

'Lest We Forget': Mapping the Written and the Unwritten in the Tales of North-east India

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Abstract

The world of story is not a simple one. Every story is a story of something imagined or real, experienced or narrated, personal or political, and, mythic or modern. Issues such as nation, nationality, identity, home, country, being and belonging enter the arena of creativity whenever a writer pens his or her story from the margins. For the voices from north east India every story, every reading creates a new meaning- a new construct. They create, rewrite and share their identity through collective culture, shared history or ancestry very often. Such one writer who contemplates in her works within these frameworks and boundaries from the point of an individual and the community is Temsula Ao. Hailing from the region, she delivers an extremely sensible and almost firsthand experience of the happenings in the region in her writing that is so evocative at the same time.

The present paper aims to explore the short stories by Temsula Ao from her Sahitya Academy Prize winning collection *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) from the perspective of both written and oral account of emotional identities and aspects of showing multiple ways of being, becoming and belonging. The Northeast has long been on the fringe of mainstream literary consciousness, edged out by its complex socio-politics, crisis of identity and the prolonged rule of the gun. Temsula, through her narratives, has expressed a strong political awareness to interrogate the violence that has ravaged the Northeast region as a whole and the 'Naga nation' in particular due to the tussle between the insurgents 'underground extortionists or rebel forces' and the Indian government in complex ways.

Key words: short story, identity, culture, north-east, history.

Writing, being a relatively recent invention, most cultures, especially the non-literate indigenous cultures, recorded their experiences, history, traditions, proverbs and beliefs through oral traditions which are remembered and passed on through generations. Therefore it goes without saying the importance and significance of oral narratives to the understanding of these cultures. The new surge of interest in non-western cultures and multiculturalism, spurred by post-colonial studies, has certainly contributed to the renewed study of the unwritten verbal art of the people across the world. The re-discovery of oral traditions, as Miles Foley has claimed, is "an achievement of the twentieth century" (*Teaching Oral Traditions* 1998) and this 're-discovery' has, no doubt, unearthed a wealth of knowledge. Besides the realization and the consequent preservation of knowledge, it has led to a better understanding of those cultures who have not otherwise found adequate representation in the written literature of the modern world.

Northeast: An Overview

In this regard, the case of Northeast India may be taken into account. The scanty writings that one finds on the region through anthropological works or colonial reports offer more or less distorted views on the region and its people. Serious study has never been made on their cultures, their verbal art or their history. At best, they are given passing references and their verbal art presented as nothing but samples of 'savage music' or 'concoctions of illiterate folk'. The subtle nuances, the rhythms of the narratives, the deliberate pauses, different dance forms with various allusions to nature, the intricate patterns of their attire and many other elements involved in the verbal art of these non-literate societies were never the subject of scholarly inquiry. It is only by the turn of this new millennium that the region has seen its own native writers experimenting with writing. In this context, the present paper proposes to interrogate, revisit and re-examine the oral traditions of the people to arrive at a better understanding of the region through tales narrated and written. For this purpose, I intend to discuss here the world of short story by Temsula Ao in her well known collection titled *Laburnum for My Head* (2009).

Environment: A Specific Context

The study of oral traditions is important also because they contain age-old wisdom about the environment, and knowledge gathered from experience it is crucial to a better understanding of the earth in this age when the world is heading towards environmental devastation in the name of development. It is important to study the environmental philosophy of the peoples who have lived in close intimacy with nature – their deep knowledge of the ecology developed not through books but rather, by learning the book of nature through observing and through recognizing the intimate connection with the environment in which they live. Their world view may not be similar with that of the most literate societies because, for them, the earth is not solely for humankind; they are just a part of the cosmic whole in which all things, animate or inanimate, are interrelated and inter-dependant. In fact, even the terminology we use for the inanimate objects – non-living things – may not be so appropriate for these cultures who live in such close proximity with nature, because even the 'non-living things' like the rocks, caves, mountains, gorges etc are believed to have spirits in them. Their rituals and ceremonies create a sense of community not just among the humans but also with the spiritual realms and offer a way of life in which humans can live in harmony with nature.

Narratives of TemsulaAo

Keeping alive the ethnic sensitivities, Temsula embarks on a sojourn to enlighten the modern sensibilities of life in *Laburnum for My Head*, poignant and bewildering. Issues such as nation, nationality, identity, home, country belonging have increased its demand in acknowledgement with the onset of modernity and globalization. It is the negotiation of modernity with tradition that Ao is talking about. The sonority of the rich culture and lifestyle that still dwells in trivial matters illumines the hidden

facts of life. Its identity is constantly transforming. The essence of individuality emerges as the marker of change. Temsula contemplates between these two markers of existence in *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). She has expressed a strong political awareness to interrogate the violence that has ravaged the Northeast region as a whole and the 'Naga nation' in particular due to the tussle between the insurgents 'underground extortionists or rebel forces' and the Indian government in complex ways. It is an attempt of 'looking back' to find answers to today's troubling questions.

Insurgency

In the story 'The Letter', Ao presents before us a new understanding of the so-called 'national workers' by highlighting the gravity of their stand. In the uneasy village, an 'armed man', who remains unnamed in the story ventures out on an 'emergency tax' extortion only to meet with retaliation that ended tragically. Interestingly just before the visit, this village had resolved that they would cease to pay 'tax' to the underground, would refuse to do 'free' labour for the government and would discourage army visits by refusing to sell any of their produce to them. The rummaging through the pockets of the dead 'armed man' revealed a few sodden notes of small denominations, a tattered ID with almost illegible writing and a letter addressed to a postbox of a nearby town. This letter turned out to be a personal cross for Long legs (as named in the story for his height and the person who read the letter) as long as he lived. Though he had never been a good student he remembered every word of it, the letter from the dead man's son, begging the father to send his exam fees. Here, however, Ao does not portray only the 'armed man's' plight. Ironically, this armed man happens to be a member of the so-called 'national workers' who had earlier performed acts of blatant extortion on the villagers of their hard-earned cash earned by digging the first alignment for a motorable road by the BRO to their village. On that fateful day, a man was injured badly by the butt of a rifle of one of the extortionists. The man had tried to appeal to the leader to be excused from the present reckoning since he had debts to pay to the timber trader and also had to send money to his son for his exam fees. Hence, the world comes full circle. Realizing the gravity of the situation, the rest of the villagers deserted the scene leaving the young activists with the injured man, inert and bleeding profusely. No one came forward to save the lone sufferer, not even on humanitarian grounds. Ao reveals the shocking details of life and what it takes to notice the thin line between civility and terrorism per se.

Traditional World

In the story 'Death of a Hunter', Temsula delves into an intricate combination of the mythical with the modern. The hunting season was on and the hunter was oiling his much-used gun. Imchanok was a teacher in the village Lower Primary School but that identity was long been eclipsed by that of the hunter. He had received award from the government when he got rid of a rogue elephant creating havoc, devastating farmlands, homesteads and even trampled people to death. He was never perturbed by such adventures before, yet this time a sense of uneasy and discomfort filled him as

he watched the dying animal surrender to him which continued to haunt him for a long time. Then he shot a male monkey again when the pack of monkeys ate the grains of his half-way hut. It was then that he began to have unusual vehement outbursts more often than ever. Though not entirely giving up on hunting, there was a lull in his sporadic qualms about hunting. Finally the rampaging boar was shot by him at the head as it rose before him in the thick forest reputed to be haunted. But the stillness of the forest began to disturb him. His health suffered and he had nightmares. He found the boar's tooth; the aged bone washed clean by the stream, and tufts of black fur among the bones of the animal and performed a strange ritual. His wife Tangchetla plays an important part in bringing her husband back to reality from his illusive world. The mystical atmosphere created by the supernatural existence of the dead big boar changes the life of the fearless hunter, Imchanok.

Gender Construct

Women's writing from this region has emerged lately. Due to inherent restrictions imposed on them by society, male dominance, social inequality, the construct of women as being suppressed, uneducated, illiterate, not emancipated and, unprivileged, recognition has come to their way slow. Woman has always emerged the victim – 'taken' to be satisfied in her small domain of home and family- at being a wife and a mother. *Laburnum for My Head* do not shy away from such concerns, it rather emphasizes the female quotient in more than one story in the book. In the title story, Lentina was widowed after her husband passed away quietly in his sleep before any proper diagnosis could be made of his strange disease. She befriended her driver Babu who had been employed for more years than she could remember and made him her confidant. Her sacrosanct secret was an 'epiphanic sensation' to have a laburnum tree planted at her grave, one which would live on over her remains instead of a silly headstone. Lentina broke all conventions in confiding in an 'outsider' over her own sons and daughters about the spot where she wanted to be buried in the cemetery. Later, in ripe old age after bouts of illness could not deter her determination to see the laburnum for her head bloom before she breathed her last, she proceeded on her apparently routine outing that eventually turned out to be her last to see the phenomenon she had waited all her life; the sight of the luxuriant blossoms on her small laburnum tree. On reaching home, Lentina shook hands with Babu thanking and blessing him, as if in a symbolic gesture to end the bond which had bonded the two because after that day, Lentina had a self-imposed isolation for five days and retired from life, a satisfied 'recovered patriarchal woman' whose self-confidence and assertiveness undermined the qualities of women as self-effacing and being submissive.

Colonial Experience

The effects of the traces left by colonization in a post-colonial society are evident in the story of 'The Boy Who Sold an Airfield'. The fascination with 'foreign' never ends. In the story, a young tribal boy Pokenmong, who had run away from home in the

hills adjoining the state of Assam, managed a ride with the American soldiers who had come in a long line of vehicles to set up camp in the perimeter of the barely functional airfield to oversee the final evacuation of men and materials from the last allied command-post of the Indo-Burma campaign, after the Great War was over. It was his curiosity that had brought him there but gradually he realized that he felt a sense of belonging there. He went on to become a fixture in the transit camp of American soldiers. However, to create an identity of his own apart from living in the house of railway lineman, Jiten Das, Pokenmong set out to the new world because he wanted more out of his life. When it started getting dark, he did not know the way back to Jiten's house. Eventually, he settled at the camp and made himself at home doing whatever menial job he was assigned to do. After a year, his status changed when he became the commander's Man Friday. Later when the soldiers left, he took himself to be the inheritor of the abandoned camp in an almost defunct airfield. So the remnants of the foreign fighting forces loaded their pride and glory in war-weary aircraft and left the desolate camp to a bewildered youth with a sheet of paper carrying the insignia of the conquerors telling him that he was now lord and master of the vacant space and the debris that littered it. He then cunningly tricked a bunch of village idiots from the adjoining area into buying the land, the airfield. After a long deliberation, he was paid rupees five hundred for the land that never belonged to him.

Multiple Identities

Another story 'A Simple Question' deals with many issues at the same time. It reveals how money collected from every household to pay for the travel expenses of the rebel leader going to the foreign lands to plead for Naga independence from India, grew into an ugly business. The gaonburah of the village, Tekaba was a disturbed man. His sensible wife Imdongla realized the effects of the terrible pressure on her husband. She encouraged her husband and believed in speaking for herself and even for her husband, never missing a chance to utilize her good presence of mind. When all the elders of the village including her husband were dragged to the army camp on charges of giving supplies, Imdongla grabbed her husband's symbols of status; red blanket along with his red and black jacket and started for the camp. The gaonburah was nothing like the earlier traditional chieftainship system. They were appointed by the government from the major clans as their agents to help maintain order in the village and worked in tandem with the traditional village council, which was also founded on the principle of clan representation. Imdongla defied death by going to the army camp to bring back her husband home. Through an interpreter, she asked questions that kept the captain mulling for a long time. "What do you want from us?" affected him the most. It made him see the impossible situation faced by the villagers. He released Tekaba. To calm his nerves he wanted a smoke. Then he realized that Imdongla had used his box of matches to light her home grown tobacco metal pipe. The petty thievery made him realize how the coarse and illiterate village woman had managed to unsettle his military confidence by challenging the validity

of his own presence in an alien terrain. Imdongla mustered confidence because she was playing on home turf; 'the belongingness' played a huge role. As for the army captain, though he wielded power and authority, things were different on his platter, he remained the other because he could not understand or embrace the idea of cultural hybridity. Because every human being, in addition to having their own personal identity, has a sense of who they are in relation to the larger community—the nation. Imdongla's self-awareness gave her the power of self-expression. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* writes about the concept of "nation" and "nationalism," that the concept of "nation" is truly a cultural construct, a man-made artifice and thus, it is "imagined." It moves out from the center of one's family and closest friends in an ever widening ripple-like motion. The Indian state remains imaginary because its identity depends not only on its demarcated boundary but on how ethnic people like Imdongla identify themselves. It is an example of how two different people belonging to the same country have nothing to identify with each other.

Memories: Personal and Political

Ania Loomba points out in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* that Gramsci argued that the ruling classes achieve domination not by force or coercion alone, but also by creating subjects who 'willingly' submit to being ruled. The British colonizers had wanted the 'Indians' to embrace the idea of their being "Indian," albeit in a form laid out by them. Thus, for people like Sonny, in the story titled on him, his personal and national identity incorporates the traditions inherent in being a 'Naga' under the 'Indian' rule. The story is narrated by the 'sweetheart' of dream-chaser Sonny. However, he got assassinated by his fellow dreamers, a rival faction of the underground group and that gives rise to the question 'whose dream is it anyway?' Now when she had considered herself 'cured' of Sonny, she speaks in retrospect. "What neither of us had understood at that time was that Sonny was entering a twilight zone in the struggle for freedom where one could not identify the real enemy anymore because the conflict was no longer only of armed resistance against an identifiable adversary. It had now also become an ideological battlefield within the resistance movement itself, posing new dangers from fellow national workers supposedly pursuing a common goal. And today Sonny had become a victim of his own convictions when the assassins pumped bullets into a fellow fighter's bosom". When Sonny had quietly slipped from his ladylove's life into another sphere of existence, she was plunged into an abyss of self-doubt and self-recrimination for her obsessive love for a man who regarded his own nationalistic passion more than the love of a woman.

Motherhood

'Three Women' is as the title suggests, a story of three women related over generations. It begins with a prologue to the story; a young man is hovering near the doorway of the humble cottage in a village. He can hear the happy chatter of several

women who had assisted at the birth. Some of them leave after a while, greeting him with broad grins. Only three women, standing near the bed, are left. He wants to see the baby but their backs obstruct his view; he can only wait. These three women, though distinctly different, are linked through a mysterious bond that transcends mere blood. Martha begins her story at this point. She starts where she was still a small girl 'coolie' as she was called by her fellow tribal friends. She was different: her hair was curly and thick and she had lice. Ao gives minute details of village life and a village child. Medemla is the mother of Martha by adoption as Martha's mother had died in childbirth in the hospital where Medemla was working as a nurse, reason her husband did not give assent to a caesarean section for the delivery. Such simple yet complicated somehow events fill up the life of these village people. Lipoktula is the mother of Medemla but she is not Lipoktula's legitimate child. Lipoktula was raped by Merensashi, who with the passage of time becomes the father of Imsutemjen, the unfortunate love of Medemla. With the disturbing turn of events, the impossibility of marriage between Imsutemjen and Medemla surface, leaving Medemla hurt forever. She never really gets over the fact that her love remained unrequited. Medemla becomes a mother of Martha but the pleasure as well as the pain of motherhood was never her forte. Martha However grows to become a very fine young lady and is good in studies. Her mother wanted her to become a doctor but as life would have it she fell in love with Apok, and became pregnant. However, at this juncture, Medemla also questions herself over a long meditation as to why she had never felt the same way when she was with Imsutemjen: Am I abnormal or just a different kind of woman? Even Lipoktula's life comes full circle when her adopted granddaughter gives birth to a baby son. She recalls the fateful day when she was being raped by Merensashi and ponders why she had not run away the moment she understood his intentions. After the birth of the long awaited baby boy, the three of them just stood for quite some time; a strange trio, as though enacting a ritualistic affirmation of the power of mother-love to mesh the insecurity of innocence in the magic of an emotionally enlarged truth. In the epilogue, Apok is seen as reluctant to intrude in this spell because a feeling of being an intruder came to him to the sacred ceremony of motherhood, he slips out unobserved. Ao shows how gender also plays an important role in creating an identity.

Conclusion

Moral crisis is what Ao's characters in the stories face repeatedly, affecting their lives, relationships, their belongingness and their identity. She also discusses the changing trends in the tribal society caused by modernity due to new education and political system coupled with new cultural influences through different forms of life and its representations. There are multiple layers that the writer brings out about her belief in cultural identity who is an enlightened Ao Naga. With the advent of modernity, the past traditions and cultural practices are being forgotten with the dilemma facing everyone being a political one. The wish of the Naga tribe to live as a homogenous tribe faces an uncertain future. Just as Kishwar Desai observes, "You

can get into the heads of characters and enjoy the sheer liberty of self-expression", Ao indulges into her characters narrating life as it is. This kind of writing has opened up a new channel, providing not only more "essence" in the field of literature but also helping many young minds of the land brought up in more "urban," "cosmopolitan," "westernised" regions look back into their roots and construct what they have lost with time, (Gill 2009).

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