial ambitions, political battles and failed bureaucratic strategies” (17).

The fear of losing identity and of being ignored by the mainland gave rise to a false sense of ‘nationalism’ that transformed into insurgency thus creating a perpetual cycle of terror and violence. According to Ved Prakash, “In India’s North-East,

insurgency is an ethno-cultural phenomenon, in the sense that perceiving their ethnic identity threatened, they seek political power to preserve it..." (33)

The Indian Government, instead of looking after the concerns of its marginalized people empathetically, has played the role of an oppressor so far through its repressive policies and draconian acts such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act that has further aggravated the alienation of the crisis ridden region. As Grace Pelly puts it in *State Terrorism*:

The rationale for AFSPA is that the armed forces need "special powers" to prevent terrorist activity in the region and to contain independence movements. In practice, however, the police and the military forces use the powers and immunity that AFSPA grants to deal with ordinary matters of criminal justice. This highlights that increased powers given to State actors results in increased violence against civilians, fuelling a mutual distrust (124).

The insurgency and violence coupled with the endangering of the traditional/indigenous culture in the face of invasion by an alien culture marked by modernity and globalization, coupled with the gross misrepresentation of the heterogeneous character of the region under the erroneous homogeneous 'Northeast' label further adds to 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 illusive construct'- with its wide divisions and remarkable differences that refuse to give unto themselves any generic and pan-regional character..." (20). Moreover, this fetishization or 'the threat of museumisation'(xv) as G J V Pasad describes it in the introduction to *Book of Songs*, is a potential threat to the already endangered culture of the Northeast. Temsula Ao expresses this fear of losing of identity/culture in a 2006 article:

The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. (7)

This paper aims to read 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. The paper analyses the role that Temsula 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 commercialisation and becoming alien in its own land. In this manner, the paper also looks at the reworking of the oral traditions of the Ao-Naga culture in her poetry as a means of invoking "the past as a collective cultural memory and making meaning of it in the 21st century for the individual listener" (Naidu *Making Storytelling Work*).

Temsula Ao is a poet, writer and ethnographer besides being a retired professor of English from North Eastern Hill University. Besides being hailed as one of the major literary voices from the Northeast India, she has also proved to be a successful administrator as Director, North East Zone Cultural Centre as she tried her best to get the cultural richness of Northeast recognised at the National level. She has also been instrumental in the construction of the Heritage Museum at Shangyu village in Mon district of Nagaland (Ao, "Once upon a life" 210). As an ethnographer, she worked on the oral tradition of her own community, Ao Naga, studying and recording their myths, folktales, rituals, traditions and belief system, which was published as the *Ao Naga Oral Tradition*. Her writings are replete with images and themes from Naga folk culture. As a representative of her people, she infuses in her poetry the voices and concerns of her people and her land. Referring to the poet in the introduction to the *Book of Songs*, Prasad remarks that 'she searches for the past that has disappeared into the mists of time, for it is in the very unrealisability of that history that her people's troubled present arises...' (xiv). 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 cultures and Temsula Ao sees herself as a Naga woman poet in search of tradition" (Prasad xvii). She makes her intentions clear in the introductory poem of her first collection titled *Songs That Tell*:

Songs
Which sometimes
Imitate
Greater bards
To indicate
Similar response
To corresponding chords. ("Songs Dedicatory" 14-20)

The poet in this free verse refers to her ancestors as the 'Greater bards' whom she wishes to emulate in order to continue the tradition of her community. These 'songs' for her are a way of reviving her kinship with her community, of experiencing and responding to their joys, pains and sorrows in a similar way as once her ancestors did. She aspires to uphold the tradition and merge her voice with it. She further reiterates this point later in the poem, stating that her songs:

... now vibrate
for a kindred heart
who knew and understood
long before I knew them (32-35)

'Kindred heart' is an allusion to her forebears and her poems carry the vibrations 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, "(T)his historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity" (Eliot 44).

“The Stone-people from Lungterok” is a poem about the creation myth of the Aos. According to Mark Bender; “The poem draws on tradition-rich imagery of assemblies of stones that mark sites associated with origins of the ancients” (112). A note attached at the end of the poem explains that the word ‘Lungterok’ in Ao Naga language means ‘Six Stones’. It further adds that “according to Aos their first forefathers emerged out the earth from a place called Lungterok. There were three men and three women” (Ao 111). 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 and myriad of creatures, worshippers of the natural and the supernatural. Using oxymoronic adjectives such as “barbaric and balladic”, “the poetic and the politic” and “savage and sage”, the poet paints a larger than life image of her ancestors and eulogizes them while tracing to them the roots of the present Ao Naga traditions. This poem can be read as a means employed by the poet to locate and revive her lost identity especially in times when cultures seem to lose their grounds of existence and turn into objects of fetish and simultaneously to instil a sense of pride in the traditions of her community. The poet makes a reference here to the martial tradition of head hunting that was famous once in the Ao Naga culture. As described in *Nagaland* by Verrier Elwin, “The Practice of head hunting is based on a belief in a soul matter or vital essence of great power, which resides in the human head” (11). While the poet maintains a tone of certainty about the poet’s faith in her traditions, it ends on a sceptical note reflecting poet’s ambivalence: “Was the birth adult when the stone broke? / or are the STONE-PEOPLE yet to come of age?” (“Stone-People” 54-55).

In “Heritage”, the poet expresses the irony of having to witness artefacts belonging to her tribe being displayed in a European museum behind ‘glass cages’. Caught between opposing forces of close familiarity and stark alienation, she experiences helplessness and despair at watching her heritage symbols locked and displayed as in these lines:

They languish, these uprooted
treasures of my heritage
caged within imposing structures
in designated spaces (“Heritage” 1-4).

The poem comments on the exoticization of cultural artifacts that alienates them from their very source, ridding them of their true identity and reducing them to mere objects of display: “But artifacts wrenched from their origin / must, by reason / remain mute” (“Heritage” 11-13). The poet views this exhibition of her heritage icons as an insult and threat to her identity and having overcome her initial shock and feeling of helplessness, resolves to bring the “purloined treasures” back to their place of origin. This seems to her a way of redeeming herself of the identity crisis arising from this cultural alienation. As put by Jorn Rusen, “Identity is a matter of culture. Culture is the entire achievement of the human mind in interpreting and understanding the given world including oneself as living in this world and being a part of it” (144). This delicate relationship between identity and culture is threatened in this age of globalization, which despite having “increased the options for identification on a personal and collective level ... has also contributed towards the fragmentation of identity” (Servaes, Lie & Terzis 2000). The poet

through her poetry attempts on a personal, and eventually a 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 augments the discourse of reconstructing a history long neglected and on the verge of being forgotten. The folklore referred to in this poem as “songs” assumes a life of its own seeking expression through the poet’s words after lying silently in her being like dormant seeds awaiting germination. The 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. As stated by Dr Soumen Sen:

When we talk of ethno-specificity of culture including folklore, we come to a related issue – issue of cultural identity which is in sharp focus in culture and politics of north-east India for last few decades. The important connection between identity and folklore can never be denied. Since the relationship between members of a group, or of a community, determines the collective identity, folklore is the most important source of its construction, articulation and perpetuation. This is because it prepares the cultural symbols, the essential features of an identity system. (37)

The poet wishes to keep this tradition of her folklore alive through her poems. As discussed in the poem “Songs Dedicatory”, she holds the tradition high above her individual self which becomes a medium for the tradition to continue being passed from oneself to another. The generations passing the traditions change and so do the words which carry them as each generation invents a new parlance to suit its needs and tastes; however the song remains the same.

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 laments the loss of peace and verdure in her region. She reflects upon a sense of alienation that haunts her in the present and a longing for the bygone days. The poet draws on natural imagery to depict the once paradise like state that prevailed in the region marked by lines such as, “and happy gurgling brooks” (6), “the seasons playing magic / On their many-splendored sheen” (11-12) and “the hills echoed / with the wistful whispers / Of autumnal leaves” 14-16). However, the last three paragraphs bemoan the plight of this region, which having lost the serenity of the yesteryear has become synonymous with political turmoil and social unrest. Expounding the trouble in the Northeast, Subir Bhaumik says, “The North East has been seen as the problem child since the very inception of the Indian Republic. It has also been South Asia’s most enduring theatre of separatist guerrilla war, a region where armed action has usually been the first, rather than the last, option of political protest” (xiv). Referring to the violence in the valley, the poet says:

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 reiterates her role as keeper of her cultural heritage, “I have lived my life believing / Story-telling was my proud legacy” (1-2). Using flowing free verses, the poet starts out on an enthusiastic note acknowledging the responsibility that she shoulders of keeping her tradition alive. The poem begins in a casual style talking about how the poet inherited the legacy of story-telling from her grandfather and sidles gradually into its theme without much fanfare. A note appended to the poem explains the origin of the Oral Tradition of the Ao-Naga community. It maintains that in ancient times, the tribe possessed a script which was displayed on a hide for everyone to read and learn. However, a dog one day accidentally swallowed the hide and so the script was lost forever. Since then, the people have retained every aspect of their lives through the Oral Tradition (Ao 240). The poem makes reference to the traditional myths about creation of the tribe and commonality of humans and animals. However, the tone turns apprehensive toward the end of the poem as the poet laments the new generation’s disbelief in the cultural history of the tribe:

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

However, despite the despair of witnessing her tradition fade, the poet perseveres in resurrecting her legacy through her poetry. “Nowhere Boatman” is based on the Ao-Naga myth according to which the boatman is paid some coins to sail the souls of the dead from the Land of the Living to the Land of the Dead where they can continue their afterlife journey (Ao 245). The title “Nowhere Boatman” is a paradox, as one expects the boatman to lead the way; however, prefixing the ‘nowhere’ defies the very sense of direction it generates. The argument in the poem proceeds in a discursive manner with the boatman counter questioning his passengers and rejecting their answers one by one as in the following lines:

They even ask me
How old I am
As if knowing my age has anything to do with their being
on my boat for their last ride
.....
I shall send the pesky souls
To the tree-stump whose belly
Is now my boat, to tell them
How old is old? (6-10, 20-23)

Through her ingenious craft, the poet manages to trace the origin of the tradition to nature itself and express the existential dilemma with apparent ease as in these lines:

Anyway, what has age to do with dying
And of what use this irrelevant knowledge
When they are already pledged
On a one way journey
To their destiny? (24-28)

The tone of the poem turns sombre towards the second half with the poet empathising with the insignificant existence of the boatman. The boatman turns sceptical about his own role of ferrying the dead to the afterworld and wonders if he'd ever be redeemed himself.

It is worth mentioning that the poet is not a blind supporter of her traditions and is candid about criticizing certain practices which have lost relevance in the modern times or are simply vainglorious. In "The Spear", the poet depicts the innate cruelty and predatory instincts of a hunter who mindlessly throws a spear at a moving figure which turns out to be a doe in process of giving birth to a calf. Realising his mistake, he is struck by remorse and fear lest any harm befalls his yet unborn child. This poignant narration tells of the evil of hunting and the havoc it causes to the natural world. Recognising this devilish instinct in his mind, the hunter says, "For now I knew / It was not the spear alone / That caused it all" (67-69). Similarly, "Trophies" exposes the inhumanity of the infamous Naga custom of chopping of the heads of slain enemies in warfare and displaying them publicly as symbol of bravery and social status (Ao 284). The poem is a feminine counter-discourse in the voice of a Naga woman who laments the bloody tradition that renders the Naga men intoxicated by wine and conceit completely oblivious of their familial responsibilities.

The study reveals that Temsula Ao is a poet who writes to give voice to her community. In the words of Preeti Gill, "(P)eople whose history and civilization had been pushed into the margins took up the task of recreating their past and reinventing tradition as part of the nationalist agenda of identity assertion." (Narratives of lived experience - writing the Northeast). Temsula is one such artist who writes with an innate responsibility to preserve her oral tradition that she as a tribal has inherited from her forebears. Her poems reflect a deep concern for the changing social scenario, especially in the face of the winds of change that appear to threaten the roots linking her with the tradition. Her poetry is an endeavour to revive a lost identity by reworking her cultural legacy and making it relevant for the new generation. By doing this, she also aims at redrafting the violent ridden image of the Northeast and portraying her region for the wealth of cultural history it possesses. In her own words:

The Northeast is so beautifully varied. It is like the different hues in the rainbow. Each of the seven states in the region brings out a different flavour. I think one should do justice in portraying these various flavours through their writing. That is what I try to do with regard to my state" (Ao, NELitreview).

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