

Dynamics of the Contemporary and the Traditional in Selected Works of *Temsula Ao*

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Abstract: One of the best known writers from Nagaland, Temsula Ao, is equally fluent in presenting contemporary as well as traditional culture. In the area of traditional culture, the author has produced a significant work, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (which provides a framework that categorises different types of traditional oral narratives of the Ao). Of her four books of poems, *Songs From the Other Life* is a volume that straddles both the traditional as well as the contemporary worlds, in that the framework is drawn from oral culture but the perception and the expression is modern.

Keywords: cultural signifiers, modern ideas, traditional ideologies.

Temsula Ao, considers the continuity of the oral tradition in contemporary written works as the evolution of a 'new literature', which is found as an emerging trend in the creative writing from the North East. She says that in this kind of 'writing orality', the distant past becomes a signifier of a new sensibility, serving as a catalytic framework that helps explore the values and their relations to complex social forces and social positioning, and simultaneously, it also serves to revive ancient oral literatures. *Songs From the Other Life* resonate with contemporary or modern themes of alienation, gender, ecology and ethical values. These concerns may have been expressed in the traditional culture of the past as well through various nuances in the narratives, however the distinctiveness of the recreations lie in the way the individual and his existence is concretized, and the issues addressed take a more direct approach. The author creates an imaginative and subjective picture around the myth, placing the speaker in a realistic world, giving them individual voices and thoughts, that relates them to contemporary readers.

The Nowhere Boatman, the Tiger-woman, or the beautiful Momola who turns into a fish, of the recreated versions, are entities within the folklore tradition but not normally found expressing their personal frustration or sadness. Here they are individualized. The boatman strikes a one-sided conversation with the audience, sharing his feelings of irritation at 'prying', 'pesky' souls asking irrelevant questions about his age; he laments his plight of being 'a soul without status' and mourns his inconsequential existence as 'an ageless, nameless/indispensable anomaly... between two irreconcilable worlds.' A feature of modern narratives is the increased awareness of the self in characters. The tiger-

woman in her prayer, distances herself from 'capricious powers' who have 'un-bidden' endowed her with the burden of companion spirits or three selves of spirit, human and beast. Whereas according to cultural expectations, the tiger-woman, is a revered and feared figure who has often colluded with the powers to control the society or individuals. Here she desires to be her own 'one' self and be free, which she realizes can be possible only in the 'region/ Beyond the sun' or death. And so she desires freedom and death rather than be something else she is not. In the poem, 'The Other World', Momola resists to become 'a being like (him) the fish-king'. She speaks of her 'insoluble mind' which is 'relentless/ In contesting (my) otherness'. However, she finally surrenders to the 'fathomless void/ Of this otherworld', when she realises her alienation from the human world, which calls her 'weird'. Paul Colbey, while tracing the history of western literature, particularly its transition from the oral epic tradition to the novel genre, underlines how the oral tradition (like Homer's *Odyssey*) in a written form acquired both technical and aesthetic features of modern narratives. Having recognizable characters, use of flashbacks, different voices in the narrative, direct representation of speech of characters, are some of these features. Along with these, he found an increased awareness of the self on the part of the characters, and in their interactions, and the attempt to concretize the individual and his existence by recreating the world realistically with a great sense of spatial and temporal detailing.

Contemporary issues and values are consciously built around the new versions of the oral tradition in the *Other Life*. The author very skillfully challenges and subverts oppressive and irrational traditional practices and values, while on the other hand also critiquing modern hypocrisy. In 'Trophies' the wife of the headhunter calls the practice 'meaningless heroics' and resolves to confront his irresponsibility of courting death and failing to provide for the family while indulging in such excesses. In 'Appeasement' the woman- slave is greatfully saved from being sacrificed at the altar of *Lijaba* (Creator of the Earth), because she is identified as impure, violated by an elder of the village, a secret that surfaces only because of the fear of the deity to whom she was to be sacrificed. Ironically, her victimization is her salvation. Conversely, contemporary notions of power and authority are also questioned in these poems. 'The Night of the Full Moon' addresses issues of leadership and social ramifications in a society under transition. The tiger king manages to contain dethronement and opposition of the young upstarts by a wizardry of language. He trades Monarchy of old with Democracy of the present in a single instance of political glibness. Through this the poet critiques Democracy as just another name for the same entrenched order. The tiger king says, 'We may have altered Our name/ But our Person remains the same'. Very often the voices that confront the traditional patriarchal culture are female voices or the voices of the subaltern, the marginalized. Temsula Ao valorises the strength and resilience of the woman. In the 'Leaf-Shredder' (traditional diviner), the incident is narrated of a victimized woman who is assumed to be barren

by her husband and therefore threatened with separation. The narrator chuckles recalling 'how/ The woman bore many sons/ But for another man'. 'When a Stone Wept' is a powerful narrative of a she-stone who courts rejection by the male-stone that fathers her children, is treated insignificantly and callously by the elements- wind, rain, moon, sun-around her, but converts her pain and misfortune into a sort of victory by having full dominion over a certain space of the earth which is her own, that allows nothing to encroach and remains barren. So the author's imaginative subjectivity merges with the traditional myth of the stones at the end. The shift of focus from an established traditional myth of stones to a personalized account of the travails of a female stone shows the trajectory of the new perspective. Such a shift in focus is also found in 'Stone-People from Longterok' in another volume, *Songs that Try to Say*, where the speaker rather than dwell on the hallowed myth of origin of the tribe, questions its impact on the community, whose present has gone awry.

Traditional relationship with nature allowed the hunter to subdue and rule it. 'The Spear' and 'The Last Hunt' demands a greater level of sensitivity and empathy towards nature. The instinctive hunter is considered a 'mindless' predator, and in both poems the hunters come face to face with their preys in their full power, forcing a reversal of positions, evincing regret and fear and finding a new respect for nature. In 'Prayer of a Monolith', a negative picture of ravaged nature is presented. The victim-speaker is a massive stone who is 'dislodged from (my) moorings' and dis/re-figured to adorn the entrance to the village. To the village the monolith is a 'trophy', but to itself the stone expresses despair and ruin, 'in mockery of (my) former state'. Contemporary attitude towards nature of 'live and let live' is privileged in these poems. Man as the perpetrator of violence towards nature is sharply critiqued and victim-nature is sometimes shown to unman a man by its power and mystery (Similarly in short stories, 'The Last Hunt', 'Death of a Hunter' in *Laburnum For My Head*). The author's modern perspective drives the narrative to be focused on particular issues, and is achieved through imaginative dramatization of characters and situations. Concerning language, the speaker is insightful, expressive, analytical and ironic, requiring 'reasonable' responses of the hearers. The use of defining and categorizing words/ terms connotes the appropriating sensibility of the poet which comes from a certain level of knowledge (Unwittingly, the child-speaker in 'Soul-Bird' uses a language which is more mature and having a descriptive capacity higher than a person of that age).

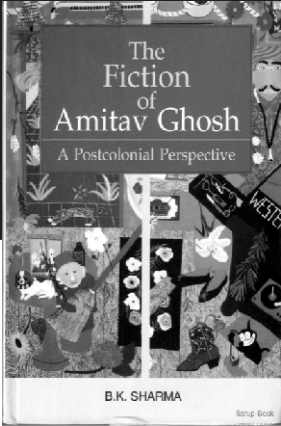
Through her renderings of traditional myths and images Temsula Ao repackages traditional culture to create a dynamic discourse between the past and the present. The reworked narratives are sites of contestation between modern ideas and traditional ideology that once defined the community. In more ways modern values and attitudes take precedence over traditional beliefs and practices in her works. And though it could be argued that much is lost in the process of writing and

rendering new forms of orality, the impact of it is a dynamic one, providing relevant cultural signifiers to address modern predicaments, where the traditional narratives are the basis upon which the discourse of the present can be continued.

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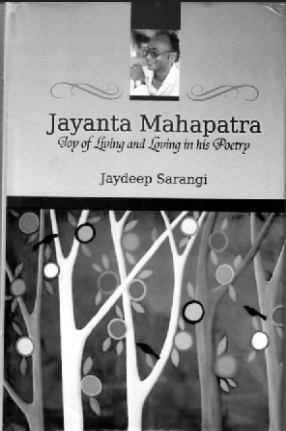
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