

Reading Select Northeast Poetry in Light of Creation Mythology, Orality and Identity

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Abstract

Creation myth is a figurative story or account that shows how the universe, earth and humanity first came into being. These accounts are not exact accounts of any actual events but they are perceived to be true at a symbolic level by particular communities. These myths often begin with the theme of birth, conveying to specific cultures where they come from. Therefore, a cosmogonic or creation myth is one of the first representations of a culture understanding itself and its identity. Creation myths are part of oral traditions and hence, they are available in various versions. Orality is a significant device to understand these myths, the origin vis a vis identity of the native tribes of Northeast India. These myths that are rooted in the oral traditions are crucial in reclaiming the identity of the tribes of this region that underwent a significant rupture during the British colonial times. This paper attempts to read the poetry of four prominent women poets from Northeast India, Temsula Ao, Malsawmi Zacob, Esther Syiem and Nitoo Das and explore how they regain and rediscover the self and identity of their indigenous tribes, i.e. Ao, Mizo, Khasi and Assamese respectively, through the appropriation of myths and folktales that are part of the oral traditions. These poets are seen carrying forward the oral traditions through their poetry and thereby, guarding their ethnic identities and the ancient oral traditions from complete erasure.

Keywords: Creation myth; Northeast poetry; Orality; Origin; Root.

Introduction

The territory called the Northeast of India is constituted by the amalgamation of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. This zone is home to various ethnic tribes such as Khasi, Jaintia, Adi, Angami, Kuki, Mizo,

Bodo, Garo et al. These tribes are heterogeneous in terms of their identity as they have different languages, food habits, cultures, and traditions and they belong to different upland and lowland ethnic communities. Thus, unlike a region defined in terms of monolithic identity, there are many sub-identities within the region itself. The entire area comprising these eight states is linked to the rest of India only through a narrow strip of land known as the Siliguri corridor or the 'chicken neck'. It stands "between Bangladesh and Nepal, while the rest are international boundaries bordering Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar (Burma) and Nepal. Most of the region used to be once part of the larger 'undivided' Assam or the Assam province" (Pou 226).

As Samir Das states, this entire region appears to be one of the most 'diverse' and 'heterogeneous' regions in the whole of India when viewed from within but "viewed from outside, it looks both homogeneous and distinct from the mainland" (2). This suggests that a kind of identity is forced on this region whereby it is viewed as an outsider by the mainstream Indian media and the populace. Moreover, a sort of binary is established between the Northeast and mainland India whereby the mainland is seen as the Centre and the Northeast is seen as the periphery. In geographical terms, the periphery is viewed to be the less developed part of a region that is located at the edge, away from the developed and more sophisticated Centre. This sort of reductionist view has, in a way essentialised the use of the term 'Northeast' in academic, socio-political, anthropological and literary discourses at large. Such discourses view the region as lawless, 'periphery' to 'civilization' and situated in 'nature' as against 'culture.' Such discourses are influenced by the ideas of European Enlightenment and the ideologies of imperialism that legitimized 'conquest and governance of the region' (Dzuvichu and Baruah 3) and in the process defined the region as a periphery.

The very notion of the Northeast as a margin, situated at the edge of the British Imperium took shape from the imperial metropolises of London, Calcutta and Delhi. Unfortunately, the greater part of the country is still ignorant of the multi-racial arrangement and cultural heterogeneity of the Northeast and it has contributed further to fracturing the ties between the majoritarian India and the Northeast. It was only during the mid-1990s, following the launch of India's vaunted Look East Policy that this region received some constructive consideration. India wanted to build a relationship with South East Asian countries and it was impossible without the collaboration of the Northeastern states. Therefore, the Centre tried to make an impression on the region by bringing economic development for

it because as Veio K. B Pou says, it had become the 'gateway to Asia' (226). The Indian government initiated its policies of 'development', whereby it took up the task of homogenizing the land and populace of the remote periphery into the national space to project a unified country. These policies of 'development' that sought to transform the 'primitive' and 'backward' societies of the region frequently relied on colonial frameworks of modernization and it led to the emergence of national identities but it did further alienate the region. This alienation came from the fact that the entire Northeast region is unique and distinct from the population of mainstream India in terms of ethnicity, culture, food habits, languages and physical features. The tribal communities from these regions are deeply attached to their oral traditions and culture as it is their root and identity and they feel a sense of threat when the dominant culture tries to usurp its unique culture and identity and replace it with the "majoritarian culture, which is largely Hindu in nature" (Pou 242).

Identity and Oral History

Malsawmi Jacob, one of the foremost Mizo writers writing in English, talks about her (Mizo) ethnic identity and cultural origins in the poem titled "Identity" from the section called Roots from her poetry collection *Four Gardens and Other Poems* (2017). She writes that the "minor" hill tribe she belongs to, is being dubbed as "subaltern" by the "majoritarian" cultures of the plains. However, she takes immense pride in her oral roots that is enriched with "tales and legends" which shape the "collective conscious" of her tribe.

To assimilate the Northeast with the mainstream in the post-independence times, the Centre adopted aggressive policies such as the application of Hindi in Northeast Frontier Agency, abbreviated as NEFA, which is now known as Arunachal Pradesh and "it went against the so-called Nehru Plan of trusting the natural genius of the people" (Misra 220). India's policy even went "against the preceding British policy of non-interference towards the hill people of the frontier region," (Misra 217-218) which even the mighty Ahom kings of Assam sincerely adhered to when they were part of the Assam province. Several militant outfits have come up as a result of this interference. They are pushing for independence of their land and indigenous identity from the Central government while the latter carries on its counter-insurgency operations to combat such acts of militant severity. In the words of Ved Prakash, "In India's North-East, insurgency is an ethno-cultural phenomenon, in the sense that perceiving their ethnic identity threatened, they seek political power to preserve it..." (33).

Rather than taking note of the interests of the marginalized people empathetically, “the Indian Government has played the role of an oppressor so far through its repressive policies and draconian acts such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act that has further aggravated the alienation of the crisis-ridden region” (34). Nevertheless, even after so much of denial and deprivation, the only thing that seems to catch the ‘nation’s interest’ about this region concerns with “insurgency, ethnic problems, smuggling, drugs, underdeveloped infrastructure and inaccessible geography” (Pou 226). Such nullifying perceptions are constructed to refer to the region due to people’s ignorance which again follows from the ill representation or lack of representation of its history and culture in the educational curriculum. One of the major ways by which this sort of reductionist labelling can be evaded is when one takes note of the multilingual, multi-ethnic, pluralistic heritage of literature and cultures from the Northeast.

The popular Assamese oral folktale “Tejimola” has been part of the Assamese psyche since antiquity. It is about a desolate young girl tormented by her stepmother and just like this story, there has been this political allegory in Assamese imagination that since Assam joined the Indian Union in 1950, the state and the entire Northeast region, has received a step-mother like treatment from the Indian Union. The poet Nitoo Das appropriates this folktale while constructing a resilient identity of an Assamese girl in the face of betrayal. While Tejimola is a silent victim of her step-mother’s torture in the original folktale, in her poem “Tejimola” (2011), she stands defiant in the face of destruction as she protests before the world and announces that she has been victimized (‘clamours out loud to the crowd’). It is her way of survival as Das registers in her poetic retelling, “Tejimola”.

There are more than two hundred languages in Northeast India and many of these languages were unscripted and they were handed down orally. It cannot be denied that languages with only oral status are the major conveyors of culture and the history of the entire Northeast India is rooted in oral folk cultures. The living tradition of folklore reflects the relationships of man with nature. For these groups of indigenous people of the Northeast, preserving their oral languages and literature becomes a part of asserting their identity. The oral traditions of these communities incorporate within themselves, the entire way of life of the people by preserving its knowledge system and then handing it down to subsequent generations through modes of tales, melodies and oral instructions. These tales or melodies that enrich the oral tradition are available as myths and legends that carry the historical and cultural origins of a group of people. However, owing to modernization and rapid changes in the socio-political spheres of life, these myths and legends that make up the

rich oral traditions, on the whole, undergo negligence for a very long time, and many times they are lost. But of late, there has been a resurgence to recover and reinstate these lost oral traditions and one such foremost exponent of oral traditions is poet Temsula Ao, who recounted several Naga folktales in her poetry collection *Songs from the Other Life* (2007) by intermingling folk elements with creative imagination. As seen in 'The Old Story Teller', she believes that she inherited storytelling as a legacy from her ancestors where each story deepens her racial roots. It is this legacy of storytelling that is at the core of any oral tradition and she is desperate to tell these stories as these stories are an intrinsic part of her Naga identity. Hence, she insists that telling stories is the 'responsibility' of her race because only through stories, myths and legends, cultural identities can be preserved and transmitted to the subsequent generations. She writes in the poem "The Oral Story Teller" that her grandfather constantly warned her against the "catastrophic" dangers of "forgetting these stories" as it will lead to the loss of their "history, territory" and their "intrinsic identity". So she considered storytelling as her "racial responsibility" because that is the only way to preserve and pass on the history and culture of their race to the younger generation.

Besides being an academician, Temsula Ao is an ethnographer and she writes poetry as well as fiction. As an ethnographer, she has been involved with the myths, folktales and oral traditions of her own Ao Naga community. Her poems are repositories of her ethnic identity and oral history. All her poetry collections are named 'Songs' which further testifies that her poetry is rooted in the oral tradition, as G J V Prasad says, "poems are songs in oral cultures" (Introduction, xvii). She is also alarmed because the oral culture and ethnic identity of her community are under threat. In the poem 'The Stone-people from Lungterok', she highlights the creation myth of the Ao Naga community. In Ao Naga language, the term 'Lungterok' means 'Six Stones' and "according to Aos, their first forefathers emerged out of the earth from a place called Lungterok. There were three men and three women" (Ao 111). She traces her roots and finds them interlinked to nature itself as she says that her ancestors were stones, infused with life and born from the womb of the earth. This imagery of the stone people hints at the idea that they are timeless and have been there since prehistoric times. Hence, they have an inherent primitive warrior instinct. In this connection, Ao refers to the Naga culture and its specific tradition of warfare, viz. head hunting. Reviving her roots, Ao says that her ancestors were people who possessed unique skills that were crucial for survival – they worshipped both the natural and the supernatural and they knew all the mysteries inherent in nature. Her ancestors lived in perfect harmony with nature.

A similar kind of exploration of identity is seen in the poems of Malsawmi Jacob as she traces her roots and reveals that her ancestors (Mizo) were there on this earth from the beginning of history – breathing the same air and nourished by the same water as people from the rest of the Indian sub-continent. She voices her resentment against the dubious gaze she receives regarding her identity in the poem “Identities”. People are not interested to know her name, her identity or her roots, instead, they look at her, ask her where she hails from and give her “strange looks” as if she does not “belong to the same earth”. So she reminds them that she and her ancestors have been “nourished by the same earth”, “moulded by the same hand”, “warmed by the same sun”, “watered by the same rain” and have breathed the same “air” just like people from the rest of India. The only difference she asserts is that she comes from the hills of myths and folklore, where fresh air soothes the blooming “orchids and rhododendrons”.

Threat to Identity

It is known to all that all over the world the very existence of oral cultures is threatened by its ready commercialization at the hands of the dominant culture, as in the words of Theodore Adorno, “[c]ulture today is infecting everything with sameness” (94). Such a worldview seeks to standardise and homogenise these unique ethnic cultures of the Northeast by removing diversity. Much of the cultural diversity of this region has already been wiped away by the modernization strategy of the West and hence what the people of Northeast are left with is a homogenisation of cultures. There is no doubt that international capitalist markets concentrate on the commodification of local cultures and traditions for their profit. It is even more important to note that local cultures become vulnerable when they are fragmented and transformed into saleable goods for a world market. These fragmented local cultures are then, removed from all cultural diversities and following that, they are homogenised and integrated into the global market which is under the control of a few multinational corporations (MNCs). Through this kind of systematic manipulation, the diverse socio-cultural, as well as linguistic identities are confined within a meta-narrative that displays them as a commodity for mass consumption. In that case, the only way out is to celebrate and promote diversity. The four women poets selected for study in this paper are seen resisting this kind of commodification and standardization of their indigenous tribal cultures and traditions in the hands of the global capitalist market through the counter-discourse of their distinct oral myths and legends.

Writing Orality

As an aftereffect of the colonial project, English was introduced by the Christian missionaries as a written and spoken language in the Northeast regions and owing to that, many traditional learning systems such as the system of morung, which is a Naga traditional learning system is swept away completely. Spurred by the West's perception of viewing the oral as 'primitive' while the written as 'modern', much of the ancient culture has been erased. However, it is also true that multifarious literary works have emerged and are emerging from these regions which are carrying forward the oral traditions by adhering to them in terms of form and metaphors and writers from the Northeast are consciously putting an effort into 'writing orality' (Pou 243). According to Walter J. Ong, orality and writing are interconnected as he insists in *Orality and Literacy* (2002), "orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing" (14) and they both are "necessary for the evolution of consciousness" (172). One needs to approach the poetry of Ao, Jacob, Syiem and Das in the same way as they attempt to reclaim their oral tradition and identity through their "written oral poems" (Foley 9).

There are very few tribes in the world that follow matriarchy and the Khasis, one of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya are unique as it follows matriarchy, that is, the rule of a woman/women. Hence, prominent poet Esther Syiem talks about the 'ancestress' of her clan in the poem "Pahsyntiew" while tracing her roots through the Khasi creation myth called Ka Pahsyntiew. As per Ka Pahsyntiew's myth, one out of the three daughters of the god of U Shillong, also known as U-lei Shillong, was deceived into marrying a human being, her children later came to be known as Syiems. Once her children grew up, she went back to her actual home in the Cave of Marai, where she came from. This myth which is about the origin of the Khasi tribe is rooted in the oral tradition and Syiem tries to retrieve it as she writes that even if "shrewd historians" have tried to wipe it away, yet still she chooses to "uphold" and "preserve" it as "the source of her identity". In the article, "From Anonymity to Identity: Orality in Three Women Poets from North East India" (2022), it is observed that Ka Pahsyntiew was lured with a flower (hence, she is called the flower-lured one) but interestingly, Syiem uses the Khasi word jalyngkteng instead of the English word 'flower', to highlight the cultural and historical significance of the oral myth. As they point out, Syiem used the Khasi word jalyngkteng as a "metaphor for political deception and exploitation" (Chatterjee et. al 6) that the Khasis went through in the hands of those in power. Through the use

of this Khasi word in particular, she consciously makes an attempt to reclaim her own as well as the identity of her community as a whole from erasure.

Priyanka Kakoti in her work on English writings from the Northeast observes,

The old storytelling tradition, which is common to all the oral cultures of indigenous people in the region, has been creatively integrated into the works of the writers of the present generation who belong to such tribes but have chosen to write in English. These writers, by moving from the oral to the written, have attempted to give permanence to the fluid narrations of oral literature. (22)

Orality as a means of preserving the beliefs and myths about one's own origin and further existence as an indigenous group in the Northeast, thus, remains one of the major motifs in the writings from this region.

Conclusion

With the introduction of Christianity and the Western education system, tribal societies in Northeast India saw the emergence of textualisation, and with it came the transition from the oral to the written. Therefore, the majority of the younger generation of different tribes in the Northeast can have awareness about their own culture and history only through English translations. In that sense, the past continues with the present and the old does not mean that it is lost rather it changes its impression with time as Tiltoma Misra observes, it "is the process of marching from the past to the future" (xvii). A group of indigenous poets and writers from this region are devoted towards preserving their oral languages and literature and reclaiming these as ways of revolt against the assumption that they have no treasured history of their own. This pursuit of roots directs these poets to their myths and folklore, and as they reclaim their oral traditions, they also reclaim their history and identity. In that sense, the counter-discourse of oral narratives negates all kinds of imposed generalizations and standardizations about Northeast India. Temsula Ao, Malsawmi Jacob, Esther Syiem and Nitoo Das- these four women poets who belong to four different ethnic tribes namely, Ao, Mizo, Khasi and Assamese respectively, represent the unique and heterogeneous identity of Northeast India. They extoll creation myths of the land embedded in their oral traditions, intertwined with their indigenous roots and identity and blend these into their poetry while reclaiming their identities.

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