



ORAL LORE AND MULTIPLE FACETS OF NAGA EXISTENCE: A STUDY OF SELECT TEXTS FROM THE ANTHOLOGY 'THE MAINY THAT I AM : WRITINGS FROM NAGALAND'

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Abstract

Folktales and Oral culture have been the earliest forms of literature that existed. Besides being an important medium to pass down traditional beliefs, customs, practices, and knowledge, they are also significant in building a cultural identity. While usually being told by mother figures at home to children in order to teach them moral lessons, folktales have also served as an important tool for the weaker sections of society to create a counter-narrative or to challenge the dominant group. In modern times, oral culture has been revived in the arena of cultural studies and analyzed from the lens of varied theories such as Feminism and Psychoanalysis. Nagaland, a heterogeneous state in northeastern India with a multitude of tribes and languages is rich with its oral lore practiced since time immemorial. It has played an important role in the construction of Naga history as well as in rebuilding its identity despite the twin forces of globalization and modernization. This paper analyses five short stories Where the Hills Grow Houses and Storyteller by Emisenla Jamir, Cut Off by Vishu Rita Krocha, Martha's Mother by Hekali Zhimomi and The Letter by Temsula Ao from the book The Many That I Am: Writings from Nagaland edited by Anungla Zoe Longkumer and sees how the oral culture of this state has manifest within it the sum total of Naga existence. The paper aims to explore different themes such as the significance of storytelling, the ambiguous relationship between tradition and modernity, the role of Christianity, patriarchal oppression and its renegotiation, insurgency, and the role of English as a language in Naga society.

Keywords: Oral culture, Folktales, tradition, modernity, Christianity, patriarchy oppression, insurgency, naga society

Introduction

Oral tradition refers to cultural material transmitted orally from one generation to another without the aid of writing. It may take many forms: jokes, sayings, narrative poetry, songs, folktales. Nagaland, a heterogeneous state in northeastern India with a multitude of tribes and languages is rich with its oral lore that has been practiced since time immemorial. In the article My

People: Tradition and Resilience Among the Naga, Tuisem Ngakang, states - "Naga oral tradition has lived, is living, and will live in the folklore of the people. It is enshrined in the memories and hearts of the people. These tradition-bearers have kept alive the totality of our society...which have come down from the remote past of our history"-

With the advent of Christianity, brought by the Baptist American mission by the end of the

nineteenth century, the very culture of Nagaland came to be informed by this "new" religion. There have been no written records of what impact this had on the psyche of the Nagas. However, the new religion consequentially brought with it a new language and thus literature in the sense of "written" word in Nagaland has been a recent phenomenon. Murkot Ramunny notes in *The world of Nagas* "Apart from spreading the teachings of Christ, which was their primary object, the missionary initiated the Naga into the elements of education." (10).

Owing to the absence of a common language among the Nagas, the last two decades have seen a host of Naga writers like Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Nini Lungalang venturing into writing literature in English which besides summing up the Naga culture, traditions, and belief systems also reinforces the intrinsic plurality linked to it. What is interesting in the contemporary literature produced by the Naga writers is that the oral tradition continues to form its main inspiration and has played an important role in the construction of Naga history as well as rebuilding its identity. Another important aspect of literature is that while these writers may attempt to reclaim their past, they are also simultaneously cognizant of the fact that the context shapes the present and therefore the past cannot be reclaimed unproblematically. By the same token, one also finds a sense of introspection of the past and the present.

The literature therefore also historiography in talking about the inner conflicts in the state, the various challenges faced at an infrastructural level, the current affairs, and politics that otherwise find no space in the mainstream media accounts.

The Many That I am: Writings From Nagaland is a collection of short stories, poems, and visuals contributed by writers and artists from Nagaland. The various themes that are engaged with include: the significance of storytelling, the ambiguous relationship between tradition and modernity, the role of Christianity, patriarchal oppression and its renegotiation, insurgency, and the role of English as a language in Naga society. Through the analysis, the paper looks at In what

ways is the past woven into the present? How does gender multiply problematize the reclamation of the past?

Discussion

The short story "storyteller" by Emisenla Jamir follows the oral pattern of storytelling. The narrator addresses the reader and tells various stories that she knows. The narrative therefore contains nested stories and every story triggers another associational story. What is interesting is the fact that the storyteller here comes across as an elderly figure passing on the story to the reader and in turn expecting him/her to preserve it and further pass it on. The story acknowledges how people are losing their culture in modern society and the storyteller as a young girl feels afraid that she may forget the stories passed on to her too. The story blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy and weaves the past into the present. She starts the tale in the present situation and language but later transcends into the world of fantasy and the past. The reader does not register the shift until at the very last point when the storyteller states her intent.

She talks about how she as a child loved listening to stories and the reader comes to know how folktales were the only way to record histories of the Nagas, but with the coming of modernity, people are forgetting it or choosing not to remember. Forgetting these stories would mean losing their history and past. The act of handing over the pot to the storyteller by "Otsula" meaning grandmother in Ao dialect in the last section becomes a metaphor for the oral tradition that informs the Naga heritage and its past and the reader assumes that the pot is handed down to him/her to carry on the tradition.

Besides we find a subversion in the story of "Aonglemla" narrated by the storyteller as she looks at it from her own perspective. Aonglemela is a creature that is seen as something terrifying in the Ao folktales but the narrator looks in a new light, as someone who is cursed to lead a lonely life and guard the forest. She is no longer seen as a figure of terror but a victim and a nurturer.

In the short stories *Where the Hills Grow Houses* and *Cut Off* written by Emisenla Jamir and Vishu Rita Kroche respectively, we find the conflict between tradition and modernity. The protagonist in *Where the Hills Grow Houses* is a conflicted individual, being at odds with both tradition and modernity. While at one point he abhors the fact that he can no longer see the view of sunrise and the green cover from his house as he once did because of the new concrete huge building as symbolic of modernity, he at the same time does not wish to go to Dimapur which is not the capital state and less crowded compared to Kohima. This story in presenting this ambiguity within the protagonist also comments on the challenges faced by the Nagas at an infrastructural level. The story *Cut Off* sees the shift from old tradition to the new religion in a positive light. It talks about how with the advent of new religion came education and “new” language for the people. Villagers started sending their children outside Nagaland to study. The development in education brought government services and public administration in the village. It is also seen as bringing about a change in the status of women. Before Christianity, they took no part in war and headhunting but with various developments, the women found space in the society.

The *Letter* by Temsula Ao engages with the issue of insurgency. The text criticizes the insurgency groups for taking advantage of the poor villagers who earn their wages through hard work and exploiting them in the name of freedom. However, it also sensitizes the readers about the plight of some of the villagers who have no opinion but to join the insurgent groups. Most of the people join such groups because they do not have any way to earn for their family.

Martha's Mother by Hekali Zhimomi is about a mother who uses her cunning tactics to survive in a patriarchal society. She tries to get a government job for Martha by visiting the Minister in her town and bribing them with whatever she has. While the father is regarded as the head of the family in the patriarchal society, it is not the same case for Martha and her family. Martha's mother here comes across as a trickster figure of the folktales

who despite coming from the oppressed section of society tries to survive by using her cunning tricks. We also find that while patriarchy and patriarchal oppression may be an overarching factor in times past and present, however the women in Nagaland have always renegotiated patriarchy by using various ways.

Conclusion

All the five stories therefore look at different themes and struggles that the Naga people face in their day to day life. The informing oral tradition can be witnessed in all the stories in terms of the texture and registers of the Naga dialects being retained. The experience of reading these stories is akin to hearing them being narrated by an individual or various individuals. By weaving in the present with the past, they collapse the binary between the real and the fictional.

While the short stories such as *The Storyteller* may represent the link between the past and the present, they also assert that the lost culture can be brought back, if not resurrected, by holding on to the stories that form a part of the Naga culture. The oral tales are seen as having the potential to impart knowledge and wisdom. We also find gender bringing in nuances in the narration of oral tales. In the short story *Cut Off* for instance, the writer who is a woman while asserting the importance of narrating the past and knowing one's roots is also cognizant of the fact that patriarchal oppression and powerlessness of women can be seen in the folktales of the past too and therefore any revisiting of the past needs to be introspective and critical.

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