

Rethinking the Problematics of Identity in Northeast India with Special Reference to Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and *Laburnum for my Head: A Discourse of Cultural Recovery*

Meghali Gogoi*

Department of English, Gauhati University, India

Corresponding Author: Meghali Gogoi, E-mail: meghaligogoi28111993@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: December 08, 2018

Accepted: February 07, 2019

Published: March 31, 2019

Volume: 8 Issue: 2

Advance access: February 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

Northeast India incorporating seven different states with endless sovereignty movements and ethnic reformation during and after the British invasion itself problematises the notion of national identity being alienated from the mainland India. Nagaland, one of the state in Northeast India is still embattling a never ending conflict between the Indian state and the ethnocentric movements. This fluid political situation is a carryover of the colonial past. The colonial past has shaped and reshaped the cultural identities. Christianity, the legacy of the colonialisation has another dimension to cultural loss and recovery. But Temsula Ao, the emerging writer from this region seeks to articulate the wholeness of life in the face of disintegration and fragmentation through collective creativity. The manifestation of creative thoughts and emotions of myth & memory through storytelling provides uniqueness to the region. This tradition of storytelling has a group solidarity for collective welfare. Her works titled *These Hills called Home: Stories from a war zone* and *Laburnum for My Head* explores the problematics of identity those that threaten their roots. Thus, this paper critically analyses the revival of a lost identity making it relevant for the new generation.

Key words: Identity, Cultural Recovery, Memory, Ethnic, Collective Welfare

Within the larger context of India and the Indian nationalist politics, northeast India as a location incorporating seven different states itself problematises the very notion of national identity. The region with endless separatist and sovereignty movements being alienated from the mainland India demands negotiation of the politics of identification. During the British invasion and after, the entire northeastern region has undergone many phases of ethnic reformation which leads to the greater identity politics in this marginalized region. The construction of northeast as the binary 'other' in the pre and post colonial times brings a potential threat for the losing of one's identity/culture. Nagaland is one such state in this particular region which is facing such consequences ie, seeking separate identity for Naga people as they think they are treated as the other by the mainland India. During their course of struggle, they are often seen taking the recourse of violent means. On the other hand, the centre too takes violent objections to such protests. So, ultimately the innocents are victimized. Such victimization are seen cast in literature which looks difficult to control as well as incurable. So, by rethinking the problematics of identity through cultural recovery, the lost glory could be revived.

Literature, according to the French philosopher, Louise Gabriel Ambrose "is an expression of society just like

the word is the expression of a human being". This gains significance with respect to the literature from the northeastern part of India as Mishra says in the context of northeastern literature "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 a new dawn of peace would emerge out of this trial by fire." As a consequence, the region has suffered from severe identity crisis. According to Ved Prakash, "In India's northeast, insurgency is an ethno-cultural phenomenon, in the sense that perceiving their ethnic identity threatened, they seek political power to preserve it." Thus this fear of losing identity gives rise to a false sense of 'nationalism' which in the process harms the innocent people and they become victim in the human terms. Reflection of such victimization is seen in Temsula Ao. Temsula Ao, a Naga by origin, expresses fear against this threat: "the cultures of northeast 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..... 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.” Her fear is evident in her fictional work *These hills called home: stories from A war zone* as she describes about her purpose of writing these stories: “ what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life-their very humanity is assaulted and violated and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul. The thrust of her narratives is to probe how the events of that era have restructured or even revolutionized the Naga psyche. she expresses that some remain untouched by the events while others got transformed into beings almost unrecognizable even to themselves.” Thus, this type of literature settles comfortably in the ‘violence’ that entangles their region. However, beyond this text’s straightforward content, there is also another truth evident in her stories which we often forget to see over victimization in such a region. We always think it is incurable as writers like Temsula Ao too throw instances who are passively oppressed and lacking in powers of self determination through her literature. But there can be also another truth as violence cannot be neatly categorized in binaries like good and bad, or victims and perpetrators. Parag M.Sarma in his *Towards an appreciative paradigm for literatures of the NorthEast* rightly says in this context “ In the northeast the violence is no distant and remote happening from which the unwilling can insulate themselves, but an integral part of the daily lived experience that does not spare anybody.” If we go through her this particular work *These hills called home: stories from a war zone*, Temsula tells the triumph of the strong willed to continue with their lives in such an unfavorable environment and thus making a strong sense for peace and sanity. Because there are also many instances in her work where the role of such people cannot be denied in constituting their identity and belonging to the crossroads of history and thereby provides a critical context for thinking about other communities of the region. She makes a mention of re embracing the life of harmony with nature and peace. It is seen that she considers memory as an important medium to make that happen. By recapturing the roots, she tries to revive the lost history reworking cultural legacy and raise voices against the state. Thus, Temsula Ao has overturned the image of the uniform degradation of the Naga community in their struggle.

My objective is to show their structural continuities even in the changed contexts in the region through a nuanced study of some of the selective works of the popular Naga writer Temsula Ao, thus analysing the identity politics of the Naga people. On the whole, it will be an exploration of how Temsula Ao uses her literary works with a motive to revive a culture under threat of being lost forever. And how literature plays a chief role in reviving the culture that is becoming alien in its own land.

All her stories in *These Hills Called Home* has a focus on the past traumatic experiences of the Naga people and identity crisis (both collective and individual) due to globalization, false nationalism, high idealism, colonization, insurgency,

centre state rivalry. Each of her stories talk of how the characters got displaced with the conflict ravaging the homes and field of the villagers, how some lost their prime essence of the youth by being forced to join the underground bodies, how innocent girls become victims by manhandled....amidst the wars and the regulated life there are also issues that revolve around families as in ‘*The Night*’. Behind the guns and violence is the story of a young girl betrayed by a man who is a soldier who has left her with a child. In addition to this because of this her society too considers her as an outcast. So, there is a portrayal of women who are doubly oppressed. Gayatri Spivak finds the status of such woman as depressing especially when one belongs to the third world countries. She finds Indian women as silenced, stifled and subjugated because of her position as twice removed –from elite and patriarchy of her own community. But the young girl in ‘*The Night*’ who is neglected by the society takes a strong decision for a good upbringing of her children. Moreover, there are also instances which highlights that the Naga people have forgotten the fact that not violence but the use of wits and simple knowledge that bring about change and peace within the state. This can be read through the witty dialogues and actions of the women characters in the stories: In ‘*The Jungle major*’ the woman character save her husband from the hands of the soldiers through the use of her presence of mind; in ‘*The Curfew Man*’ it is the wife who helps her husband find a suitable job for himself and Apenyo in ‘*The Last Song*’ who stood her ground oblivious of the approaching soldiers and burst into her solo song as an act of open defiance without taking the help of violence. Every time their stories of exploits were recounted between friends and young ones. For example, in ‘*The Last Song*’, the old storyteller tells the young ones about the young and beautiful girl Apenyo who sang her last song so that one more Naga village begin weeping for her ravaged and ruined children. And everytime she speaks there is a peculiar glow on her face and she seems to have changed into a new self. So, memory culture is the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving its collective knowledge from one generation to the next rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity. References to the past, on the other hand reassures the member of a society of their collective identity and supply them with an awareness of their unity and singularity in time and space ie historical consciousness by creating a shared past (Assmann 1992.) Stuart hall is right in saying that cultural identity is not an essence but a positioning.

In Ao’s *Laburnum for my head*, a story titled “*The Three Women*” the author tries to present the bond of inter ethnic scape where “the three women, though distinctly different, are linked through a mysterious bond that transcends mere blood ties” in the story, Martha, a little old girl from the tea tribe community is adopted by Medemla, a Naga nurse. If we see Martha’s self description: “I am Martha and this is my story, of how I am different and not really so at the same time. When I was a little girl living with my mother and grandmother in a village in the hills, the other children used to call me “coolie” and laugh at my dark complexion....after play

I would come home and sometimes ask my grandmother why the other children called me "coolie". She says. "just ignore....they are jealous because you can run faster and throw the sticks together.I would be pacified and would forget what had happened at play". Here, Ao reflects a unique mother-daughter relationship: "Mother, I may look different from you or grandmother or from all others in the village but I feel no difference in my heart...just then Medemla says Just as you feel I am your real mother." Parag Sarma rightly says here through enacting a ritualistic affirmation of the power of mother-love,indicates the disadvantage of falling into a trap of binaries which will divert and make others interfere. Moreover, in another story in '*Laburnum for my head*' where lentina tries her best to bring harmony with nature and thereby peace.lentina who wants a laburnum tree grow on her grave instead of stone monuments unlike her husband. So the story ends with something extraordinary: "so ends the story of the undramatic life of an ordinary woman who cherished one single passionate wish that a humble laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her crown...and if you observed carefully, you will be amazed to see that in the entire terrain,there is so far,only one laburnum tree bedecked in its seasonal glory,standing tall over all the other plants,flourishing in perfect co existence,in an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality...so every may something extra ordinary." The yearly flowering of laburnum is indicative of resurgence and new life. It is a sign of hope in the existence of life. Nature's independence symbolizes one's own independence. Again there is also an instance of a twelve year old boy Pokenmong in her another story '*The boy who sold an airfield*' who manages to liberate himself from the pretensions of the colonial masters by using his own wit by selling the abandoned airfield to the villagers. Thus, he saves himself from a heavy loss imposed on him by the colonizers. After Pokenmong sold the land to the villagers, trouble started while dividing the land and starts digging up the field. One day when an official looking man appears at the village head's house, he began asking questions." He asked where is he? No one had the answer; they had not bothered to ask him where he was from or where he was going. When the official read the document he began to laugh and told the villagers that they were really and truly a bunch of idiots because the airfield had never belonged to this person who sold had it." In another story named '*A simple question*' Imdongla when she learns that her husband has been pulled off by the soldiers, she immediately goes to her husband to provide him the blanket thinking he might feel cold despite such a great risk. As soon as she spots her husband in a separate enclosure, she throws the blanket and jacket through the opening between the stakes. She was so quick that by time the captain realizes what is happening, her husband has put on the jacket and wraps himself in the blanket. After that Imdongla says to the soldiers standing there. ".look at them; are not they like your own fathers? How would you feel if your fathers were punished for acting out of fear? Fear of you Indian soldiers and fear of the mongrels of the jungle. But what affected him most was one single question that Imdongla had repeatedly asked: what do

you want from us? For the first time in his tenure in those hills, this apparently simple village woman had made him see the impossible situation faced by the villagers". Thus, this illiterate village woman manages to unsettle his military confidence by challenging the validity of his own presence in this alien terrain.

History becomes the catalyst for a peaceful present and future. But that history which is counterpositioned can only bring negative results. Temsula ao in her *These hills called home: Stories from a war zone* while referring to victimization is in a way condemns history as she portrays youths who are pitifully transferred from a good existence to a world of conflicts. History is to be understood because understanding the nostalgia for a previous history becomes a unique history and so to revive our culture. It is to be noted that that she has done this in her poetry and make the readers to claim that not all history brings rows of bloodshed. She in her poem titled "*My Hills*", the poet laments the loss of peace 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 depicts the once heaven like paradise as "happy gurgling brooks,... the seasons playing magic/on their many splendored sheen... and the hills echoed/with the wistful whispers/of autumnal leaves." However, the last part of the poem moans the plight of this region, which has lost the serenity of the Easter year. Thus, it has become synonymous with political turmoil and unrest in the region. 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.

This study reveals that temsula ao is a writer who gives voice to her community. Temsula who considers storytelling as her proud legacy plays her role as a keeper of the cultural heritage in her poem '*The old storyteller*'. She writes I have lived my life believing/story telling was my proud legacy. Thus the poet starts in an enthusiastic note the responsibility that she shoulders of keeping her tradition alive. The poet mentions that she has inherited the legacy of story telling from her grandfather. Thus the poem relates to the origin of the Ao Naga tradition. It maintains that the tribe possessed a script which was displayed on a hide for everyone to read and learn. However one day a dog accidentally swallowed the hide and the script was lost forever. Since then the people have retained the every aspect of their lives through the oral tradition (Ao). The poem makes reference to the traditional myths about creation of the tribe and the commonality of the humans. So, storytelling is related to studying history because through history we can learn the stories of how our countries began and the difficulties we went through. Without these histories, we would not be able to know who we are. Thus. Ramanujan says, "Remembering is not a mere skill to show off, it is the means of enlightenment and salvation....so amnesia is a curse, a form of alienation from one's self. Remembering is vital for a cultural survival coupled with peace and harmony".

So, Nagaland is still embattling a never ending conflict between the Indian state and the ethnocentric movements. This fluid political situation is a carryover of the colonial past. The colonial past has shaped and reshaped the cultural identities while Christianity has another dimension to cultural loss and recovery. But the emerging writers like that of Tamsula Ao seeks to articulate the wholeness of life in the face of disintegration and fragmentation. So creativity is collective and participating. Bhattacharjee says that tradition has a group solidarity for collective welfare. So, the legends and the short stories are the creative thoughts and emotions of myth & memory unique to the region.

The study reveals that Tamsula Ao is an artist who gives voice to her community. Her work reflects a deep concern for the social scenario especially those that threaten the roots. Her works are a step to revive a lost identity making it relevant for the new generation. In her words: "the northeast is so beautifully varied. It is like the beautiful hues in the rainbow. Each of the seven states in the region brings out a different flavor. I think one should do justice in portraying these various flavours through her writing. This is what I try to do with my state." Thus, in the words of Preeti Gill, "people whose history and civilization had been pushed into the margins took up the task of recreating their past and re-inventing tradition as part of the nationalist agenda of Identity assertion."

Thus, this paper gives a critical insight to interrogate the illusions of singular meaning of identity. i.e. the identity which is only based on binaries: good/bad, victims/perpetrators

which consequently gives rise to problematics of identity. The self-sufficient meaning of violence and victimization in her texts can be questioned by rethinking identity politics through myths, memories, harmony with nature & neighbours. In this way, we can reaffirm our collective cultural values without any loss. In her words in *These Hills called Home: Stories from A war Zone*:

" I hear the land cry
Over and over again
Let the dead awaken
And teach the living
How not to die."

REFERENCES

- Ao, Tamsula. *Laburnum For my head*, Penguin Group, 2009.
 Ao, Tamsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from A war zone*, Penguin group, 2006.
 Borah, Manash Pratim. *Ethnicity, Identity and Literature*, Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2013.
 Crowder, George. *Theories of Multiculturalism-An Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013
 Gill, Preeti (ed). *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*. Zubaan, 2010
 Misra, Tilottoma. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from Northeast India- Poetry and essays*. New Delhi, 2011
 Zama, Margaret ch. (ed). *Emerging Literatures from North-east India*, SAGE Publications India Ltd, 2013