

Tracing the Aspects of Postmillennial Indian Fiction: A Study of *Laburnum for My Head* by Temsula Ao

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Abstract

The experience of the tribes can never be labelled under one umbrella. It varies between every region and country. G.N. Devy in his *Introduction to Indigeneity: Culture and Representation* states that tribes are "recognized as "Aborigines" in Australia, as Maori in New Zealand, as "First Nations" in Canada, as "Indigenous" in the United States, as "Janajatis" in India...as "Adivasis" in the terminology of Asian Activists" (XI). The names and terms alone not vary but each tribe as mentioned by the anthropologists has unique practices, culture and belief. For all these tribes, oral literature is the mother of all forms of literature. However, in the modern era, the survival of tribes is possible only with their written expression which is mandatory to sustain with the mainstream literature. This article aims to trace the text *Laburnum for my Head* as a postmillennial Indian fiction that presents the transformation of tribal literature from oral to written form addressing their contemporary issues. The form and content of the tribal literature has varied according to the context of the modern era. These issues addressed by Temsula Ao also covers the subaltern aspects like the role of tribal women and the portrayal of tribes as

Naxals in the North East India. This text by various means serves as an appropriate example for a postmillennial Indian fiction.

Keywords: Northeast Literature, Tribal Issues, Story-Telling, Contemporary Issues Among The Naga Tribes, Post Millennial Fiction.

Introduction to the Author

Temsula Ao (25 Oct 1945- 9 Oct, 2022) is an Indian poet, fiction writer and an ethnographer. She served as a professor of English at North Eastern Hill University from where she retired later. She has also served as the director of the North East Zone Culture Center between 1992 and 1997. She has won Sahitya Akademi Award for *Laburnum for my Head*. Her works have been translated into Assamese, Bengali, French, German, Hindi and Kannada.

Introduction to the Text

Her collection of stories *Laburnum for my Head* has multiple themes varying from feminist themes, political issues prevailing in North East, struggle for freedom and search of inner self etc. A gamut of emotion is captured in this collection of short stories. Sometimes her stories give us heart-rending experience and at times it is witty filled with irony. However, her stories definitely capture the image of North East women and the men who are involved in political issues. The society of the tribes caught in-between the Government and the underground brothers are clearly represented in her short stories. The text was published in the year 2009, 30th October.

Introduction to Post millennial Indian Fiction

All the contemporary Indian literature that emerged after the year 2000 are labelled as post millennial Indian fiction. This genre is supposed to include the wide range of themes, style, encompassing the multiple issues and evolving aspects in Indian society. Some of the important

aspects covered are political and social issues which happened in the contemporary era, female-centered narratives, complexities of urban life, graphic novels and sports-based fiction etc.

Laburnum for my Head covers the female centered narratives, and political scenario in the North East India. Even one could observe the transformation in the form of tribal literature by examining her works.

Initially, this article would examine the text of Temsula Ao for her skillful usage of storytelling art followed by the transformation of themes in Tribal literature focusing more on the representation of women in her short stories.

Art of Storytelling

Story telling runs in veins and bloods of all the tribal generations. One can see the art of story-telling in the context of Native American, Australian Aborigines and the First Nation people of Canada etc. It seems to be a common phenomenon for all the tribes in the universe as they have to preserve their tradition only through story telling. Oral tradition strongly had its foundation in the power of words. Once the word uttered cannot be taken back. The traditional story telling pattern in Naga tribes is oral which includes myth, folklore or at times combined with music and dance. In the modern world, if the tribal culture has to survive, tribal stories in written form becomes indispensable. It has to imbibe different genres catering to the contemporary style blended with tribal issues. In India such kind of written tribal literature is necessary as the written languages alone are provided with due recognition. In fact, after the independence when the states were divided based on languages, only the languages in written form got their due province.

Temsula Ao work stands as a testimony for powerful storytelling though it is expressed in the form of written style. Her collection of short stories with the title *Laburnum for my Head* begins with the following epigraph that strongly expresses the power of story. To quote,

Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard-stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination; stories that are jokes, and sometimes prayers; and those that are not always a figment of the mind but are, at times, confessions. Because stories live in every heart, some get told, like the ones on these pages...

She herself declares the stories in these collections as 'told' and not rather 'written'. She becomes the story teller and the readers become the listener. Written words transform into an abstract oral form.

Ao's Skillful Story-Telling and the Effective use of Words

Picturesque Representation

Ao's skillful narration is quite explicit through picturesque representations. Words and sentences are structured in a way where the scene unveils before the eyes of the readers. To quote,

And if you can tear your eyes away from the display and survey the rest of the ground, you will notice that in the entire expanse, there is not a single stone monument...Hibiscus, gardenia, bottle-brush, camellia, oleander and croton bushes of all hues comprise the variety of flowering plants, and at one or two spots you can see some jacaranda trees trying to keep up with the others. A low banyan and a few Ashoka trees standing on the far edges also seem to be doing quite well. (20)

Even the representations of seasons through the changes in the laburnum tree is highly classic.

To quote,

It is resplendent in May; by summer-end the stalks holding its yellow blossoms turn into brown pods; by winter it begins to look scraggly and shorn. Springtime brings back pale green shoots and by may it is wearing its yellow wreaths again, to out do all the vainglorious specimens erected in marble and granite. (2)

In the above description one could see the ideology promoted by Cleanth Brooks in “The Language of Paradox”. According to him, “Paradox is a vital element of poetry and a key to understanding its meaning”. However, one could observe that in the above given passage which is in the form of prose, the usage of paradox is evident which effectively forms a pattern of critical interpretation. One should read the below lines carefully,

The headstones in the old cemetery bear mute testimony to duties performed by willing and unwilling offspring and relatives. (2)	The laburnum tree on the other hand is alive and ever unchanging in its seasonal cycles. (2)
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The beauty of the laburnum bush has always exhibit annual show with its yellow splendour in drooping branches. According to the author, nature possess the script of season through which pantomime of beauty and baldness is written all over the tree. The laburnum tree standing on the graveyard spreads over the “remains of the assorted dead” (2). Here too one can understand the play of paradox. The life of the dead is classified under the demarcation of **rich and poor, young and old, mourned and unmourned**. The life of the entire mankind could be stipulated within this given paradox.

In another short story “Death of a Hunter”, the emotions within the hunter after killing a wild boar and spotting its tooth, and the aged bone washed clean by the stream, shining like

ivory could be clearly noted in the following lines. The difference in turmoil and tension within and outer self is expressed by the author as “**Outwardly** he behaved as if nothing extraordinary had happened; but **inwardly** he began to question the failure of expert trekkers to locate the carcass of such a big animal which had not strayed far from where he was shot” (39). One could see the paradox in his attitude of considering himself as a great hunter. To quote, “Some days he would sit by himself and re-live the life of Imchanok the hunter and his earlier **sense of pride** about his **skill and reputation as a famous hunter**, would be **replaced by shame and regret**” (39)

The purpose of analyzing Ao’s *Laburnum for my Head* is not to express our grievance or celebrate their culture but to bring out her skillful story telling technique through which the readers (audience) can envision the story and further one could mirror the life of North eastern people. In many stories she has made a special mention about Nagas while a few did not specifically use any tribal names. However, all the geographical, social and political description gives a holistic approach to the North eastern states and their people.

Transformation in the Themes of Tribal Literature

Tribal literature in general is defined as a literary canon which encompasses the literary works produced by and on the indigenous/tribal communities. Tribal literature in a way closely shares the bond with subaltern studies as this study exclusively examines the perspective of voiceless people. This voiceless people who are socially, politically and economically marginalized often challenges dominant mainstream narratives. This chosen text for the study challenges both the traditional pattern expected from the tribal literature and at the same time questions the portrayal of tribes as Naxals in North East India.

Currently surpassing the myths and folk, tales in tribal literature has multiple roles to function. Her collection of stories has multiple themes varying from feminist themes, political issues prevailing in North East, struggle for freedom, and search of inner self etc. A gamut of emotion is captured in this collection of short stories. Sometimes her stories give us heart-rending experience and at times it is witty filled with irony. However, her stories definitely capture the image of North East women and men who are involved in the changing political trends. The society caught in-between the Government and the underground brothers is clearly represented in her stories.

In this collection a short story titled, “Laburnum for my Head”, exhibits the political, social issues, identity crisis and the turmoil/conflict within oneself and the position of female in tribal society etc. Ao did not fail to present the modern tribal life through her work *Laburnum for my Head*. Themes in the text vary like eco-feminism, community and identity, gender issues and transgression of hope etc. The mainstream literature gives a ghostly appearance to the Naxals. In contrary Laburnum for my Head presents a common man face and a human quality to the Naxals. She even avoids the term ‘Naxals’ and call them as ‘underground government’ and addresses them as underground brothers. The story titled ‘The Letter’ and ‘Sonny’ stands as a testimony for the human life of the underground brothers filled with suffering.

Another short story titled “A Simple Question” as stated by Kamal Deep Kaur in a review “speaks volumes of the fear and exasperation that has permeated their lives” (Kaur Kamaldeep). The question “what do you want from us” raised by the Naga woman to get back her husband from the security force strikes the key note of the story “A Simple Question”. Three short stories titled “The Letter”, “Three Women”, and “A Simple Question” deals with the

current political turmoil and the tug of war between the mainstream politicians and the underground brothers from the perspective of women.

Representation of Tribal Women in *Laburnum for my Head*:

Three short stories in this collection showcases tribal women from different perspective. They can nevertheless be classified under any feminist movement as their life experience, demands, expectations are entirely different. “Laburnum for my Head”, “Three women”, and “A Simple question” showcases a strong facet of women.

To begin with “Laburnum for my Head” short story, arises the question whether the character of Lentina can be labelled under Tribal feminism. The main goal of Tribal Feminism is to protect the human rights, and land rights of tribal women and their communities. It also aims to achieve equity in public spheres and demands equal acknowledgement in personal spaces. Some of the challenges encountered by tribal feminist are the problems imposed by patriarchy and double marginalization. However, if one observes carefully, it is evident that patriarchy and double marginalization has arouse due to the influence of colonization and post colonization effect.

Catering to the above aspects, it could be vitally proved that the character of Lentina can be studied in the framework of Tribal feminism. In this short story, she thinks about buying a land for her graveyard devoid of cement and block structures. In contrary, she loves to see the blooming of laburnum tree even before her death which could serve as a resting place for her after the demise. However, her desire for laburnum flower which is yellow in colour is also noteworthy. Usually, the colour of pink is associated with female preference but in case of Lentina, she has a unique choice. May be her choice of flower can be considered as a unique aspect of Tribal Feminism.

She is very well aware that her choice to buy a land to serve as her graveyard will be considered as weird. Therefore, she wants to possess the land for her cemetery stealthily without the knowledge of her family members. She seeks the help of her driver both to purchase the land and to plant and nourish the laburnum sapling. She is very keen to fulfill her desire and successfully achieves it too. The condition that she lays to the municipal people for procuring the piece of land from her for the extension of cemetery presents her tenacity. The conditions are as follow,

1. The new plot of land could be dedicated as the new cemetery and would be available to all on fulfilling the condition that only flowering trees and not headstones would be erected on the gravesites.
2. Lentina, as the donor, should be the first to choose a plot for herself.
3. The new plot of land could be dedicated as the new cemetery. Plots would be designated by numbers only and records of names against plot numbers would be maintained in the Committee Register.
4. The terms were to be widely publicized and the Town Committee would ensure that they were adhered to strictly. (12)

Another story “Three women” narrates the history of a grandmother, a mother and a daughter namely Medemla, Lipoktula and Martha. Martha is simply abandoned by her biological father. The first reason was that she is born as a girl and added to it, she had a dark complexion. Lipoktula who works as a nurse in the hospital adopts her after great struggle. She is not entrusted with adoption for the reason of being single. However, Martha enters into the life of Lipoktula through adoption. Lipoktula’s failure to get married to the boy whom she loved is directly related to her mother. She is totally unaware about this. Medemla at all costs manages to

stop her daughter's wedding as Lipoktula is born for the groom's father himself. Medemla wants to save her daughter from the sin of incest. She becomes the reason for her daughter's spinster state. The life of these three women amidst all turmoil captures the essence of the story.

In the short story, "A Simple Question", Imdongla a barely literate woman is presented as a worldly-wise woman. She has solutions for all the problems. She has a quick wit in saving people. The suffering of the Nagas in-between the Indian state and the underground government is clearly portrayed in the below paragraph,

On the one hand they were held responsible by the government if any young men from their villages were reported to have joined the rebel forces; on the other, the underground forces ordered them to identify young men representing each clan to join their army, failing which they threatened to burn down the village granaries. (82)

One could witness Imdongla's bravery and sharp wit when a few problems arose. When her spouse was taken into custody by the army, she daringly questions the army officer that how can he arrest a man of his father's age. Above all she clearly mentions the reason for their act. They are merely acting out of fear. They are caught in-between the fear of Indian soldiers and the fear of mongrels of the jungle. Through her statements, the army officer was able to understand the impossible situation faced by the villagers. He orders to release Tekaba, husband of Imdongla and sends him with her. The empowering face of Tribal women is presented through the character of Imdongla.

Conclusion:

To conclude, *Laburnum For my Head* stands as a unique example of post-millennial fiction which has skillfully incorporated the technique of story-telling in modern ways combining the contemporary literary theory form. This work also highlights the transformation

in themes of tribal literature, moving beyond the traditional folk and myths. It addresses modern day issues, socio-political struggle and the resistance of the tribal communities. One another prominent feature of the text is the powerful representation of tribal women characters. The above discussed women characters break the conventional portrayals of tribal women. They are presented as women with strong resistance skills, inclusive of multifaceted quality challenging the stereotypes. The author Temsula Ao has provided a fresh perspective on the women characters encompassing the reality of tribal affairs. The text in the post-millennial era celebrates the diversity and relevance of tribal literature in contemporary era. The ongoing transformation in the tribal communities is given due acknowledgement. This collection of short stories could be considered as a melting pot of skillful story-telling, contemporary themes and strong female characters. It leaves a lasting impression affirming the vitality and significance of tribal voices in the literary landscape.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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