

Ao's and Iralu's Short Stories : Portrayal of Crisis in Naga Identity

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Literature like other art forms has not only a dialectical relationship with society but also with history and geography. It reflects the literary tradition of a particular geo-political entity along with universal aspects. Indian literature encompasses the multifaceted cultures and traditions of India in its assorted hues. Indian short story got enriched from the modes and models of the Western form but has incorporated in its ambit the dynamics of social change affecting the Indian society. It showcases a wide spectrum of views, values, voices and visions of this plurilingual India. Sisir Kumar Das aptly observes, "The thematic range of Indian short story today is as extensive and varied as the geographical and social diversities of the country.... It is in some sense the most complete world." (276)

Short story has been used as a medium in different Bhasha literatures for articulating the lived culture, problems of identity and ethnicity, enforced migration and relocation and victimization in all its forms. Writers across the states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura are deeply concerned about the brutalization of their societies by the daily experience of human rights' violation and the maiming of the psyche of the whole people by the traumatic patterns of violence. As such creative writers like Tensula Ao, Easterine Kire Iralu, Imran Goswami, Manorama Das, Sebastian Zümvü, Monalisa Chankija and Charles Chasie depict their perceptions of the travails of their people living in the midst of terror and fear. In Nagaland, the ritual way of life with traditional communities and structures is tottering in the presence of guns, insurgency, counter-insurgency, state and non-state violence. There is no gainsaying the fact that a paradigm shift came after the outbreak of the conflict between the Naga underground army and Indian government forces. It transformed lock, stock and barrel the cultural ethos of Naga people which was known as 'Naga way of life'. The possibilities of minting easy money by providing supplies to the military contractors or amassing wealth through corruption in government services raised high expectations about 'progress' and 'development' which are inimical to the lofty notions of distinctive old traditions. Commenting on this volte face, Tensula Ao writes :

The sudden displacement of the young from a placid existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and confusion in urban settlement is also a fall- out of recent Naga history and one that has left them disabled in more ways than one. (Ao, 2006 : XI)

The old story telling tradition which is pervasive in all oral cultures of indigenous people has been successfully integrated into modern literary genres to give a distinct identity to the literature of the region. The Naga community of North-east India can pride themselves for possessing a vibrant story telling tradition. The rich culture of the 'face to face communities', which is distinguishable from the abstract nature of modern social relationships, is a remarkable feature of the oral and it has left an indelible imprint on the literary creation of Nagaland.

Nagas comprise of around eighty tribes with a population of about three and a half million, dispersed across the Indo-Burmese International border. They have a different cultural set up from the mainland India. So they started compiling and printing the oral and written literature of one's own community as a nationalist agenda of identity assertion. Tillotama Mishra asserts:

People whose history and civilization has been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of modernity took up the task of recreating their past and reinventing tradition as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future. (3)

Before understanding the role of Naga short story in highlighting the crisis of Naga identity, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of Naga tribe and their oral culture. Nagas consider land a gift and treat it with respect in keeping with a view of reciprocal co-dependency between the people and the land. In the words of Naga scholar Imkong I. Imsong "The Naga concept of identity includes the embodiment of the human being in the triune concept of God-Land-People." (19). He further states that the Naga identity is shaped by this concept of land, denoting an intrinsic relationship between the Naga and the land. (18) The Naga identity as a concept is inherently related to the land and this has given them strength to withstand the potent influences of colonialism over the years. Majority of the components of Naga culture as well as the festivals round the year are connected to the agricultural cycle and both women and men have particular roles in the agricultural process. Vamuzo presents the insider story in these words, "Nagas' daily and annual life is organized largely around care for, survival from and celebration of the land. Over the course of history, however, the Naga political struggle has profoundly impacted their lives, The daily activities of Nagas have been significantly altered, one of which is hampering the normal agricultural activities, where once Naga cultivators peacefully worked in their fields and enjoyed the harvests, now people fear violence might erupt anywhere, especially in the fields and forests. Sadly, paddies have often become killing fields." (87)

Nagas are entirely tribal people with a distinct love for poetry, music, dance and pageantry. There are sixteen major tribes in Nagaland viz. Ao, Angami, Chakhesang, Chang, Kuki, Khiamni-ungar, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sumi, Sangtam, Yimchangru and Zeliang. Each tribe has its own distinct dialect and cultural features yet bonded together by a racial integrity. The megalithic culture is the distinct feature of traditional cultural life. Ancient Nagas being a worshipper of nature believe in the theory that everything in nature has a soul as such the tradition of pulling and erecting stone persist amongst the Nagas for getting wealth. Each tribe has its own unique folk song glorifying a tradition or extolling a specific act of heroism or love. These songs are sung with specific musical instrument. The Chakhesang and Angamis use one string guitar which they call 'petu' or 'theku' which has a bamboo string and a round base made from gall bladder of a buffalo and also from emptied fruits of a creeper, 'mukhusea'. Besides, the 'long-drum' is an important instrument used by Ao's, Konyak's and Sumi's. The beating of the 'long drum' conveys different message which can be differentiated by the speed of its beating. Naga culture, history and folklore flourished without any written script of their own because the words of mouth transmitted information from one generation to another. The Naga folk tales elucidate man's

understanding of nature, animals and social customs. It includes stories as to 'how head hunting began', 'how tigers began to eat human flesh'. 'Why bats moved at night' and 'how man, tiger and God went their separate ways' and so on. The popular folk tales also focus on how human beings are occasionally altered into all kinds of creatures due to fate or supernatural powers. 'Sofunuo' and 'Anishe-Kapu' belong to this category. There are certain folk tales in which animals are the main characters. These animals behave in ways which reflect human ways of living and maintaining relations with each other.

All these oral narratives got smothered in the conflict that raged for over six decades, but then even reminiscence of them are seen in Naga women short stories, as they create 'terror lore' (Desmond Kharmawphlang) by blending folklores and the present collective fear of the masses. They interrogate issues such as identity, ethnicity and the unwarranted violence for establishing a world- Kelhonkevira which is bereft of all kinds of sufferings. They want that the rapport between nature and man, between man and oral narratives and between all round prosperity and Nagas may again get established. In this paper the short stories of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire Iralu have been chosen for portraying the identity crisis of Nagas.

II

Temsula Aa has tremendously contributed to tribal literature in the north-east and has in fact given an identity to the Naga literature beyond their oralism. Her short stories are the epitomes of the ambience of the traditional Naga way of life which appears to be increasingly irrelevant for the youngsters in this phase of modernity, sophistication and material progress. She wrote two collection of short stories entitled, "These Hills called Home : Stories from a War Zone" (2006) and "Laburnum for My Head" (2007). Her story collection "These Hills called Home" deals with the seething issue of Nagas' separatist battle for autonomy which started with the ceasing of the British rule in 1947 in the backdrop of the agrarian economy of Nagaland. The back cover of the book reads :

More than half a century of bloodshed has marked the history of the Naga people who live in the troubled north-eastern region of India. Their struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity provides the backdrop for the stories that make up this unusual collection. Describing how ordinary people cope with violence, how they negotiate power and force, how they seek and find safe spaces and enjoyment in the midst of terror, the author details a way of life under threat from the forces of modernization and war. No one – the young, the old, the ordinary housewife, the willing partner, the militant who takes to the gun and the young woman who sings even as she is being raped – is untouched by the violence. (Ao, 2006 : Cover Page)

Her stories endeavour to capture the voices of the common people who are trapped in the struggle between the state and the Naga insurgents. They are replete with historicity of the Nagas' armed struggle and the strategies of bio-politics employed by the state to diminish the Naga insurgency. Ao writes in an Introduction – "Lest we forget" to these short stories :

In these stories I have endeavoured to revisit the love of these people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged. They are not about 'historical facts', nor are they about condemnation, justice or justification of the events which raged through the land like a wild fire half a century ago. On the contrary, what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life – their very humanity is assaulted and violated and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul. (Ao, 2006 : IX-X).

Ao exhorts the readers through her stories for preserving the Naga identity in the face of forced migration and adaptation of metropolitan modernization of India. In the story 'Saoba' the protagonist Saoba becomes a stooge in the hands of the state and his identity is constructed with this aspect of servility. Ao explicates this fact in these words, "It was at this stage that a new vocabulary also began to creep into everyday language of the people. Words like 'convey', 'grouping', 'curfew' and 'situation' began to acquire sinister dimensions as a result of the conflict taking place between the government and underground armies." (Ao, 2006 : 10). Saoba meets a pathetic end at the hands of the person whom he considered as his hero. His predicament reflects the fate of the Nagas in general. The Indian state does not give significance to their ethnic identity and the Naga nationalist group does not also feel concerned about the miseries being undergone by the multitude. The rank and file regressed into associating with money making motives of state sponsored terrorist groups instead of leading their life in pristine glory. In the story "The Jungle Major" Ao mentions that the rural Nagas were displaced from their natural environs and confined to clustered pockets during terror attacks. Having got evicted from their homes, the Nagas' lives became dislocated. The same thought is expressed in "The Curfew Man". Satemba became a spy out of economic compulsions but cannot sustain this duality of his personality-betrayal to his Naga identity and becoming allied with the state mechanism. To quote Ao, "The real trouble was in his heart. For the first time in two and half years, he was beginning to question himself and his so-called job." (Ao, 2006 : 41). Thus Satemba personifies the crisis of Naga identity between two deleterious poles – suicidal in the long run at both ends.

The story "A New Chapter" highlights this fact that Nagas were beginning to look at themselves through new prisms – some self created and some thrust upon them. The characters like Nungsang earned their living by attaching themselves with Army as contractors. They realized the futility of Naga nationalism and participated in the assembly election of 1960's by taking the 'hornbill' as his electoral symbol. The most astounding aspect is revealed when the chief of the Naga Insurgency Force utilizes Nungsang's contacts for securing a government job for his son. The last lines of the story blends the ethnic sentiment with the need of the hour to have a new lease of Naga life for better future. Ao sums up :

The spirit of the legendary birds stirred something elemental in their racial memory and they fancied that the birds had descended from their lofty perches in the deep and dark jungles and had come to participate in the political parade with a clear message for the people. (Ao, 2006 : 140).

In the story "An Old Man Remembers", we find a character Sashi who tells his story of turbulent days to his grandson Moalemba which he faced in the course of his fight against Indian forces. Sashi and his friend Imli had to take shelter in the forest during their childhood when their village became the target of an Army operation. It was thus a coincidence, not a love for freedom that forced them to take up arms against the state. In the forest their innocent eyes saw a girl who walked naked in the middle of a line of women. To quote Ao, "Her breasts bounced with every step and he could see a darkness around the pubic region." (Ao, 2006 : 101). The 'Last Song' is the moving story of Zhamber, father and his daughter Apenyo. Apenyo is the lead singer in the church choir. She falls into the callous hands of an army officer when the church is raided. Neither rape nor death could take the song away from her lips. The story 'Shadows' presents a cruel insurgent Hoito who can go to any extent with his cadres for satisfying his elephantine ego. Ao expressed this situation, "When you have a gun in your hand, you cease to think like a normal human being." (Ao, 2006 : 72). The writer emphatically conveys this aspect that if all killings, extortions and assaults are the components of self-determination struggle, it is not worth attaining.

In these short stories Ao also explicates that patriarchal subordination of women in Nagaland is not an internal phenomenon but has come through cross-politico-cultural interaction. Naga women came to be situated not only as a political foe but also an object of patriarchal domination for Indian soldiers, belonging to the patriarchal main land. With the result rape became an instrument for intimidating ethnic group. Despite this, it is historically proven that Naga women have negotiated peace with various groups (state and non-state armed actors between warring factions, bridging inter-community divides, mobilizing mass support and democratizing the peace process) through a space that does not jeopardize the traditional patriarchal leadership structure of the society. Paula Banerjee aptly writes, "They appeal for peace as mothers, wives and sisters." (142).

Temsula Ao's another short story collection "Laburnum For My Head" is again an emphatic portrayal of Naga life in the verdant background of North-eastern hills. She has adroitly delineated Naga women as they encounter and overcome heterogeneous daily socio-economic psychological tribulations by getting solace from nature. She has not been able to stomach the socially constructed/determined roles of man and woman in the fulfillment of natural carnal desires. In the story, "Three Women" Ao gives vent to the thoughts and feelings of women facing the patriarchal subjugation in different facets of their quotation life. Lipoktula cannot understand the logic behind the accepted argument that a man can be sexually demanding but women's sexual desires needs to be submissive and entertained only when the male wants. By using the first person narrative Ao brings home this axiomatic fact that sexual desire and its fulfillment are the natural instinctive urges of both men and women. Lipoktula as an old woman remembers this inevitable propensity of nature which made her succumb to Meresashi in the crop field when her husband went far off for a job. She does not feel regret for this sexual aberration anytime except for Medemla who had to remain deprived of true love for Imsutemjen. Her decision was in defiance of the fixed separate rules framed by society for men and women in sex related conduct. Similarly in story "Laburnum For My Head" Lentina's earnest desire for having a laburnum plant at

her grave instead of any head stone reflects her fascination towards nature besides her bold resistance against stifling patriarchal set-up of the society. To quote Ao for substantiating this view point : "Standing beyond the southernmost corner of the vast expanse of the old cemetery-dotted with concrete vanities, both ornate and simple – the humble Indian laburnum bush erupts in glory; with its blossoms of yellow mellow beauty." (Ao, 2009 : 1). By choosing her grave-site herself before death and denying the "already embarked (space) beside my master (her husband)" she tries to remove the patriarchal shackles. She does not want that the 'consecrated ground' may get suffocated with the 'specimens of human conceit' – grandiose headstone as they are forgotten with the passage of time and inscribed names are read only as 'incidental past time.' This exhibits that the writer wants to highlight the Naga women's distinctive and innovative frame of mind which is rooted in ecology for ushering in an era of eco-feminism. Naga culture as described earlier with its changing determinants-beliefs, customs, values, structure and vision cannot be separated from nature. So this story becomes a negotiation between culture (man-made) and nature (flora and fauna).

The story 'A Simple question' again reverberates the same theme penned in the collection "These Hills called Home" because the agonising incidents are related to that village which is torn between the demands of the underground and those of the state machinery. Imdongla's husband was the goanburah and so there was great pressure on him from both sides. He and his village elders under compulsion have acceded to the demands of the underground without intimating it to the army. As a fall out they have to face reprisal from the army. The army commander decided to punish Tekaba for providing logistic help to the underground but the simple question posed by Imdongla shook the conscience of the officer and had to set her husband free. Sikhamani Gogoi rightly avers, "She was able to negotiate the gap between the male world of underground hiding themselves in nature's lap and the socially constructed male world with settlements like village and military camps." The story 'Sonny' also reveals the devastation caused to nature and women in the name of preserving Mother nature and the honour of women. Sonny like woman faces desertion and death because ideologically governed men leave them for creating an illusory free motherland – where families wouldn't be separated, women wouldn't be raped and killed or Naga men humiliated. But in this process which becomes a vicious circle they defile nature and torment vulnerable sections (like Sonny). Ao points out:

What neither of us had considered at that time was that Sonny was entering a twilight zone in the struggle for freedom where one could not identify the real enemy anymore because the conflict was no longer only of armed resistance against an identifiable adversary. It had now also become an ideological battlefield within the resistance movement itself, posing new dangers from fellow national workers supposedly pursuing a common goal (Ao, 2009 : 91).

In the story "The Letter" she links up poverty, violence and militancy for manifesting their baleful impact on Naga identity. A man tries to extort money and is killed in the maelstrom of his own making. But after his death a letter is found from his possession which shows that his son requires money for paying his examination fees and so he has to resort to this self destructive manoeuvre. Here the writer has not expressed her

opinion but rather left it to the readers to interpret this ugly reality as per their sensibilities for coming to a conclusion about the sad predicament of Nagas.

Thus Ao reconstructs the identity of Nagas from the pristine glory to the troubled history of militancy and thereafter to the stage of learning from past mistakes. In the course of elucidating different attributes of Naga life, she neither celebrates nor negates nationalism as such but presents the flip-side of it. She interrogates the use of violence because it affects nature and women to a great extent and in this way the natural pleasure of enjoying life in all its hues gets lost for the Nagas. The stories become the effusions of agony felt by the insider for her own people. According to Tellis Angues. "Ao's stories enunciate the quality of resistance of a people who built their history out of suffering almost beyond endurance. Hers is a literature with many dark areas as there are areas of illumination, which is the stuff of our political engagement with the world."

Easterine Kire Iralu is another short story writer who underlines the realities of Naga life in the light of in house rivalry and ideological differences among the Naga brethren fighting for freedom. She has showcased the vibrant Naga culture to the rest of the world through its age old traditions and folklores. Her story collection like "The Forest Song" and the "Windhover Collection" have a deep imprint of Naga folk tales. According to Iralu, "The Nagas have so many oral narratives but with the oral dying out, it is all going to be lost."

Her story collection "The Forest Song" which is subtitled 'People's Stories' gives a discerning look into Naga spirituality and brings before us the Naga rituals and beliefs that co-exist with the physical world. Naga culture and religion revolve around spirit appeasement and deep consciousness of the activities of the spirit. Such supernatural tales though mysterious serve as a means of containing people from overstepping the tribal customs and beliefs and thereby evoking a sense of awe and devotion among the worshippers. Her stories like "Forest Song" and "River and Earth Story" are about deceptive spirits who abduct people. This kind of portrayal of river spirits and abduction of people are also prevalent among Igbos of Nigeria. As such Nagas folklore writings came to be associated with African folk literature which has in fact played an influential role among the Naga writers. In the story "Forest Song" the writer narrates the story of Zeno and her villagers who were terrorized by the account of people who went missing after having been hypnotized by the song of the forest only to be found after weeks of disappearance. The story also brings out the superstitious beliefs of the Nagas like people sticking bitter wormwood behind their ears for averting the deleterious influences of the evil spirits because they believe that the spirits cannot abide bitter wormwood. In the words of Easterine "His spirit has forsaken him. You must go and call it back as soon as you can. Do it at first light. Pretend you don't know the way home. Urge him to lead." (Iralu, "Forest Song", 10). In the story, "The Man Who Lost his Spirit" Pesuohie loses his spirit while climbing a tree. After coming back home, he falls sick, as such his clan's man goes to the same place where Pesuohie has left his spirit but their effort turns into fiasco. So Pesuohie himself goes out in search of his own spirit and finds his spirit on the tree. He then brings his spirit home.

"Bitter Wormwood" describes the story of Mose's life from 1937 to his fatal death in 2007. The story gives the readers a chance to go back in time through the lens of the author to observe the rich culture and the humble country life of the Nagas. The title is related to the herb-bitter wormwood which was traditionally believed to keep bad spirits away. For the Nagas facing violent struggle all around, it becomes a powerful talisman to ward off evil time.

The story opens with a present day scene of rampant shooting relating to that internecine squabble that has marred the contemporary Naga society quite different from the struggle for self determination fought by the first generation of Nagas. They have stooped so low to go on a killing spree among themselves. Iralu articulates this fact, "A young man has been gunned down in cold blood – the latest casualty in the conflict that has scarred landscape and brutalized the people of Nagaland" (Iralu, *Bitter Wormwood*, Cover Page).

Although *Bitter Wormwood* is a novel, it has been taken here for the purpose of analysis because it provides the same lesson for beginning a new era of mutual understanding between Nagas and the Indian nationhood instead of bemoaning the past misdeeds. *Bitter Wormwood* becomes a strong metaphor for healing the wounds of the past. Easterine Kire Iralu has also utilized her gripping poem-film 'Where the Soul of a Nation Dies' to deplore the internecine warfare within the Naga National Movement by relating it to the value of land for Nagas. She wrote :

That field, these hills, those skies/ was what he had fought for all his life/ so his people might call it theirs/ . . . when does the soul of a nation die?/ When the cries of mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, sons/ fall on indifferent ears?

Altogether these short stories have immensely contributed to the cause of Naga identity and brought before the world the rich Naga tradition. Nagas' struggle for nationalism affected their life in all ways and resulted in atrocities at the hands of the underground and the army. These creative luminaries convey through these stories the wish of the ordinary Nagas to begin a new phase of hopeful future. As Sebastian Zümvü asserts "Ceasefire has been declared, I hear and talks are going on at the highest level. Ceasefire may become a permanent reality and peace may finally return to these hills." (29)

There is no denying the fact that Naga literature in general and short stories in particular has suffered considerably because it was understood for a long time that Naga writers are capable only of producing politically charged writings or exotic folk literature in mediocre language. Easterine Kire expresses this fact in these words :

Some publishers will publish Naga writings only if it is brought under the umbrella of the contemporary Indian Writing. This is an exercise that underwrites the peculiar genius of Naga literature. The truth is, there is so much more to the Naga writing than the political conflict and the exoticism of the folk. Indeed, we have been profoundly affected by both. We cannot deny the influence of the folk upon our psychological perception of the World. Nor can we extricate the angst of the conflict from our poetry and our writings. I want to assert that the Naga Writers are capable of writing beyond these strictures imposed upon them.(Iralu, 2004. Speech)

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