

Interrogating Nation: A Reading of the Selected Poems of Temsula Ao and Monalisa Changkija

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Northeast poetry is a symphony of folkore, myths and various other aspects. Northeast poetry is rich in its content for the fact that it bears the cultural heritage of various tribes. “Collecting and printing the oral and written literature of one’s own community also became a part of the nationalist agenda of identity assertion” (Misra xvii). Nagaland is one such land that also tries to revive its identity and cultural formation through literature. Moreover, “the new literature that is emerging from Nagaland is not all soaked in blood. The old storytelling tradition, which is common to all cultures of indigenous people, has been creatively integrated into modern literary genres to give a distinct identity to the literature of this region” (Misra xxvi). Temsula Ao is one such poet who tries to present the Naga heritage and the oral tradition of the Nagas. Poetry, as Ao puts it to be the most challenging and satisfying genre of literature. Her poetry also shows a strong sense of resistance towards the pan-Indian identity. A separate Naga identity is something that each and every Naga longs for. This is an identity that is not synonymous with Indian identity, but it is a monolithic identity of the Naga people. Temsula Ao explores the possibility and expectation of the naga people that is related to their identity in large.

The question of identity has some kind of political affiliation in it. Through poetry the poets of Northeast try to reclaim their identity. Ao always tries to bring back the lost cultural identity through her writings. Her poetry also focuses on the issue of centre and margin. This paper is an attempt to examine how Temsula Ao's poetry responds to the idea called 'nation'. In a way, her writings can be said to be the critique of the idea of nation. She has rightly pointed out that how their position does not fit in the idea of nation. This paper also tries to explore how Ao through the medium of poetry takes a step against the hollowness of the idea called nation, which is one of the most crucial aspects of post-colonial discourse.

Though the Nagas are considered to be Indians but they do not relate themselves as Indians for the fact that neither they share common culture nor they have a common history. The idea of nation is a western concept. According to Benedict Anderson "nation is an imagined community." The idea always involves the sense of belongingness and the sense of ownership. When we talk about the Nagas in the light of nation we conclude that they are compelled to imagine themselves belonging to a particular nation. But the fact is that The Nagas were never part of India. They do not belong to India. So it is natural that they do not have that sense of belongingness to India. When identities are, forced conflict arises. This forced identity of the Nagas to be Indians compelled them to take a rigorous step.

Nationalism has certain limitations. The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (Anderson 50). It is against cosmopolitanism, internationalism. So nation is imagined because people are not acquainted with one another, but they feel that they are one in some

situations. In the minds of the people lives the image of their communion. It is a mental image and people are united through different artifacts. He said, “the creation of these artifacts towards the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of a discrete historical forces” (Anderson 48). Benedict Anderson has also mentioned about how tradition, history, print media, tombs play an important role in creating the sense of belongingness. In his words, these are part of ‘national imaginings’. He said, “No more arresting emblems of modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers” (Anderson 50). Anderson has also talked about print capitalism that also helped in spreading the nationalistic fervor. He said, “nothing made it more fruitful, than print capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (Anderson 52). Creation of imagined communities became possible because of “print capitalism”. Capitalist entrepreneurs printed their books in the vernacular , as a result of which people speaking various local dialects became able to understand each other, and a common discourse emerged. Nation offers a imposed kind of imagination to its citizen. People are made to believe that they belong to it. This is an imaginary construction but it should be noted that there is a resistance to this construction. The Nagas in no way homogenize themselves with India because their culture, history, geography are not identical to the Indians. That is the reason why they do not unite with India. Thy do not have the sense of belongingness to a country called India.

The Naga people fought for a separate identity, a separate homeland. This battle started even before India's independence. What is important is that the Naga Separatist Movement seeks to assert as Zapu Phizo puts it, that the Naga identity is separate from a pan-Indian nationalism: "Nagas are not Indian, and were never part of India. Nagaland, a British conquest could not become an Indian legacy" (Verghese 86). The poetry of Temsula Ao mainly focuses on the issue of Naga nationalism. She "depicts the anxiety of 'otherness', the necessity of the separatist tendency, the subsequent evasion of the Naga nationalism and the emergence of a 'new literature'" (Ahmed 20).

Tilottama Misra said, "Temsula Ao whose own writings display a sensitive blending of the oral and written, claims that the 'new literature, rich with indigenous flavour' that is being created by the modern storytellers and poets from the North-East, doesnot seem to have a political agenda like the postcolonial literature that is emerging in Africa and amongst the Native Americans in recent times"(Misra xvii). Temsula has rightly pointed out that the people of North East India are matured enough to accept their difference in relation to the mainstream India as a kind of uniqueness. Iralu said, "My edge of earth is called Nagaland. In the minds of its people, Nagaland is a nation." . In a way, it can be said that the alternative imagination of the Nagas as separate from India has challenged the pan-Indian identity.

Temsula Ao in her poetry offers a critique of the very idea of nation. She tries to present the limitations of nation. The idea of nation is a myth. Though it unites, it

unites by avoiding the diversities according to Anderson. Though the idea of nation tends to unite people, it also creates the idea of centre and margin. The Naga writers like Temsula Ao tries to articulate this marginality and therefore it always involves the process of negotiation between the centre and the margin.

Temsula Ao's famous poem 'Blood of Others' tries to depict how since the pre-independence era the people of Nagaland are pushed to the margins and this helps in developing the sense of cultural loss. The formation of Indian nation-state with its tacit agencies of nationalism continues to be a repressive force over the Naga way of life:

In the re-awakened songs and stories

A new breed of cultural heroes

Articulate a different discourse

And re-designate new enemies

Demanding reinstatement

Of customary identity.

Through these lines what Ao tries to suggest is that as the Nagas are pushed to the periphery because of the formation of the Indian nation state and this actually makes them more aware of their loss cultural heritage and they find a voice to articulate in front of the mainstream nation. It should be noted that "this entire

cultural process is based on and, more or less, reinforces the binaries of colonizer/colonized, centre/margin and us/them (Ahmed 25).

Naga nationalist strife was primarily driven by the notion that Nagaland is not a region to be handed down to India. This separatist tendency of the Nagas and the increasing forceful tendency of the mainstream manifest the the pitfalls of post colonial formation of nation state. The formation of nation always imposes a kind of alternative imagination in the minds of people.

It can be said that nation has certain limitations. In the process of uniting people it also ignores the diversities, it ignores the difference. Moreover, the fact is that the Nagas were colonized for the formation of a nation. The Indian Government, instead of looking after the concerns of its marginalized people empathetically, has played the role of an oppressor. The formation of nation has actually misrepresented the heterogeneous character of the region under the homogenous label. That is why it is at times deceptive. Writers like Tamsula Ao reinforces the notion that we or the people of North East should respect the difference then only we can be able to erase the marginalization. Samir Kumar Das in his book *Governing India's Northeast* said, "It is true that in scholarly circles Northeast continues to be dismissed as 'an illusive construct'- with its wide divisions and remarkable differences that refuse to give unto themselves any generic and pan-regional character..." From this quote it is evident that Nagaland has ignored the pan-Indian identity because the diversities of the region does not allow them to be a part of nation that does not consider its uniqueness.

In "Heritage", the poet expresses the irony of having to witness artifacts belonging to her tribe to be displayed in a European museum behind 'glass cages'. Caught

between opposite forces of close familiarity and stark alienation, she experiences helplessness and despair at watching her heritage symbols locked and displayed as in these lines:

They languish, these uprooted
Treasures of my heritage
Caged within imposing structures
in designated spaces (“Heritage” 1-4)

This poem comments on the exoticization of cultural artifacts that alienates them from their very source and reducing them to mere objects of display. This is a threat to their identity. The sense of being at the margin always inspires these poets to fight their alienation and embrace their diversities. Temsula Ao as a writer tries to give voice to her community. Preeti Gill has rightly pointed out that “People whose history and civilization had been pushed into the margins took up the task of recreating their past and reinventing tradition as part of the nationalist agenda of identity assertion.”

From Ao’s another poem *Eclipse*, we can be able to figure out the scenario of being at the margin:

He is the great core
Of inexhaustible power
And I
Only a mere satellite once removed

He is the burning star

I am the after glow

.....

He plays on centre-stage

I, only on the periphery.

This is the idea of nation that compelled the Naga people to decide whether they will show their allegiance to Indian state or to the Naga Nationalist movement. In this battle of allegiance who suffered most were the common Naga people.

Monalisa Changkija also tries to present the hollowness of the idea called nation. She has used her writings as a weapon against the Naga's union with India. Her poem "One of these Decades" deals with the binary of us and them on the ground of which Naga people try to seek their identity and create a kind of uniqueness. In the poem she has documented how the coming of the Indians to their virgin land has spoilt their peace and their life has become full of nightmares:

One of these decades when our dreams

Become as real as the nightmare now

We will gather around the fire

On moonlit nights as did our forefathers

Before strangers traversed across

Our strong and secure hills

And kept us chained to be tamed

To keep their date with destiny.

In the above lines, the word “strangers” refers to the Indian people who came to the soil of Nagaland so that the people of Nagaland can negotiate with India to become a part of it. Undoubtedly, this negotiation is a forced negotiation. The poet has expressed her disgust towards the process of nation making that only involves brutality and forceful acts and increases the hatred of people towards a land. “These decades” refers to the turbulent period of Nationalistic strife that set Nagaland against India

“Nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind” (Anderson 48). Partha Chatterjee In his famous book *Nation and its Fragments* has said, “not many years ago nationalism was generally considered one of Europe’s most magnificent gifts to the rest of the world. It is also not often remembered today that the two greatest wars of the twentieth century, engulfing as they did virtually every part of the globe, were brought about by Europe’s failure to manage its own ethnic nationalisms. With a certain ferocity Gellner makes a comparable point when he rules that 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist.

So, the nation operates through a process of exclusion. Nation is a social construct that exists in the mind of the people within the community. Nationalism is a toll that necessarily unifies people that are diverse. It is more than a protective mechanism than an emotional bond. Nationalism is a political bonding.

Fanon in his essay *the wretched of the earth* has said that we must fight for the human beings who have been pushed to the margins. We must remain united not to destroy but to enable. For Fanon it is necessary to look at the extreme forms of nationalism. Tagore was also particular about the dangers of narcissism. Because narcissism prevents people from seeing their own defects.

Nagaland is a land that emerges as one of the leading voices in celebrating its uniqueness to form a new identity. It is a land that shatters the so called foundation of 'homogeneity'. This is the voice of a land that tries to create a name out of its own region, that tries to question the narcissistic attitude of nationalism. Nagaland is not the land rooted in insurgency, bloodshed, but it is the land that makes the whole region realized how to fight the oppressive power of nationalism that threatens their identity by marginalizing them. "The strife for a separate Naga homeland is only 'imaginary' and the Naga nationalist feeling has its reference and signification in relation to the Indian nation-state and its governance. What emerges from such a position is turning of boundaries and limits into the *in between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated" (Ahmed 28).

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