

Exploring The Presence of Folk-Myths in Select Poems of Temsula Ao

Rajlakshmi Dutta

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, B.H College, Howly

Abstract-Usually of unknown origin, myths are collective, shared and communitarian 'repository' of cultural values of a particular tradition; generally transmitted orally down the ages. It presents itself with its unquestioned authority and validity, and is now taken into consideration by various approaches to the subject from a multiplicity of approaches. Myths find a pervading presence in Northeast poetry. A harmonious blend of narratives, myths, legends, folk art and craft, ecology and tradition, Northeast poetry has co-existed parallel to cultural complexities and political turmoil. The paper would explore the purpose of folk-myths in the poetry of Temsula Ao and the functions of these myths in the complex dynamics of identity politics and counter cultural negotiations.

Key-words: myths, culture, identity, northeast poetry.

A *Glossary of Cultural Theory* defines myth as “an anonymous tale relating heroic adventures, including encounters with the supernatural, which explain the world in allegorical form and thus ratify a society's beliefs and customs.” (2003:182) While on one hand we have the centrality of Graeco-Roman mythologies, on the other we have traditional myths from Irish, American, African and Indian cultures which are affirmed and mobilised in re-making of national identities. Identity is always an ongoing process of construction which is constantly evolving and transforming by the very interaction of the global and the local. Myths inform this complex dynamics of identity politics and shape our indigenous narratives. Often symbolic, myths reflect the mental disposition of a community. Thus they are incorporated by many writers of contemporary period to (re)present the process of complex dynamics of identity politics, which in turn forms an aspect of counter cultural negotiations. Usually of unknown origin, myths are collective, shared and communitarian 'repository' of cultural values of a particular tradition; generally transmitted orally down the ages. It presents itself with its unquestioned authority and validity, and is now

taken into consideration by various approaches to the subject from a multiplicity of approaches. Myths, folklore, legends etc are collective, shared and communitarian. Therefore, they are of essentially aesthetic value to the artist. Myths are iconic of a particular indigenous group and hence possess the capacity to resist the hegemonic (mis)interpretation cum (mis)representation of the mainstream culture. Some also depict a subversive nature.

Myths are embedded with traditional knowledge of instrumental music, songs, dance, weaving, preservation, farming, medicine et.al and once lost, it is difficult to recover due to its transmission via oral tradition. Penning them down or including them in literary writings is to imprison them in aesthetic cages. Myths represents shared cultural memory which is crucial in affirming one's identity. Without a (shared) and recognizable past individuals as well as groups would fail to make sense of their present and myths form the manifestation of their collective memory. Myths come to exist through the discourses and coming to know them never remains a passive process in my opinion. Rather, it is a process of acquisition. Our present identity which is always in the state of flux contains the baggage of our past and myths form an indispensable part of identity politics. Many a times, we go back to re-trace them to assert ourselves against the backdrop of a mainstream culture. As myths are transmitted orally they are often re-shaped, contoured and coloured according to contextual needs—be it religious, social, political or ethnic needs and we end up with multiple varieties of the basic plot of the myth. Yet they are crucial as they re-address, protest, negotiate and subvert various impositions and also bears the capacity to make sense of an existing tradition. Myths thus become vital for all indigenous society as its essential foundation and would readily find mention in its artefacts including the literary writings.

Northeast India which is a colourful mosaic of myriad tribal culture and belief is a repository of folklores, folk-myths, legends, customs and the like. Writings from Northeast India consist of a plethora of themes and could be considered as genre in itself for its very own celebrated individuality and authenticity. Yet to lump the writings of Northeast into one cluster would be to do injustice to the multiple ethnicities and rule out the differences altogether. One might have the tendency to homogenise it, but every different writer from different spatial position has a different voice and vision to render. A region with more than 420 ethno-social linguistic configuration, English language only serves as a challenging medium of transmission for various writers. It simply gives them a global reach, but the origin of its uses could be traced to colonial period and missionary activities. The English language is the common thread of communication for these writers which gives them the opportunity to capture the oral tradition in words and mould them for their very own purpose. However, there are many instances in their writings which show an uneasy co-existence between their folk-religion and Christianity. In fact, Christianity has not been able to displace their folk myths and cultures as we would see later in our discussion. Rather, English as a language is constantly shaped by the very individual and, ethnic flavours of these writers thereby distancing it from the colonisers' language.

As far as poetry from the Northeast is concerned, it is not always about violence, insurgency or bloodshed. It is rooted to nature and its very own cultural heritage. Folk-myths, oral tales, legends form an integral part of Northeast poetry. Connected by hills, rivers, variety of folk art, myths, tradition and culture, the poets from the Northeast share a mytho-poetic sensibility, predominated by love for nature, myths, folklore and tribal narratives. They do not seem to concern themselves much with linguistic sophistication but are quite confident of creating their very own style, distanced from mainstream writing of India. Rather, folk-myths, rituals, legends, narratives are handled with utmost dexterity that bears the capacity to negotiate dynamics of identity politics. Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Robin Ngangom, Uddipana Goswami, Eastire Kire, Kynpham S. Nongkynrih to mention a few are poets from Northeast known for their distinct flavour and style. This paper would deal with renowned Ao Naga poet Temsula Ao and the use of

folk-myths in her poetry. She is one of the prominent voices of Northeast poetry, but to draw conclusions on Northeast poetry via reading of one poet would be injustice to this genre.

Born at Jorhat, in Assam, Temsula Ao is a poet, short-story writer and an ethnographer. She is a retired professor from NEHU, where she has taught since 1975. She received the Padma Shri in 2007 and the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 2013 for her work *Laburnum for My Head*. Her poetic volumes include *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003) and *Songs from The Other Life* (2007). With a difficult childhood ripped by several tragedies, she struggled all through to reach this prestigious position in her life. Folk-myths form an essential aspect of her poetry to give expression to her deep contemplation on identity politics, displacements and counter cultural negotiations. They even help her to connect herself with her roots and comprehend her inexplicable difficult childhood. Poems like 'Soul Bird', 'Bat Cloud' etc. reflect her struggles and self-consolation.

The concern with metamorphosis and shared memory of people via various folk myths of Ao Naga tradition is well reflected in her poem 'Soul Bird'. The reference is basically to traditional myths to compensate for the loss of identity and personal crisis. In this poem she describes the Ao-Naga folk belief that the human soul is transient and takes form of a bird or an insect to remain one with nature. Here, we do not see the Christian concept of trans-migration of the soul.

They are chanting prayers,
But I watch a lonely hawk
Soaring
Amidst the swirling blue..
The mourners depart
From this obscure bit
Of disturbed earth.

The poet negates the act of 'prayers' to watch a hawk soaring high in the sky. This poem along with 'Bat Cloud' might refer to her personal loss which she suffered after the demise of both her parents in her childhood. More than the 'prayers' which seem to be very Christian in origin, it is her faith in the myths of her tradition which help her to recover from the loss and come to terms with it. 'That's your mother's

soul/saying her final goodbye..' well explains her search for solace in myths. 'Bat Cloud' is a poem in similar line which talk separation of a daughter bat from her mother bat. The poem talks about the intervention of machines in form of 'guns on shoulders' in the organic lives of the inhabitants and how it disrupts peace and equilibrium of the region. It could be an allegorical reference to advent of colonisers, or Christianity or modern political chaos, but surely the bats who stayed happily in the cave had to pay a heavy price for it. The mother bat dies saving her daughter. In this poem too we notice references to myths.

The mother started

Praying to the cave –goddess

'Mother of all mothers, have mercy

Please save us from these creatures'

But the mother goddess could save only one of them and the mother bat sacrifices her life to save her daughter. However, the poem ends with a consoling mythical note at the end.

If on a clear day you see a little cloud

Hanging upside down

In a corner of a horizon

Be sure it is the bat-girl

Resting on her way to heaven

Remembering her mother's cry

'Fly my little girl, fly to the sky'

The above lines lighten the tension of the readers and provide them a solace.

There are other poems where she asserts the identity of her people via the use of natural imagery like trees, rivers, rocks, mountains, animals etc. and the process gains momentum when the traditional myths become the vehicle of relating her concern to her readers. In the poem 'Blood of Others' she audaciously talks about displacement and long loss of identity with the intervention of Christianity and hence invokes the mythical past to negotiate her identity and resist the hegemony of neo-colonialism manifested in Christian practices and mainstream cultures. She feels that Christianity has only distanced her people from their glorious past and it is time that they retrieve the traditional past. Myths being a part of shared memory thus serve as a tool to reinforce lost identity.

We believed that our God lived

In various forms of nature

whom we worshipped

with unquestioning faith.

...

Armed with only a book and

promises of a land called heaven.

Ao claims how it was declared 'our trees and mountains/ Rocks and Rivers were no Gods.' The poem also reflects how loss of cultural values has also lead to ecological loss and hence the present destruction of nature for material gains. Earlier people of her tradition lived in harmonious communion with nature, loved it, prayed to it and protected it. There was this this belief that mountain is alive with a 'soul' in it, but after the advent of Christianity her people were:

Stripped of all our basic certainties

We strayed from our old ways

And let our soul mountain recede

Into a tiny ant-hill.

The destruction of mountain has in turn led to destruction of Ao Naga culture. From an ecological perspective, the destruction of mountains would cause imbalance in nature which could harm her people. Myths enable her to re-assert her identity and also be the voice of her community. The voice of resilience and counter- negotiation re-create an identity that is rooted to the locality, nature and indigenous traditions. Contrasting images of vital importance like rivers, trees, stones, rivers, belly, womb etc. and mechanised objects like bomb, bleaching powder are juxtaposed to depict the crisis of her tradition and culture.

In her well known poem 'Stone-People of Lungterok', Temsula Ao uses various folk-myths and themes. It draws on from a rich repository of Ao-Naga tradition where stones are associated with the origin of their ancients—Aier and Jamir. According to a note attached to the poem, 'Lungterok' means 'Six Stones'. It refers to their myth of origin where their forefathers, three men with a companion of three women emerged from the Earth. The stones could still be seen today, and the poem is an attempt to retrace the roots, to identify herself with her own culture and re-connect with it via this myth.

The six stones...

Of the stone-people

Were born

Out of the womb

Of the earth.

In 'The Old Story Teller' Ao tells the importance of passing one's tradition to younger generations through the narratives of myths and legends to preserve one's culture. The younger generation should develop a

propensity for the folktales and play their roles in restoration and preservation of the same. In another poem called 'When a Stone Wept' Ao refers to the myth of Lungterok where she tells that the bigger stones 'give birth' to younger stones, move towards isolated places without human existence and dominance to 'procreate'.

Thus, we see that there is a pervading presence of myth in Temsula Ao's poems. There is a definite purpose behind this. Retaining the otherwise orally transmitted folklores and myths via the use of words, these myths counter the pre-conceptions of mainstream poetry of Indian English poetry regarding Northeast poetry. The myths establish and assert the identity of a particular tribe against the backdrop of cultural hegemony, neo-colonialism and violence of the region. Myths affirm oral tradition and what is lost amidst cultural colonisation is restored and recovered by the very use of it. Use of myths also has the capacity to interrogate and resist the meanings imposed on a particular culture and the above discussed poems of Temsula Ao have well reflected this idea. Most importantly myths also draw our attention to ecological destruction and the need of the hour to establish close affinity and oneness with nature as was practiced in our ancient traditions.

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