

Green Culture and Identity in North East Indian Tribes

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Abstract: The paper is an attempt to interrogate and explore the relationship between nature and culture, Culture and identity, ecology and identity with reference to tribes of North East India focusing mainly on Nagaland. For this a collection of short stories entitled “Laburnum for My Head” by Temusla Ao will be taken up. Certain questions are raised 1. What is the place of humans in nature? 2. Is there a need to rethink some of the basic assumptions about nature and its significations? 3. How can threats to environment be tackled unless man starts living on earth in a responsible way? How identity of tribes is affected by their culture and ecology?

Keywords: Culture, identity, ecology, tribes

Green Culture” integrates nature and culture and attempts to locate humans in the non humans. Despite antithetical positioning of these two concepts there is a very complex relationship between culture and nature. The dichotomous position of these binaries is undermined with an appeal to return to nature. The environmentalist present 'nature' as an uncontested and transcend category. If we make an attempt to define nature the naturalness of it will certainly get emphasized. Nature will be something which is 'pure' uncorrupted, unpolluted, uninhabited and untouched by human beings. We perceive any kind of human intervention as degradation in 'Edenic nature'. Hitherto the material nature we inhabit and 'nature' as a human construct or 'idea stand in contradictory positions but exploration and research about the interrelatedness between them will certainly render a new perspective to these concepts. Nature's diverse panoramas are viewed and visualized differently by all human groups and cultures and this raises a very significant question about naturalness of nature. In fact people conceive natural beauty and its havoc according to one's perception. The objects, creatures and landscapes we label as 'natural' are in fact deeply entangled with the words, images and ideas we use to describe them. As Li has said, “nature is nothing more than anthropomorphic construct”. We have many such evidences from literary scholars, anthropologists and cultural historians that 'nature' is not nearly as natural as it seems to be. This does not mean that non human world is merely figment of our imagination colored with our cultural cognition and perception. Non human world is real but influenced by our impressions to such an extent that the two can never be fully separated. As Raymond Williams says, 'the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.' If we unravel the etymological background of the word 'culture', we find that in the beginning it was used for cultivated field hence the word 'nature' and culture' shared a kind of synchrony. As later on it was associated with the cultivation of crops and as it involved human activities, it ceased to be something natural. This involvement of humans

led to distinction between two concepts and humans were held responsible for destroying this harmony between nature and culture. The paper is an attempt to interrogate and explore the relationship between nature and culture, Culture and identity, ecology and identity with reference to tribes of North East India focusing mainly on Nagaland. For this a collection of short stories entitled “Laburnum for My Head” by Temusla Ao will be taken up. Certain questions are raised 1. What is the place of humans in nature? 2. Is there a need to rethink some of the basic assumptions about nature and its significations? 3. How can threats to environment be tackled unless man starts living on earth in a responsible way? How identity of tribes is affected by their culture and ecology?

North east India, popularly known as “Eight Sisters” is rich in biodiversity and mainly populated by diverse tribal groups. Bound by four countries namely Bhutan, Bangladesh, China and Myanmar, the region has immense geo-political significance. While every other part of India is joined integrally to the mainland, the Northeast hangs on a 14 km “chicken neck” of land between Nepal and Bangladesh. State's rich diversity can be assessed by the fact that 51 forest types are found in the region. Of the 1500 endangered floral species, 800 are reported from North East India. Most of the North Eastern states have more than 60% of their area under forest cover, a minimum suggested coverage for the hill states in the country. More than two critically endangered species, three endangered species and 14 vulnerable species of birds are found here. A population survey of the state records that nearly 272 small and large tribes with separate dialects dwell in these regions. Most of these tribal communities depend on their immediate environment for their livelihood. Their firm belief in Nature, as a mother and nurturer, made them believe in sacrosanct qualities of it and revere and worship nature as Goddess. The close proximity and dependence on nature are reasons of their culture being constructed around nature. Through various rituals, rites traditions they appease destructive forces of nature and their folklores and myths sing its glorious state. These Indigenous Communities have their distinct language, culture and cultural practices. C.W.Watson pertinently writes, Culture is vaunted, celebrated.... Strongly associated emotionally and nostalgically with a distinctive way of life which despite all its deficiencies, speaks directly to an individual's sense of identity and belonging” (2). Even the Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution allows different tribes complete autonomy of preserving their practices and customary laws. These tribal groups are still leading their isolated life in underdeveloped conditions. The process of development and economic growth is very slow here. As their difficult terrain and topographical factors, economic resource base, their diverse cultures and the dependence on land and nature for sustenance necessitates an alternative model of development the one which can facilitate conservation of their natural riches and bio diversity. For a more sustainable development in congruence with environment, culture can play an important role as it can raise awareness among people about exploitation of natural resources and also about their conservation. Ecocritics explore the cultural means by which ties to natural world are produced and perpetuated. They also find out the role of such relationship in the identity formation. Whether such ties foster or impede

regional, national and transnational forms of identification.

In ancient times, these communities used to transfer their cultural norms and values such as myths, folklores, traditions, different festivals, diverse rituals and rites orally in the form of songs and stories. However with the advent of printing press, expansions of modes of transportation, advancement of technology and globalization have impacted their culture, identity and loss of orality. Changes in culture and ecology are two important factors which bring transitions and transformations in social structures and institutions at various levels. Identity is constructed by 'diverse discourses' which shape these social structures and is marked with fluidity. In this connection K. C. Baral, there are three structures that dominate the cultural space of the tribal of the Northeast. The first is state government, which represents the nation having adequate means of controlling the errant individuals; the second is represented by the militant organizations which function as parallel government and finally, the Church, which had a considerable influence on the lives in the region. These three structures have competing pulls in the process of identity formation and cultural representation. (2006: 122). These multiethnic tribal communities occupy hyphenated space of identity, they face dilemma between their nationality and ethnicity.

Temusla Ao, an academician and the writer, both in poetic expression and short stories shows an in depth understanding of ecology, environment culture and identity. She is awarded with Sahitya Academy award for the collection of stories *Laburnum for My Head*. She promotes eco consciousness by foregrounding locale and landscape, by interpreting relationship between man and nature. Most of her short stories are located in Nagaland and populated with Ao tribal characters. Because of multi ethnic societies, this part of India has always been a site for internal clashes and disputes between state army and diverse insurgent groups demanding complete autonomy and separate state. In an interview Temusla Ao opines that "we are so ethnically different-physical features, food, dress and we get treated differently." "The cultural and linguistic differences make them distinct from the main stream and are the cause of alienation. Questioning she asks, why can't we just be ourselves and still be Indian instead of blending with them." Homi Bhabh's comment on hybridity is also very significant in this context, he writes, in my writings I have been arguing against multiculturalists' notion that you can put together harmoniously any number of cultures in a pretty mosaic. You just cannot solder together different cultural traditions to produce some kind of brave new cultural totality. The current phase of economic and social history makes you aware of cultural differences not at the celebratory level of diversity but always at the point of conflict or crisis. (Huddart 127)." The stories in the collection essentially disseminate the politics of identity. Whether naga identity will be determined by the markers of state mechanism or it will be constructed by their ethnicity- these questions penetrate the idea of naga identity from the post independent era. North east Indians suffer a kind of discrimination from the main stream has been come to the fore many times but in the recent protest for killing of a North East student in Delhi, one of the placard read, 'We are confused and scared in our own

country. What shall we call ourselves? Indian? Nepalese? Chinese?

In the title story “Laburnum for my Head” Temusla Ao, appeals people to give up their pretentious and exhibitionist materialistic approach towards life and make a clarion call to return to nature. Ironically man's desire to immortalize himself is displayed in adorning their tombs with marble and granite headstone and even photographs. The clash between man and nature beautifully emerges when 'nature with its intruding growth' and 'bird's shit' spoils these man made artifacts. Conversely, Lentia, an ordinary Ao Naga tribal woman's ardent desire to decorate her burial site with yellow butterfly blossoms of Laburnum tree rejects man's incessant competition and hunger for name and fame. Temusla Ao's belongs to and is firmly rooted in her Ao Naga culture. Laburnum tree planted at the burial site of Lentina “outdid all the vainglorious specimen's erected in marble and granite (2)”. Temusla writes “Lentina burial place thus “displays nothing that man has improvised; only nature, who does not possess any script, abides there; she owns the seasons (2).” Celebrating nature and bio diversity, the writer establishes the supremacy of nature on the one hand and on the other an intimate relationship, a kind of symbiosis between nature and man.

The story “Death of Hunter” graphically narrates the encounter between “two strong willed being” one the hunter Imchanok and the other enormous and vivacious boar. Imchanok, earlier a teacher in the village was better known for his skill for hunting was assigned the duty to kill the cussed boar. His earlier two hunting experiences had made him rethink about killing of these helpless creatures of wild life. With his every kill, a part inside the hunter also seems to die. He could see tears in the beady eyes of elephant 'lying helpless divested of his menacing power of destruction' as if questioning about his equal right to exist. The hunter was perturbed by helplessness of these powerful creatures and filled with a feeling of remorse and compassion. He asked “Why did it have to be he who was placed at the centre of the eternal contest between man and animal for dominion over the land? (29).” For the tribal communities land is very valuable. In the story, the transformed Imchanok performs a tribal rite by offering a tuft of his hair to the killed animals as an act of repentance for his inhumanity. Temusla Ao displays her deep concern about diminishing of wild life, deforestation and destruction of nature which has displaced ecological equilibrium and of grave consequences if neglected. She, very explicitly, conveys the message that each individual has to contribute for the conservation of Green Earth. William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism” underlines the urgency of balance in the interaction between human and nature thus “we are violating the laws of nature, and the retribution from the biosphere will be more terrible than inflicted on humans by Gods. In ecology man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric vision and his compulsion to conquer.... Exploit every natural thing. (113) In the story “The Letter” the identity between a dead insurgent and an otherwise innocent villager responsible for his death is blurred when the letter in the pocket of the dead reveal the fact about the circumstances which forced him to engage in insurgence and violent activities. Both men are, at the core, struggling with the same issue — making ends meet. He wanted money for his son's school fees. Since 1947, the people of Nagaland have been

demanding an autonomous independent country and the problem is still not fully resolved. There are many insurgent groups who sustain themselves by extorting money from the local people and the deployment of State army personnel for the security of common people has worsened the situation because the victim of clash between these two have always been a native or common man. Hence the natives find themselves in a dilemma for their allegiance between local insurgents or state agency Young are forced to join these groups as in the story entitled "Sonny" the protagonist who 'dares the fate and tamed his passion to follow a dream joined the movement to 'set up an independent country, but was gunned down by his fellow dreamers. Identity of such people is marked with uncertainty and ambiguity because they consider their fight as a noble cause for the community but for state they are insurgents. For these tribal community is an important identity marker and they equate loss of an individual with the loss for the entire people. In another story "Three Women" Temusla Ao takes up issue of gender identity and inequality. Divided into three sections this is a story of three generation, this is about mother daughter and grand daughter relationship, their love, understanding and female bonding. Told in the first person all the three women share their history, secret and story about their exploitative position in the patriarchal society.

Temusla Ao, through her works attempts to bring the issues of Northeast and marginalized tribes at the forefront. For her, it is only sustainable symbiotic relationship with the land that is real engagement with the world. Believing in personal reciprocity, Temusla Ao affirms that we simply indulge in earth delights without giving it back something in return. Voicing the devoiced, oppressed tribal people, Temusla Ao appeals to address these issues with fresh perspective as there is an urgent need to address the issue of shrinking diversity and marginality. Instead of negotiating their multi ethnic identities, these tribes who are "internally colonised" should be given adequate cultural space to accommodate their plurality. Identities should not be seen as a threat to the national integrity instead satisfying their ethnic aspirations would help in developing a feeling of enhanced individual freedom which would then provide impetus for strengthening our national unity about their life. As Prof. Ganesh Devy said, "Realizing our ability to acquire higher consciousness means being sensitive to multi cultural, multilingual, for today and tomorrow.

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