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Recovering Lost Lore Through Poetry:

An Examination of Select Poems by Temsula Ao

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Abstract: The revival of traditional folklores through poetry may be considered an alternate source of history, for a people who have lost much of their cultural and historical moorings. Hence, the present paper endeavors a discourse on the significant role writers play in recovering and reviving the traditional oral lore of their people through their writings, with specific emphasis on poetry. In this regard, the paper aims a careful examination of select poems by Temsula Ao. Ao may be positioned as one of the poets who have fulfilled the dual role of poet and preserver of her people's cultural heritage. An examination of her poems makes it evident that she makes a concerted and deliberate attempt to recover the lost lore of her people through her poetry. The poet's role as the transmitter and preserver of history becomes all the more important considering the fact that her tribe's intrinsic history rests on an oral tradition, which is growing more flimsy with the progressing generations. She notes that forgetting the songs of her ancestors would be catastrophic to her people's history, territory and their "intrinsic identity."

Index Terms: Temsula Ao, Folklore, Poetry, Writings in English from Northeast India, Oral Tradition, The Old Story-Teller, Soul-Bird, Nowhere Boatman, Stone-People From Lungterok

Folklore, in common parlance, refers to the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a particular community, which are passed on through generations by word of mouth, by observation or by imitation. It encompasses the verbal, spiritual and material aspects of any culture, which exist in the form of songs, stories and beliefs. The word folklore was coined in 1846 by the English antiquary William John Thoms to replace the term popular antiquities. Several other studies and definitions affirm that folklore is the body of expressive culture, including tales, music, dance, legends, oral history, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs and customs within a particular population comprising the traditions of that culture, subculture, or group.

Folklore is an important repository of traditional knowledge for most of the tribal communities of North East India which comprises of eight States namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim. In this region, which peoples an exemplary mix of divergent races,

cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, and practices, folklore has held a central position in the dissemination of traditional wisdom, customs and beliefs, owing to the fact that most of the tribes here followed an oral tradition. This means that they did not have a written script, and hence depended on the various forms of orality, such as folklores, songs and legends, for recording and transmitting the community's tribal wisdom and knowledge from one generation to the next.

Birendranath Datta makes an observation about the importance of the oral tradition in the region by noting that it is "indeed in many ways the source of the people's literature, social customs, religion and history" (xv). Considering the important role of oral literature for the people of the region, folklore is paramount to the identity of the people of the region. Sadly, the region is at the threshold of forgetting the infinite tribal knowledge that lies with orality. Following the arrival of the western missionaries, and with them, a western system of education, much of the tribal knowledge is lost. Written scripts were eventually introduced, which replaced the oral form of instruction. In the wake of mass conversion, many of the tribe's customs, rituals and folklores were prohibited, and labeled a taboo by the western missionaries. These practices were viewed as primitive and pagan. The tribes were encouraged to adopt a more "westernized" way of life. This naturally led to the decimation of the community's ancestral knowledge and heritage, which further compounded the erosion of the community's intrinsic identity.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in a genre of literature within the gamut of Indian Writings in English, generically known as writings from North East India. Not discounting their distinctive styles and vision, it may be noted that these writers maintain their geographical and literary seclusion by remaining rooted, in theme and subject, to their native places, its traditions and experiences, past, as well as the present. Many of these writers go back to their rich literary heritage, which exist in the form of folklores, and use them as the subject of their writings. This serves as a means of reviving the dying lore of their people, while also compounding the history and the intrinsic identity of their people. According to Priyanka Kakoti, "the old storytelling tradition, which is common to all the oral cultures of indigenous people in the region, has been creatively integrated into the works of the writers of the present generation who belong to such tribes but have chosen to write in English. These writers, by moving from the oral to the written, have attempted to give permanence to the fluid narrations of oral literature". Some writers from the region who fulfill this role are Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Esther Syiem, to name only a few.

The revival of traditional folklores through poetry may be considered an alternate source of history, for a people who have lost much of their cultural and historical moorings. Hence, the present paper endeavors a discourse on the significant role writers play in recovering and reviving the traditional oral lore of their people through their writings, with specific emphasis on poetry. In this regard, the paper aims a careful examination of select poems by Temsula Ao. She may be positioned as one of the poets who have fulfilled the dual role of

poet and preserver of her people's cultural heritage; she believes that "folklore is culture and culture is folklore" (Ao, viii). Her poems are characterised by a lyrical quality and it is noteworthy that all her volumes of poetry are referred to as "Songs", perhaps an allusion to the oral tradition of her people, where songs were sung to capture, record and transmit the experiences of the people as well as to communicate the tribe's revered lore and beliefs. Naturally, this is exactly what one experiences in her "songs" and they may be regarded treasures which serve as repositories to her people's ancient history.

Temsula Ao, through her poems, becomes the transmitter and the preserver of traditional knowledge and lore. Many of her poems may be considered a lesson in traditional beliefs and customs of a people, who, swamped by influences from outside, are on the verge of completely forgetting their own cultural heritage. Thus, the fact that the poet visits and revisits her people's folklore and oral history may be viewed as a conscious and deliberate attempt made by the poet to preserve her people's vanishing history. She admits to taking on the responsibility of retelling these stories in an act of preserving them. In the poem, "The Old Story-Teller", she writes;

Grandfather constantly warned

That forgetting the stories

Would be catastrophic:

We would lose our history,

Territory, and most certainly

Our intrinsic identity

So I told stories

As my racial responsibility

To instil in the young

The art of perpetuating

Existential history and essential history

To be passed on to the next generation.

("The Old Story-Teller", 11-13)

The poet's role as the transmitter and preserver of history becomes all the more important considering the fact that her tribe's intrinsic history rests on an oral tradition, which is growing more flimsy with the progressing generations. She notes that forgetting the songs of her ancestors would be catastrophic to her people's history, territory and their "intrinsic identity".

She rues the fact that her tribe does not have a written script, through which to document and record their ancient history. In the poem, “The Old Story-Teller”, she alludes to the folklore of her tribe which explains the lore for the tribe’s lack of a written script. According to her tribe’s lore, like others, they too once had a script which was inscribed on a hide, and hung on a wall for all to see and learn. Unfortunately, one fine day, a dog comes along and eats up this hide, rendering the tribe without any script. The poet draws attention to the frailty of the tradition upon which her tribe’s history rests; she is fearful that, she, who takes on the role of the storyteller, might grow forgetful or her words may fail. She also expresses her fear that future generations might not pay heed to the stories which she attempts to recover and thus they may never know their intrinsic history. She expresses her frustrations by saying:

So when memory fails and words falter

I am overcome by a bestial craving

To wrench the thieving guts

Out of that original dog

And to consign all my stories

To the script in his ancient entrails.

(“The Old Story-Teller”, 11-13)

It may be assumed that it is owing to the fear of the loss of her people’s history, that she makes a concerted and deliberate attempt to recover the lost lore of her people through her poetry. She becomes the perfect storyteller through whom her people’s stories are sung. She retells several of her tribe’s lore in her poems. For instance, the poem “Soul-Bird” (14-15) alludes to the ancient belief of her tribe about what happens to a person’s soul after life. The footnote below the poem offers a brief explanation on the context of the poem, saying that her animist ancestors believed that when a person dies, the soul takes the form of a bird, an insect or even a caterpillar. The sighting of birds, especially hawks, is considered to be the last sighting of the loved one on earth. After the death of a person, if a hawk is seen circling above, it is considered a good omen as it signifies that the transition of the soul has been completed. In the poem, the poet alludes to this belief, as she records her memory of such a sighting after her mother’s death.

Another poem titled “Nowhere Boatman” (16-18), draws our attention to the traditional belief of the poet’s tribe about life after death. It may be worthwhile to note that even before the arrival of Christianity, the tribe had existing notions of a life after death, as well as that of a land of the dead where the souls go to after death. In the poem, Ao, alludes to the tribe’s belief that after life the soul travels by boat across a river to the land of the dead. It is believed that the souls pay in coins to the boat man who then transports the souls of the dead to their final destination. In a parallel belief, one is reminded of the Greek myth which talks about Charon, the boatman. The Greeks and the Romans also placed coins on the mouth of a dead person before

burial as they believed that this coin is then used by the soul of the dead as payment or bribe to the ferryman, known as Charon.

Ao revisits the lore of the creation myth of her people in the poem “Stone-People From Lungterok”. The word “Lungterok” in the tribe’s language means six stones. According to the lore of “Lunterok”, the first progenitors of the tribe, three men and three women, emerged out of the earth at the place called Lungterok. The six stones, representing the six progenitors, can be still found in a particular village in Nagaland, standing to bear testament to this lore. The poem is more than a retelling of the creation myth or the lore of her tribe’s origin; it also traces much of their early cultural practises and way of life;

The polyglots,

Knowledgeable

In bird’s language

And animal discourse.

The students who learned from ants

The art of carving

Heads of enemies

As trophies of war.

Stone-people,

The romantics

Who believed

The sun can sulk

The moon can hide

And the stars are not stars

But pure souls

Watching over bereaved hearts.

(49-50)

In the poem the poet gives a clear account of many of the beliefs, practises and customs of her forefathers and in doing so she further brings to light the closeness her forefathers shared with nature; her forefathers lived in perfect harmony with nature, even communicating with animals and birds in animal and bird languages. The closeness of her people to nature also throws light on the fact that her forefathers were animists who worshipped the different elements of nature; they were a people “who believed/ The sun can sulk/ The moon

can hide/ And the stars are not stars/But pure souls/ watching over bereaved hearts...The worshippers/Of unknown, unseen spirits/ Of trees and forests/ Of stones and rivers..."

Thus, a careful examination of only some of Temsula Ao's poems bears testament to the fact that she has donned the garb of her tribe's storyteller. Through her poems, she attempts to tell the story of her people's past, so that they are recorded for posterity even when, or if, her "memory fails". That she recounts and revives her people's many folklores and beliefs in her poems ensures that she fulfills the shamanic role to perfection. A history which rests on an oral tradition may appear flimsy and feeble in a modern world which relies only on the written document, but it may be safe to say that as long as poets like Temsula Ao, shoulder the responsibility of transmitting their tribe's rich and ancient lore through poetry, there is hope that all lost lore may be recovered through poetry.

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