

Cultural Recovery from Folklores, Folktales and Myths: A study of select poems of TamsulaAo

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Abstract: For the people who have lost many of their cultural and historical moorings, the resurrection of old folklore through poetry might be viewed as an alternative source of history. The tribe's internal history is based on an oral tradition that is becoming more brittle with each passing generation, the poet's role as the transmitter and preserver of history assumes even more significance. The manifestation of creative thoughts and emotions of myth & memory through storytelling provides uniqueness to the tribals. This tradition of storytelling has a group solidarity for collective welfare. TamsulaAo, the emerging writer from Northeast India, seeks to articulate the wholeness of life in the face of disintegration and fragmentation through collective creativity. Her works titled *Books of Songs: Collections of poems (1988-2007)*, explores the problematics of identity that threaten their roots. Thus, this paper critically analyses the revival of a lost identity and making it relevant for the new generation. As a result, the current study attempts to have a discourse on the important part that writers play in recovering and renewing the traditional oral heritage of their people through their writings, with a focus on poetry. The paper will carefully discuss a few of TamsulaAo's poetry. An analysis of her poems reveals that she makes a strong and intentional effort to restore her people's lost history through poetry. She points out that losing the songs of her ancestors would be disastrous for the history, territory, and inherent identity of her people.

Key Words: Folklore, Folktales, Myth, Oral tradition, Cultural Identity, Story Telling.

Paper: Folklore is a vital component of each tribe, ethnic group, or traditional group. Indeed, it is a fact. In the academic setting, folklore has a specific significance. The terms "Folk" and "lore" were effectively illustrated by Alan Dundes in his book, *The Study of Folklore* (1965):

It is possible... to define both folk and lore in such a way that even the beginner can understand what folklore is. The term folk can refer to a group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is- it could be a common occupation, language or religion-but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own.

Folklore and tradition go hand in hand. According to Bascom (1953), all folklore is tradition, but not all tradition is folklore. Folklore denotes a wide-ranging viewpoint. The phrase, however, shares similarities with a number of other words, including culture, tradition, traditional cultural expressions,

indigenous expressions, and others. Folklore is essential to the identity, behaviour, way of development, and other characteristics of any person, group, or society. Bronner (2007) Many indigenous cultures want to assert their identities through their folkloric traditions. They consistently place a focus on their diverse folkloric expressions, such as folk traditions, traditional attire and ornamentation, eating and drinking customs, music, and dances, as well as traditional knowledge of biodiversity and oral literature. Additionally, they try to improve their native literature and promote the expansion of indigenous languages and dialects. It has been noted that different ethnic groups in Northeast India have built their indigenous identities on folklore.

As we've seen, tribal folktales are closely related to the myths and beliefs of the tribal communities. Folklore in different countries is influenced by a more diverse cultural base. Folktales also escape the shackles of pure ritual and magic as civilization emerges from a tribal stage and moves toward more organized and

established agrarian modes of life. Folklore has a huge impact on how ethnicity and identity are seen. Every community in the globe makes an effort to elevate its past and present in the modern era by pointing to the importance of folklore. In India, folklore plays a notable part in ethnic and identity movements, particularly in North Eastern India.

Oral stories are typically divided into three categories: myth, legend, and folktale. Legend and myth both claim to be factual, while folktales are considered as false. Greek myth, which derives from mythos, is about supernatural beings existing outside of space and time. Legend is derived from the Latin word *legenda*, which connotes recognizable characters in space and time, exceptional traits, and frequently interactions with supernatural creatures and forces. The narrative tradition of tribal folk stories is significantly more influenced by myth and folk beliefs than the non-tribal tradition. Tribal's way of life and beliefs are greatly influenced by magic. The myths detailing the birth of the world, the genesis of certain phenomena like the sun, moon, eclipse, and other natural occurrences are woven around the rituals, fertility symbols, and folklore. These myths are tightly tied to specific key phrases, chants, or incarnations. Therefore, myths are prevalent in tribal folklore. Folklore is sometimes referred to be the oral literature of a society or culture. The majority of tribal literatures have their roots in folklore, creating an unbreakable bond between the written and unwritten forms of literature.

Folktales and storytelling have always played a significant role in Naga culture. These oral narratives have, however, only recently been converted into writing form. Temsula is passionate about preserving the folklore heritage and is extremely proud of her ancestors' legacy of storytelling. Her exposure to Native American oral traditions motivated her to revitalize the Ao Naga, her own oral heritage. She spent over twelve years studying the oral heritage of the Ao. Her words are entwined with the diversity of environment, culture, and long-standing customs. *Songs That Tell* (1988), *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and

Songs from Other Life (2007) are some of her best-known poetry books. The poem by TemsulaAo extensively depicts folklore, folktales, myths, legends, and fables. These folktales cover a range of subjects. There are tiger tales, tales about humans and other animals, tales about spirits, tales about love and marriage, tales about headhunting, tales about birds, tales about creation, etc.

This land mass has existed for centuries through its legends, myths, stories, poetry, songs, dances, arts and crafts as well as through its conflicting history and moribund politics. This territory is ancient and modern, mythic and contemporary. TemsulaAo in the epigraph to her work titled *Songs from the Other life*, writes:

To All

Who can still

Touch the wind

Talk to the rain

And embrace the sun

In every rainbow. (Ao: 37)

The poet bemoans how the legends that once permeated her veins and rekindled her "life-force," such as the genesis of her people from six stones with tigers and other animals as brothers, etc. Those legends have faded from her memory. She is aware that if the younger generation doesn't preserve the oral tradition and discards it as antiquated, these rituals may be lost to history. Out of longing for the past, she recounts the tale of how the Ao Naga lost their script, which was inscribed on a hide that was eaten by a dog. The oral tradition began as they told their stories.

I am overcome by a bestial craving

To wrench the thieving guts

Out of the original dog

And consign all my stories

To the script in his ancient entrails (quoted in Das. p.94)

The poem, "A Tiger-Woman's Prayer" is based on the Ao Naga idea that humans have tigers as spirit companions. The tiger woman describes how the tiger-soul of her grandfather came to possess her. She hoped that like the others, she would be able to cross the region beyond the sun so that she could "raise a rainbow there/ Against our composite tears" (Songs from the Other Life; 21). The poem "A Tiger-Woman's Prayer" is based on the Ao Naga idea that humans have tigers as spirit companions. The tiger woman describes how the tiger-soul of her grandfather came to possess her. She hoped that like the others, she would be able to cross the region beyond the sun so that she could "raise a rainbow there/ Against our composite tears" (Songs from the Other Life: 21). The most well-known tiger folktales are presented to readers in the poem, "The Deer and the Tiger." According to the legend, the tiger asked to eat some of the deer's grazing grass. The tiger started explaining why he turned vegetarian to the deer's complete surprise. Nevertheless, despite the tiger's several justifications, the deer stayed away out of skepticism. Finally, the deer mustered the bravery to yell:

You turn-coat,

Do not encroach

On my territory

That's just enough for me (Songs from Here and There:7)

The poem "Stone-People from Lungterok" is based on folklore. The six stones discovered in Chungliyimti village in the Ao region are referred to as Lungterok. According to a fable, six stones erupted into six human beings. There were three men and three females among them.

Lungterok,

The six stones

Where the progenitors

And forebears

Of the Stone-people

Were born

Out of the womb

Of the earth (Songs That Try to Say:49)

The poet continues by describing the characteristics of the stone people, just as in folklore. They were sculptors, singers, lovers, farmers, planters, weavers, potters, and potters. They were multilingual and spoke animal and bird languages. They were also romantic individuals who were aware of the moon's and sun's moods. They worshipped unidentified spirits out of religious fervor.

Temsula states in the poem "Soul-Bird", that there is an old Ao-Naga belief that after death, the soul manifests as a bird, especially a hawk. An indication that the transition to earth's next life will go smoothly is the appearance of a hawk soon after a person's death. (Songs from the Other Life:14)

The child describes how a hawk keeps circling above the mud mound over the burial site while "emitting unearthly sounds" in the poem "Soul Bird." In order to complete the commend, the grandma says to the child:

See that keening bird in the sky?

That's your mother's soul

Saying her final good-bye (Songs from Other Life:15)

The Sangtam Naga mythology of Momola, a lovely young woman that the fish king adored, served as the inspiration for the poem, "The Other World." If he delivered them a good fish harvest, her mother would have given her to him in marriage. The fish-king promised to deliver a massive flood if the mother broke her word. Momola eventually became a large fish with a white mark on her forehead after being given in marriage to the fish king. But Momola yearned for the 'human live, love, and die', existence of her earlier days. She frequently took a trip down the bay to observe human youngsters play in order to sate her desire. But when she hears others identify her by pointing out her white forehead mark, her hopes are dashed. To stop her fish-king from starting a flood, she can do nothing except head back to the waters. (Songs from Other Life: 27-30)

The poet writes a satirical poem titled "Rumour" regarding the myth that God has passed away. Ironically, inconsequential organisms like the tiny bird and the ants are the center of attention. The poet infuses magic realism into her poetry by fusing a realistic portrayal of a subject with weird and mystical components. The combination of realism, fairy tales, myth, and imagination in this work is superb. If God is dead, the speaker inquires to a bird. It simply took off with the words "Who knows the truth anymore?" (Songs of Many Moods: 37)

The small ant, however, paid little attention to the narrator. It ran off to tell his colleagues the news while shaking his "spindly legs." The rumor "God is Death" quickly gained traction inside the ant colony. Social repercussions resulted from the ant protest procession. Everywhere was in complete chaos. Political discussions on the procession erupted, and the government, ants, and birds were roundly condemned. The small bird whispered, "Wow," in amazement at the change of events.

God is now really dead,

Or worse still

He simply does not care (Songs of Many Moods: 40)

The poem "Night of the Full Moon" describes a group of tigers congregating to honor their king, who is the biggest of them all. They present him with the trophy game they have taken as a gift. A young tiger's voice could be heard during the assembly criticizing the previous order and calling for democracy to take its place. It was decided to have a leadership election. However, a dilemma occurred when they talked about choosing a leader. The monarch himself had to be chosen as the people's representative.

If we do not elect him

Where shall we hunt?

He owns all the land! (Songs from the Other Life: 35)

The poem "When a Stone Wept" is inspired by the legend surrounding the ancestors of the

AoNagas. It is thought that large stones give birth to smaller ones, which then enlarge to larger sizes and give birth to other small stones. So, TemsulaAo tells of the Ao Naga myths. Even as she recounts them, the thought in her cannot escape empathising with certain characters and seeing them in their existential dilemma that others wouldn't notice- as in the "Nowhere Boatman" and "The Leaf-Shredder". She uses a Naga Myth about tigers, that they pay tribute to their king on each full moon night and receive his counsel. Into this hierarchical world, she introduces democracy, but wonder of wonders, they get elected the people's leader. The more things change the more they are the same, and the tiger king-leader announces:

We may have altered Our name

But Our Person remains the same.

(Book of Songs: 266)

"Blood of the Others Day" recounts Naga history, their days with their early gods and their honour codes, and the intervention of Christian missionaries who swept their land as clean of ancient gods. The Naga soul-mountain was reduced into a tiny ant-hill and their minds were wiped clean to be written on by the strangers who began scripting a new history. Some youngsters also mimic westerners:

... a mere century of negation

Proved inadequate to erase

The imprints of intrinsic identities (Book of Songs: 298)

But the new assertion of old identities comes with a price:

A new breed of cultural heroes

Articulate a different discourse

And re-designate new enemies (Book of Songs: 298)

This leads to

... death dealing shrieks of unfamiliar arms

As the throwback generation resurrects (Book of Songs: 298)

The poetry in the collection *Songs from Other Life* (2007) is primarily descriptive of the Ao Naga people's past and present cultures. This book begins with the words "History" and "augment the lore" of the "essential core" of the Ao-Naga. In practically every collection TemsulaAo has written, there is a poem on songs, the value of songs, the reasons TemsulaAo writes poetry, the reasons people listen to music, and the reasons people produce songs. This entry is no different, beginning with a poem on "The Old Story Teller."

I have lived my life believing

Story telling was my proud legacy (Book of Songs: 240)

The community is reliant on it because they can no longer write their poems because their script was eaten by a dog. She understood where the significance of her stories originated from.

Grandfather constantly warned

That forgetting the stories

Would be catastrophic

We would lose our history

Territory, and most certainly

Our intrinsic identity. (Book of Songs: xxxvi)

As a result, the poet as storyteller has "racial responsibility". But as times have evolved, her grandfather's cautions have proven to be accurate.

In conclusion, it can be seen that TemsulaAo's poetry offers a glimpse into a magnificent landscape full of lush forests, hills, valleys, rivers, and waterfalls. They discuss about their territory and its creation myths, traditions, rituals, festivals, and dances because they are entrenched in their history, their country, and their people. The presence of nature does not overshadow the violent imagery that erupt in their poetry, which is an important aspect of their poetry that shifts back and forth. Her poetry highlights the enduring value of their folklore, folktales, myths, and legends as well as the beauty of natural surroundings. Her poems can also be seen as chronicles of indigenous

people's lives. They are also potent depictions of community life that offer people a sense of their roots and connection to the past, possibly defying nation states' ethnic tendencies. She is a distinctive poet of the ethnic customs and sensibilities of Northeast India and thanks to her themes of ancestral legacy and oral tradition. The oral tradition which incorporates proverbs, oracles, myths, and folktales, is essential to the Ao Nagas' cultural existence and is firmly ingrained in their traditional way of life. The social existence of the community is preserved through sharing and recounting their cultural and religious ideas, and it is through these stories and songs that the cultural memory of the group is passed down through the generations. Thus, it symbolizes how the interventions of modernity threaten to upend their way of life and traditions while also making an attempt to reclaim indigenous histories that have been ignored. The use of oral storytelling as a structural method enables clear communication with the readers and can inspire a sense of reclaiming identity and dignity.

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