

ENTERTAINING DIFFERENCE: NORTHEAST POETRY'S USE OF THE FOLK AS A MEANS OF ASSERTING IDENTITY AND CREATING A SPACE FOR DIALOGUE

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Abstract: Orality and literacy have had to often interact in postcolonial societies, especially in those with a strong oral tradition in the pre-colonial period. The Indian Northeast's oral tradition has had to face the two pronged threat of a newly introduced religion and literacy. This has resulted in the difficulty of locating one's identity – is it to be based on the oral tradition of the past or on the newly drawn political boundaries? This dilemma has resulted in the Northeast being located in a non-space within the Indian imagination. Writers from the Northeast address this issue and find that the fading importance of the oral culture is a cause for this problem. However, the oral tradition is not completely lost. In fact, its ability to exist in the periphery provides room for reinvention, as can be seen in the appearance of the folk in various works of Northeast writers. This paper aims to show that the liminal quality of the oral tradition is the reason why the Northeast poetry that makes liberal use of the folk achieves two significant things – it aids in asserting identity by locating it in what is and has been theirs and creates a liminal space in Indian literature, a space conducive for a dialogue – between the 'mainstream' narrative and that of the periphery. This paper limits itself to the works of poets from the Northeast, particularly Temsula Ao and Esther Syeim and does not study the use of the oral tradition in other forms of literary expression.

Keywords: Dialogue, Identity, Northeast poetry, Oral tradition.

Introduction: Postcolonial societies, particularly those which had a dominant oral culture in the pre colonial era have always seen an interaction between orality and literacy. The Sahitya Akademi's page on 'The Tribal and Oral Literature' points out that until the 19th century when the printing and publication of literary works became popular, literature in India existed only in the oral tradition. Even in the case of literary works that existed in manuscript form, the general awareness among the population was though the spoken medium rather than the printed form. From the 19th century, owing to colonial patronage accorded to literature, oral tradition gradually took a back seat. The Indian Northeast had a very strong oral culture in place before the colonial period. This region (which comprises diverse people groups rather unfairly lumped under the umbrella term 'Northeast') has faced the threat posed by the advent of a written script and newly introduced religion. Writing of the Mizo context, Mona Zote says, ". . .the new religion had a magical weapon at its disposal: education. Mizos en masse and practically overnight were filled with an unquenchable desire to learn the alphabet, and did in fact learn to read. . ." (209).

The result of this conflict was that the old ways of life were relegated to the margins. With the colonial presence, particularly through literacy, opening up a new world, the Northeast found that the traditional and what was one's own did not fit in with the new conditions. For instance, was identity to be derived from tribal roots and the oral culture associated with it or with the newly drawn political boundaries? Naga poet, Temsula Ao's phrase "A soul without status"

(Ao 17) aptly describes the condition. Ao uses the Naga myth of the boatman who ferries the souls of the dead across the river between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead to portray the dilemma of identity. Like the boatman, "Fated to ply my trade/ On this designated route" the people here are caught in a space in which they are not quite sure where they belong – "The land they have left/Or the one they are going to". (Ao 17)

In a recent article published in The Hindu's Op-Ed page, Papor Bora and Abhinash Borah locate the North East in a "non-space" within the larger space of India. Writing about the draconian AFSPA and the extraordinary 16year fast of Irom Sharmila, they explain the strange place that the Northeast occupies in the Indian narrative. "In purely logical terms, there is, of course, nothing that can be both inside and outside (a set) at the same time. That is why, within these terms, when the presence of such an element shows up, we refer to it as a contradiction. India's Northeast very much finds itself within such a theoretical and political impasse, caught up, as it is, within a non-space – inside the physical space of India, yet outside the political and epistemic space underlying its imagination. . ."

In her poem 'The Old Story-Teller'(Ao 11-13), Ao provides a reason for this strange location of the Northeast. She points to the fading importance of stories. She says that she believed that story telling was her "proud legacy". These stories were repositories of a people's history, their beginnings, the lessons learnt over time and imparted to future generations.

These stories told of the moment
 When we broke into being
 From the six stones and
 How the first fathers founded
 Our ancient villages . . .
 Warriors and were-tigers came alive through
 these tales
 As did the various animals
 Who were once our brothers. . .

She says how these stories are often dismissed as “gibberish”, as stories irrelevant to the present times, for “who needs rambling stories/When books will do just fine?” She recalls the warning her grandfather gave:

. . .forgetting the stories
 Would be catastrophic:
 We would lose our history,
 Territory, and most certainly
 Our intrinsic identity.

However, the work of literary artistes from the region has helped address the problem. Writers from the various linguistic and cultural backgrounds in this region have written and made available to the world the stories of the people there. No longer do we only have to hear the story of Northeast as a “troubled” region or as a land that has to be set free. These writers give voice to different themes of this region, and very often make use of the old stories of the oral culture in their works. While Ao sees the fading away of the art of story-telling and the stories themselves, Khasi poet, Esther Syiem is of the firm opinion that the oral tradition has never really vanished from the consciousness of the people. Orality, she says, “no longer manifests itself in the consistent ways of the past because it has . . .gone underground . . .” (Syiem 141). It has therefore, shifted from the centre and has come to occupy “a space that, on the face of it, may seem to be a liminal one, as they exist on the peripheries of everyday life. This liminality must not, however, be misjudged or misunderstood as being indicative of inevitable erasure. In fact, this has proved to be a vantage point; an area rich in the psychical reserves of society, an unnamed area, milling over with significances, nuances and challenges striving to be heard and to be taken up all over again. . .” (Syiem 129) This liminal quality of the folk and of the oral tradition is the reason why the Northeast poetry that makes liberal use of the folk creates a liminal space in Indian literature, a space conducive for a dialogue – between the ‘mainstream’ narrative and that of the periphery. Syiem’s poem ‘To the Rest of India from another Indian’ can be studied as an example of this opportunity for a dialogue.

The poem refers to the existence of mythologies, the collective consciousness of peoples both in the centre and in the periphery. While the Khasis may not have a Rama or a Sita or an Arjuna, they do have Nam and

talking tigers and Sajer Nangli. Mythologies and legends provide a people with a sense of history, a past that can be looked to for rooting one’s identity in, for lessons to be learned, to use as metaphors, for inspiration. While the people of the North east, the Khasis in this case, may not have the same myths as several other groups in the country, they have their own legends, their own histories, and their own stories to look to and to claim as their own. The poems quoted in this paper too serve as examples of the deep rootedness of the old myths and legends that inform the thinking and creative expression of this people. Syiem’s poem seems to trace the differences between people, but somehow the similarities are highlighted too. Wars are fought in tales told by both the sides, but the location varies – one fights on famed battlegrounds, the other on stony tracks of the antelopes. The land that shaped these stories is different – mountains and caves on the one hand, plains on the other. Yet, the stories tell of the same things – love, loss, sorrow, freedom. Belief systems are very much a part of any community. Here, Syiem points to the existence of their own system of belief, different from that of other areas.

We have no temples
 none to be purified
 . . . No one river too sacred
 to purify impurities:
 none of our gods
 bear god-names like yours.

They have instead, “earth-gods and sky-deities/nymphs and elfin-dwarves”, “sibling mountain gods” and the “ancestor who sanctified the speaking tongue”. The title of the poem provides interesting food for thought. The poet insists on referring to herself as ‘Indian’ yet makes a distinction between herself and ‘the Rest of India’. This seems to point to the existence of multiple narratives behind the label ‘Indian’. Chimamanda Adichie, in a TED talk, very rightly points out the dangers of a “single story”. In India, we have heard and continue to hear different voices, telling the various stories of India. This poem emphasizes that and points to the ability to hold an Indian identity while holding a history, a past and belief systems that differ from that of the mainstream. The poet doesn’t deny her “Indianness”. She just points out that there are different Indians. The poem serves as a voice of resistance to the imposed hierarchy that has existed in postcolonial India. There has been a centre fixed and the margins drawn. The margins have had to learn the ways of the centre. This poem calls for a reciprocal action and serves as an invitation as well:

. . .if you should
 twist your tongues around ours

as we learned to twist ours around
yours,
you'll get a taste of
webbed legends.

The voice of resistance to the hegemony that has been in place, calls, not simply for a reversal of the power structure, but for a re-consideration of the hierarchy itself. The centre and the periphery differ in many ways, but surely that doesn't provide just cause for a vertical and oppressive hierarchy, for they also have many things in common. A realignment of the relationship between the centre and the margins could also lead to worlds unknown and unheard of until now. The deliberate and conscious twisting of the tongue to learn the language and the treasures hidden in the oral culture of this region implies that there has been a disconnect between the two regions – a disconnect that is primarily linguistic and manifested in many other ways. This poem's call is for a conscious effort to bridge that gap. Northeast poets' use of the various elements of their oral tradition achieves two things. It emphasizes their identity, reminding them and their own people that their identity is to be found in what is theirs and that they need not look elsewhere to locate their identity.

The ability of the folk to reinvent itself to suit the needs of the present allows the people to also reinvent themselves without losing any potency. This security and assurance of identity allows the creation of a space for dialogue. Instead of remaining passively in the periphery, poetry from the Northeast, armed with their folk tradition, offers a space for cultural change – the very idea of the liminal that Homi Bhabha speaks of – “the interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (qtd. in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin: 131). Perhaps a complete obliteration of hierarchy is impossible, but inclusivity, instead of exclusivity and exoticism can be removed from the page.

Syiem's poem asks, 'Is Nam still alive?/ And the tiger and the toad?' The answer is a resounding yes. They live on through the works of poets who choose to keep them alive, and it is because they are alive that the work of those poets can create a space for dialogue, and provide scope for understanding, for an existence without a hierarchy, keeping the differences intact.

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