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Harmonizing Folklore With Poetry: A Study Of Select Poems By Temsula Ao

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Abstract:

Folklore is an important repository of traditional knowledge for most of the communities of North East India. Before the arrival of western education in the region, most of the tribes followed an Oral tradition, and hence, folklore assumed significant importance as an alternate source of literature. Due to the absence of a written script, mediums such as songs, legends, myths, graphic patterns and designs, and artifacts became the transmitters of their tribe's ancient history

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the region's rich literary heritage. Several poets of North-East India, have chosen as the subject of their poetry, folk stories, songs, legends and myths of their tribes. Priyanka Kakoti observes that "These writers, by moving from the oral to the written, have attempted to give permanence to the fluid narrations of oral literature".

The present paper proposes to examine select poems by Temsula Ao to establish that a perfect symphony has been achieved through the harmonization of poetry and folklore in her poems. The paper seeks to identify the similarity between Ao's poems and the folk songs of her tribe. The paper will also discuss the poet's role as a transmitter and preserver of history as she assumes a voice similar to her tribe's ancient storytellers, upon whom rested the task of transmitting their tribe's ancient wisdom from generation to generation. Her poetry, like the ancient songs of her ancestors, serve as repositories of knowledge which teach, move and inspire the readers. The intrinsic identity of her people is thus preserved through her poems.

Index Terms – Poetry, Folklore and Literature, Poetry of North-East India, Temsula Ao.

The word *folklore*, a compound of *folk* and *lore*, was coined in 1846 by William Thoms, who contrived the term as a replacement for the contemporary terminology of "popular antiquities" or "popular literature". When Thoms first coined this term, *folk* applied only to rural, frequently poor and illiterate peasants. Over the years, the term folklore has come to refer to the body of expressive culture, including stories, songs, dance, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs and customs, graphic patterns, designs and artifacts of a particular population comprising the tradition of that culture, subculture or group (Bascom).

Folklore holds a significant position in the history of most tribes in North-East India. Before the arrival of western education, a majority of the communities and tribes of the region did not have a written script, and hence, they depended on the spoken word for the transmission their history and traditional knowledge. 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). Unfortunately, this rich heritage of folklore has been threatened by the arrival of influences outside of the region- most significantly, that of the western missionaries, who first came to the region in the 1600s, and made substantial inroads into the region by the early 19th Century (James, Woba). The missionaries introduced to the region a western system of education, as well as the Christian religion. In the wake of mass conversion, many of the tribe's customs, rituals and modes of oral folklore were prohibited, and labeled a taboo by the

western missionaries, as these practices were viewed as primitive and pagan. The tribes were encouraged to adopt a more “westernized” way of life. Tuisem Ngakang observes that “Early Christian missionaries saw everything traditional as antichrist and prohibited it, from traditional songs to hairstyle to rice beer”. As a result, a steady decimation of folklore followed. These factors, further compounded by modernization, urbanization, globalization, and the process of assimilation, further led to a loss of cultural identity for these communities.

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the region’s rich literary heritage which are rooted in the folklore of the region. The fact that several poets frequently allude to the various myths, legends, songs and tales of their tribes in their poems may be considered one of the contributing factors towards this revival of interest. Priyanka Kakoti observes that “These writers, by moving from the oral to the written, have attempted to give permanence to the fluid narrations of oral literature”. Therefore, a harmonization of folklore and poetry has been achieved due to the efforts of the poets of the region, wherein legends, myths, songs and tales of the region find permanence in the written form.

The present paper endeavors to examine this convergence of folklore and poetry, limiting the study to select poems by Temsula Ao. Ao is a renowned poet, fiction writer and ethnographer from Nagaland. References of folklore and culture of the Naga community, especially that of the Ao tribe to which she belongs, are interspersed in her poems. That these intersections of folklore and poetry, are in fact concerted and deliberate, may be confirmed by her statement, “...our persistent engagement with the ‘Oral Tradition’ bears testimony to the fact that we have not altogether abandoned the essence of who we are, even as we evolve with the dynamics of a modern, technological and ‘written’ world around us” (Ao, xi). In another instance she observes, “...forgetting the stories/ would be catastrophic; we would lose our history/ Territory, and most certainly / Our intrinsic identity” (‘The Old Story Teller’, 11-13). Identifying the fact that there is an unmistakable similarity between Ao’s poems and the folk songs of her tribe, the paper will attempt a discussion on the poet’s role as a transmitter and preserver of history. Her poetry, like the ancient songs of her ancestors, serve as repositories of knowledge which teach, move and inspire the readers. The intrinsic identity of her people is thus preserved through her poems.

Ao Naga folk songs play a pivotal role in cultural preservation and continuity as these folk songs serve as vehicles of oral history, communication and storytelling. They are integral to the cultural identity of the Ao Naga people. Ao Naga folk songs frequently impart moral lessons and social values, fostering community solidarity and common ethical values. As such, they form a notable component of the Ao Naga cultural landscape. The songs are usually rhythmic narrations of stories, experiences and history. Ao notes, “No account of the oral tradition among the Aos would be complete without a reference to its poetic form. Singing...always formed an important part of any narrative account...” (13, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*). Ao seamlessly assumes the position of her tribe’s storyteller-songstress in her poems, as she narrates and re-tells the stories of her tribe’s history, traditions and culture. Her poems have a rhythmic song-like quality, and it is noteworthy that all her volumes of poetry are titled ‘Songs’, signifying the blend and harmonization of folklore and poetry. While admitting to the enormity of assuming the role of her tribe’s story-teller, she explains why she must don this garb;

“I have lived my live believing
 Storytelling was my proud legacy.
 The ones I inherited from grandfather...
 When my time came, I told stories
 As though they ran in my blood
 Because each telling revitalized
 My life-force
 And each story reinforced
 My racial reminiscence.”
 (Ao, “The Old Story Teller”, 83-85)

In the poem, she admits that the art of storytelling is a gift that she, as a descendant of the tribe, has inherited from her forefathers. Hence, for the poet, storytelling is a recognition of and a reinforcement of her life-force; it is in this art that she finds purpose and meaning in life, and herein lies her essential identity as a member of her tribe. However, this desire to reclaim her identity transcends beyond an individual need- She believes that this is her racial responsibility:

“So I told stories
 As my racial responsibility
 To instill in the young
 The art of perpetuating
 Existential history and essential tradition
 To be passed on to the next generation”
 (Ao, “The Old Story Teller”, 83-85)

The poet notes that, at present, the people of her tribe, especially the youth, is positioned at a very delicate line, where they are at the danger of altogether abandoning their past, and their intrinsic identity. This may be the reason why Ao believes that she must respond to the call of her life-force with great and incessant urgency. She explains the current situation in the following lines;

“My own grandsons dismiss
 Our stories as ancient gibberish
 From the dark ages, outmoded
 In the present times and asks
 Who needs rambling stories
 When books will do just fine?”
 (Ao, “The Old Story Teller”, 83-85)

This perspective of the younger generation may also be viewed as Ao’s recognition of the fact that this modern outlook is one that has been instilled by her tribe’s colonisers who introduced to them, a western system of education, where they learned through the medium of books. Hence, what was earlier taught through the oral tradition, is now replaced by the written word consisting western thought. Ao indicates that the younger generation poses more faith in the written word, and hence they view folk narrations as “ancient gibberish” and “rambling stories”. Though Ao expresses disappointment and a momentary desire to relinquish her efforts at storytelling, we may conclude that she has persisted in spite of the obvious rejection, and she has in fact forged into a new reckoning to remedy this dilemma. In an ironic twist, Ao assumes the subaltern voice, and transforms her tribe’s ancient history from oral narrations to the written form, using the language of her colonisers. In this way, she ensures that her people’s ancient and collective history is recorded, read and remembered through her poems.

In the poem, ‘Stone People from Lungterok’, Ao alludes to her tribe’s origin myth. The Aos believed that the first forefathers of the tribe, three men and three women, emerged from six stones, known as *Lungterok*, which literally means six stones. Here, she traces the experiences, customs, traditions and beliefs which her forefathers followed, after having originated from *Lungterok*.

Stone-people,
 The polyglots,
 Knowledgeable
 In birds' 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
 (Ao, ‘Stone-People...’, 49-50)

These lines allude to some of the significant bygone practises of the tribe. The poet recounts her ancestor's close relationship with nature; she points out that they knew the art of communicating with the different forms of nature. Her ancestors believed that all forms of nature had life. She alludes to the numerous folk songs and stories of her tribe that interweave the sun, moon and stars in their narrative. In these tales, the different forms of nature are personified, and attributed human, or god-like qualities. The poet's tribesmen were also skilled craftsmen, especially famed for their wood-carving skills. In the poem, the poet merits this quality to the tribe's close association with nature. It is this essential closeness with nature that also explains the fact that her ancestors were once Animists, who worshipped "unknown, unseen Spirits" of the environment around them (49).

In the poem, she also makes a reference to the tribe's practise of headhunting, where the enemy's heads were usually taken as trophies of war. Her ancestors, the "stone-people", she declares, are "barbaric and balladic", "singers of songs and takers of head", and "gentle lovers and savage heroes" (49). As the tribe's modern-day storyteller, Ao recounts the customs, traditions and experiences of her ancestors through the retelling of the origin myth of the Ao tribe of Nagaland. In the poem, she traces the origins of her tribe, and how they had existed as a people since their purported inception, before this simple way of life was lost to the influences of outsiders. The poem "Stone People from Lungterok", may therefore be considered the poet's deliberate call to her people, to bear in mind their origins, because it is only by going back to one's origin's that one may seek ways to reclaim their identity.

Establishing the identity of a people begins with a comprehension of one's roots and history. However, one also needs to trace this history forward to the present-day, and recognise all the experiences endured by succeeding generations of their people. This composite reckoning enables a clear understanding of the identity crisis that is experienced by the present-day generation. Ao undertakes the endeavour of presenting a comprehensive assessment of her people's history, in her poem "Blood of Others". In the poem, she traces the history of her tribe, beginning from the "bygone days of the other life" up till the present times. She begins the poem by recalling a time before the arrival of any outside influence, when her ancestors existed in a pure state of complete harmony with nature. Henceforth, the poet takes the reader into a journey, through all the significant phases in the history of her people.

The poet begins the poem by recounting the pristine state of existence, where her ancestors existed only in tandem with nature. She observes that this state of existence was soon broken by the arrival of "a tribe of strangers". This is a clear reference to the Christian missionaries who came to the region and established a western system of schools, and introduced Christianity. She writes;

We listened in confusion
 To the new stories and too soon
 Allowed our knowledge of other days
 To be trivialized into taboo
 ...
 Schooled our minds to become
 The ideal *tabula rasa*
 On which the strange intruders
 Began scripting a new history
 (82)

In these lines, the poet traces the transformation of her people, and their identity. They once identified themselves as proud tribal heroes, but now, they have become mere mimics, grappling with foreign beliefs and customs. Whatever was familiar to them were labelled as taboo by the "outsiders"- and hence age-old customs, songs, stories were rubbished into negation. Their ancient beliefs and traditions were now replaced by a "new history"- a reference to the westernization of education, way of life, and practices. This colonial technique of engineered social domination over the tribe, led to a complete decimation of their past identity. Hence, the poet concludes that the younger generation of her tribe has now become the "perfect mimics" (82).

After the Colonizers left, Ao notes that, her people were faced with a new challenge. She delves into the political turmoil that unfolded in her State after the Country's independence. It may be briefly mentioned here that since India's independence, Nagaland has been witnessing secessionist movements demanding that Nagas "should be left alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times" (Krome). The secessionists demanded political autonomy over their land, and complete Independence from India. This began as a non-violent movement, but soon turned violent. Many of those who joined the movement had to go underground and take up arms to fight for their cause. Of this new and unfamiliar situation, Ao writes;

In the re-awakened songs and stories
 A new breed of cultural heroes
 Articulate a different discourse
 And re-designate new enemies
 ...
 In the agony of the re-birth
 Our hills and valleys reverberate
 Of death-dealing shrieks of unfamiliar arms
 (83)

The poet points out that this political turmoil which began after India's independence further deepened the crisis of identity experienced by her people. As citizens of a new country, they have been struggling to forge a new identity for themselves. Standing on a shaky past that has been weakened by their colonizers, Ao observes that her people are going through an internal and external turmoil which she recognises as the 'agony of re-birth'.

The poem "Blood of Others" may be considered as the poet's attempt to assess and document her people's history. Through this exercise, Ao traces her tribe's journey in time, and ensures that this is recorded for posterity, in her poem. She also becomes the voice of her tribe, positioning that the deep trauma of their past is the reason for the present-day generation's crisis of identity.

Through the examination of these selected poems by Temsula Ao, we may conclude that she has achieved the perfect harmonization of folklore and poetry. Like the songs of her tribe, Ao's poems achieve the dual role of delighting and teaching. Reminiscent of the ancient songs of her tribe, her poems are simple, succinct yet beautiful rhythmic narratives, which teach the readers about her tribe's ancient lore, customs and traditions. Her poems, therefore, lend permanence to the delicate, yet essential wisdom that lies in her tribe's oral tradition. By seeking a convergence of folklore and poetry, Ao awakens the consciousness of her own people, as well as that of other readers, towards the recapitulation of, and a celebration of their intrinsic and unique identity.

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