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BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND MODERNITY: A STUDY OF Dr. TEMSULA AO'S
LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD

SIAMBIAKMAWI

Ph.D Scholar

Department of English, Assam University Diphu Campus



SIAMBIAKMAWI

ABSTRACT

Issues such as nation, nationality, identity, home, country belonging has increased its demand in acknowledgement with the onset of modernity and globalization. To many, the meaning of the term 'ethnicity' remains ambiguous and vague. Moreover, ethnic identity is further marked by the recognition from others of a group's distinctiveness. Various theoreticians gave interpretations of the term and concept in varying degrees. Every story, every reading creates a new meaning- a new construct. Means of conceiving identity is through collective culture, shared history or ancestry. However, ethnicity remains questionable as there exists cultural bias. Modernity brought along with it a new concept of reality- the stream of consciousness. This revolutionary modern technique has tried to transform the art of narrative in almost every respect. The writer contemplates between these two markers of existence in *Laburnum For My Head stories*. Hailing from the region, she delivers an extremely sensible almost first-hand like experience of the happenings in the region in her writing that is so evocative at the same time. The Northeast has long been on the fringe of mainstream literary consciousness, edged out by its complex socio-politics, crisis of identity and the prolonged rule of the gun. The writer has expressed a strong political awareness to interrogate the violence that has ravaged the Northeast region as a whole and the 'Naga nation' in particular due to the tussle between the insurgents 'underground extortionists or rebel forces' and the Indian government in complex ways. It is an attempt of 'looking back' to find answers to today's troubling questions.

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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. . . (Ao, Temsula. *Laburnum for my Head*, 1.)

Temsula Ao begins with these lines in her book, a collection of short stories *Laburnum For My Head stories* which she 'dedicates' to all storytellers. Weaving her magic in the art of storytelling, her stories run the gamut of emotions. Keeping alive the ethnic sensitivities, she embarks on a sojourn to enlighten the modern sensibilities of life as well.

Werner Sollors claims that it has become a widespread practice to define 'ethnicity' as the otherness. According to "Challenges of Measuring an Ethnic World: Science, politics, and reality", a conference organized by Statistics Canada and the United States Census Bureau (April 1–3, 1992), "Ethnicity is a fundamental factor in human life: it is a phenomenon inherent in human experience." It is this experience that T.Ao talks about in *Laburnum For My Head Stories*, poignant and bewildering. These experiences direct at the issues impertinent in the heart. Issues such as nation, nationality, identity, home, country belonging has increased its demand in acknowledgement with the onset of modernity and globalization. It is the negotiation of modernity with tradition that Ao is talking about. The sonority of the rich culture and lifestyle that still dwells in trivial matters illumines the hidden facts of life.

The representation of this cultural identity has always been dynamic. It can never be an isolated identity. Behind operates a particular world view. Every story, every reading creates a new meaning- a new construct. Its identity is constantly transforming. The essence of individuality emerges as the marker of change.

Dr. Temsula Ao contemplates between these two markers of existence in *Laburnum For My Head stories* (2009). Her writing addresses important issues like the question of regional identity or cultural identity in a land that has been in a continuous swathe with ethnic diversity, who share a common history, and how violence has seeped into the literature to breed a gut wrenching contemporary mélange of content and essence of identity. Hailing from the region, she delivers an extremely sensible almost first-hand like experience of the happenings in the region in her writing that is so evocative at the same time.

The Northeast has long been on the fringe of mainstream literary consciousness, edged out by its complex socio-politics, crisis of identity and the prolonged rule of the gun¹. The literature from the region is a mirror of the angst. Issues such as identity and ethnicity are being addressed vehemently today. The writer has expressed a strong political awareness to interrogate the violence that has ravaged the Northeast region as a whole and the 'Naga nation' in particular due to the tussle between the insurgents 'underground extortionists or rebel forces' and the Indian government in complex ways. It is an attempt of 'looking back' to find answers to today's troubling questions.

In the story 'The Letter', Ao presents before us a whole new understanding of the so-called 'national workers' by highlighting the gravity of their stand as well.

There was an uneasy quiet in the village: the underground extortionists had come and gone and along with them the hard-earned cash the villagers had earned. Cash the villagers had earned by digging the first alignment for a motorable road to their village²

An 'armed man', who remains unnamed in the story ventures out on an 'emergency tax' extortion in a village alone, only to meet with retaliation that ended tragically. Interestingly just before the visit, this village had resolved that they would cease to pay 'tax' to the underground, would refuse to do 'free' labour for the government and would discourage army visits by refusing to sell any of their produce to them. The 'situation' was to be hostile to any outsiders in order to attain calm, placid ordinariness of the simple village life. The rummaging through the pockets of the dead 'armed man' revealed a few sodden notes of small denominations, a tattered ID with almost illegible writing and a letter addressed to a postbox of a nearby town. This letter turned out to be a personal cross for Long legs (as named in the story for his height and the person who read the letter) as long as he lived. Though he had never been a good student he remembered every word of it, the letter from the dead man's son, begging the father to send his exam fees.

Here, however, Ao does not portray only the 'armed man's' plight. Ironically, this armed man happens to be a member of the so-called 'national workers' who had earlier performed acts of blatant extortion on the

¹ Chatterjee, Madhusree. "Revisiting the Northeast with sonnets." *The Sentinel* 4 April 2010: 8. Print.

² Ao, Temsula. *Laburnum for my Head*. Pg. no. 54.

villagers of their hard-earned cash earned by digging the first alignment for a motorable road by the BRO to their village. On that fateful day, a man was injured badly by the butt of a rifle of one of the extortionists. The man had tried to appeal to the leader to be excused from the present reckoning since he had debts to pay to the timber trader and also had to send money to his son for his exam fees. Hence, the world comes full circle. Ao gives a depth reading of each character in (maybe) fleeting detail while at the same time maintaining a macrocosmic outlook throughout.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, the rest of the villagers deserted the scene leaving the young activists with the injured man, inert and bleeding profusely.³

No one came forward to save the lone sufferer, not even on humanitarian grounds. Indeed he was the enemy but it was no fair fight. It was him against the masses. The thread of brotherhood had snapped, only revealing individual anxiety. The 'armed man' was treated like an animal, no amount of pity was shown on him. All the scorn and hatred he bore it all, all for his son. Ao reveals the shocking details of life and what it takes to notice the thin line between civility and terrorism per se. She takes our thoughts further to where the reality of our identity exists. It is what we choose to be. It is what we choose to associate to. And life is never the same anymore.

Discussing the work of the writers from North East, Preeti Gill, Senior Editor- Zubaan Books says, "Many writers continue to grapple with these issues. Having grown up in the shadow of the gun, their desire to analyse the common people's reaction to insurgency is as strong as ever."⁴ Nevertheless, life in the Northeast is not all bleak, tragic or violent. There is love and hope in the human spirit. There is the serenity of the region's mountain streams and the immense silence of its forests. This is yet another side of the region that Ao tries to incorporate in her book. She remains moored in traditions, giving her work a certain depth. Development depth-wise rather than length wise has become her technique which is the stream of consciousness. Although intense political conflict and complex issues of identity are the burning issues prevalent, the perennial myth and folklore, coupled with scenic landscapes, make the region a perfect breeding ground for fresh ideas in literature.

In the story 'Death of a Hunter' Ao delves into an intricate combination of the mythical with the modern.

The hunting season was on and the hunter was oiling his much-used gun. He was quietly humming a tuneless song, the reason for the suppressed giggles coming from the adjacent shed where his daughter and niece were husking paddy. The hunter took a deep breath and replied, 'Who knows? Maybe the big boar who has been eating our best paddy these past years will make an appearance soon. I am giving my gun a thorough cleaning so that this time I do not miss his heart.'⁵

Imchanok was a teacher in the village Lower Primary School but that identity was long been eclipsed by that of the hunter. He was a trusted skilled hunter and had a reputation as top hunter of the region. He had also received award from the government when he got rid of a rogue elephant creating havoc, devastating farmlands, homesteads and even trampled people to death. He was never perturbed by such adventures before, yet this time a sense of uneasy and discomfit filled him as he watched the dying animal surrender to him which continued to haunt him for a long time. He questioned why he was placed at the centre of the eternal contest between man and animal for dominion over the land. After that incident something remained amiss in Imchanok's behavior. Then he shot a male monkey again when the pack of monkeys ate the grains of his half-way hut. It was then that he began to have unusual vehement outbursts more often than ever. Though not entirely giving up on hunting, there was a lull in his sporadic qualms about hunting. Then came the rampaging boar that had become the bane of all the villagers. Accompanied by his favorite nephew, he set out one early winter morning on a hunting trip that changed him forever. He shot the gigantic boar at the head as it rose before him in the thick forest reputed to be haunted. With one gigantic leap, the animal plummeted

3. Pg. no. 60

⁴ From *Tehelka Magazine*, Vol 6, Issue 36, Dated September 12, 2009

⁵ Pg. no.21

into the dark forest and all was still. The stillness continued to disturb him. His health suffered and he had nightmares. They vanished only when he went to ask for forgiveness from the dead creature and connected to the pervading presence of its spirit. He found the boar's tooth, the aged bone washed clean by the stream, shining like an ivory and tufts of black fur among the bones of the animal. On the spot where he had fired the fatal shot, Imchanok performed a strange ritual. Some inner urge compelled him to tear a tuft of his hair and blow it towards the haunted forest, and that ended all his worries along with Imchanok the hunter. The role of the wife Tangchetla behind the scenes is very important. She backs her husband's every move and understands his temperament. She is the one who brings him back, to her embrace.

Only Tangchetla knew what went on at night. Imchanok, the fearless hunter, would shriek out in his sleep crying, 'Look at him, he is as big as a barn and as black as charcoal.' Then he would begin to whimper in Tangchetla's arms, 'I am afraid, woman, he is going to come after me.' It took all her cajoling and consoling to coax him to sleep⁶.

Tangchetla plays an important part in bringing her husband back to reality from his illusive world. The mystical atmosphere created by the supernatural existence of the dead big boar changes the life of the fearless hunter, Imchanok. Never in his life had Imchanok felt any fear or for that matter felt the need of his wife's comforting. Tangchetla does not overdo her duty. She plays the perfect woman in supporting her husband and becomes his anchor to bring him back to shore of life. Gayetri Chakravorty Spivak uses the term "ethical responsibility" when we engage profoundly with one person and the responses come from both sides. Then the ideal relation to the Other, is an "embrace, an act of love". Such an embrace may be unrequited, as the differences and distances are too great, but if we are ever to get beyond the vicious cycle of abuse, it is essential to remain open-hearted; not to attempt to recreate the Other narcissistically, in one's own image, but generously, with care and attention.

Northeast India has always been a mystery. Dr. Ao terms the region and its subsequent literature that has evolved from it as a 'colonial construct' and hence, an artificial construct. (The orientalist view) There are arguments that there is nothing called a "north-easterner" as the concept is purely geographical; it is an extremely heterogeneous cluster of people and there exists no common history and heritage of the people in North-East India as a whole⁷. Indeed, as an aftermath of the colonial rule, there is interplay of power politics, evident even in the literature produced. Any form of writing has always included a state of alienation and theme of rootlessness and tends to be autobiographical, with the authorial intention evident. Women's writing from this region has emerged lately. The space of women has drawn much attention and has been discussed. Due to inherent restrictions imposed on them by society, male dominated, recognition comes dropping slow. Social inequality, the construct of women as being suppressed, uneducated, illiterate, not emancipated, underprivileged are the major issues ticking. Women has always emerged the victim – 'taken' to be satisfied in her small domain of home and family- at being a wife and a mother. It is a universal phenomenon, though.

The book *Laburnum For My Head* does not shy away from such concerns, it rather emphasizes the female quotient in more than one story in the book. Ao believes *Heaven's gifts should be accepted without any murmur*⁸.

Every May something extraordinary happens in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town 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 beauty⁹.

This is how the first story begins in the book. In the first story, *Laburnum for My Head*, Lentina was widowed after her husband passed away quietly in his sleep before any proper diagnosis could be made of his strange disease. She befriended her driver Babu who had been employed for more years than she could

⁶ Pg. no. 37

⁷ Wikipedia.

⁸ Pg.no 10

⁹ Pg.no 101

remember and made him her confidant. Her sacrosanct secret was an 'epiphanic sensation' to have a laburnum tree planted at her grave, one which would live on over her remains instead of a silly headstone. Lentina broke all conventions in confiding in an 'outsider' over her own sons and daughters about the spot where she wanted to be buried in the cemetery. This momentous decision was followed by her stretching of hand to Babu and leaning to him on their way back home as if to hint that a beautiful bond of intense understanding between the two was in the making. Their mother's 'crazy' plan did not go down well with her children of course. The usurping of 'rights' by a mere driver left them sulking. Lentina pacified them with deft and crafty manipulation of her knowledge. Likewise, she also satisfied the members of Town Committee over issue about 'ownership' of her plot, settling it on her own terms. Later, in ripe old age after bouts of illness could not deter her determination to see the laburnum for her head bloom before she breathed her last, she proceeded on her apparently routine outing that eventually turned out to be her last to see the phenomenon she had waited all her life; the sight of the luxuriant blossoms on her small laburnum tree. On reaching home, Lentina shook hands with Babu thanking and blessing him, as if in a symbolic gesture to end the bond which had bonded the two because after that day, Lentina had a self-imposed isolation for five days and retired from life, a satisfied 'recovered patriarchal woman' whose self-confidence and assertiveness undermined the qualities of women as self-effacing and being submissive¹⁰.

The next morning when she knocked on Lentina's door with the morning tea, there was no answer. She knocked again but only silence greeted her. She entered the room and found Lentina stretched on the bed; she seemed to be sleeping soundly. Putting the tray on the bed-side table, the maid said gently, 'Madam, I've brought tea.' She went and drew the curtains as usual but when she came near the bed, she noticed a certain stiffness in the body and an unusual palour on the old lady's face. Distinctly alarmed, she went out and urgently called the others, the sons, their wives and all the servants. They all came rushing, except Babu, who stood near a post, crying like a baby¹¹.

Lentina attempted at self-representation, to be understood "a transaction between speaker and listener", the subaltern speaking, ¹²which is indeed 'something extraordinary'. ¹³So ends the story of the un-dramatic life of an ordinary woman who cherished one single passionate wish that a humble laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her crown¹⁴.

More than half a century of bloodshed has marked the history of the Naga people who live in the troubled northeastern region of India. Their struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity provide the backdrop for the stories¹⁵ in Ao's earlier book *These Hills Called Home* and also in *Laburnum For My Head*. Ao's work comes as both refreshing and daunting. She details a way of life that has embraced modernization yet considering not losing the tribal context. It accounts a crucial period in the history of the Naga people that almost reshaped it. Today, much of the culture and lifestyle have indeed undergone a tremendous change. However, the rich legacy is carried on through her work. The crux of the book is its role as a cross-cultural bridge, the indigenous flavor that its readers may have a deeper experience of the culture and life-ways of the Naga people. It holds on to the ethnic sensibility without giving away the modernization effects in life. It bears its own appeal in being a 'readerly' as well as a 'writerly' text.

Describing experiences of ordinary people, Ao takes us on a journey of half baked dreams, unfulfilled promises of the people. Her stories seem to be more concerned with touching sensibilities, giving something to think about and feel; not just swallow and enjoy. The connections between the characters and the gradual procedure of the story are very intriguing. The stories act as and point out the fissures between the ethnic and the modern. Ethnicity is formed by people who identify with one nation but live in another state. The notion of

¹⁰ Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory today*. Routledge. 2006

¹¹ Pg.no.20

¹² Landry and MacLean interview, Spivak.

¹³ Ao, Temsula. *Laburnum for my Head*. Pg. no. 20.

¹⁴ Pg. no. 20

¹⁵ Ao, Temsula. *These Hills called Home Stories From a War Zone*. New Delhi. Zubaan/Penguin. 2006

Naga sensibility or the feeling of the Naga nation gives them their ethnicity which comes under the feeling of living in the 'Indian' state.

Almost following the revisionist style, the stories allow an investigatory approach into power relations in various contexts. The 'nation', its impact on history, economy, culture and its representations are the major issues. The effects of the traces left by colonization in a post colonial society are evident in the story of 'the boy who sold an airfield'. The fascination with 'foreign' never ends. *The 'foreign' soldiers were Americans who had come to set up camp in the perimeter of the barely functional airfield to oversee the final evacuation of men and materials from the last allied command-post of the Indo-Burma campaign.*¹⁶ In the story, the young boy Pokenmong managed a ride with the American soldiers who had come in a long line of vehicles to set up camp in the perimeter of the barely functional airfield to oversee the final evacuation of men and materials from the last allied command-post of the Indo-Burma campaign, after the Great War was over. Pokenmong had no idea what he was going to do when they reached their destination. He had arrived at this juncture of his eventful life through gestures and a smattering of a few English words. It was his curiosity in the first place that had brought him there but gradually he realized that he felt a sense of belonging there. He went on to become a fixture in the transit camp of American soldiers. It may also be because of the fact that Pokenmong was a young tribal boy who had run away from home in the hills adjoining the state of Assam doing menial jobs in households in the plains of Assam for a number of years. He was in his third house when he met the soldiers. By that time Pokenmong was no longer restless as before. He was at home, literally and figuratively. However, to create an identity of his own apart from living in the house of railway lineman, Jiten Das, Pokenmong set out to the new world because he wanted more out of his life. When it started getting dark, he did not know the way back to Jiten's house. Eventually, he settled at the camp and made himself at home doing whatever menial job he was assigned to do. After a year, his status changed when he became the commander's Man Friday. Later when the soldiers left, he took himself to be the inheritor of the abandoned camp in an almost defunct airfield. *So the remnants of the foreign fighting forces loaded their pride and glory in war-weary aircraft and left the desolate camp to a bewildered youth with a sheet of paper carrying the insignia of the conquerors telling him that he was now lord and master of the vacant space and the debris that littered it*¹⁷. He then cunningly tricked a bunch of village idiots from the adjoining area into buying the land, the airfield. After a long deliberation, he was paid rupees five hundred for the land that never belonged to him. Another interpretation of this story can be that though Pokenmong could not get what he consciously wanted, he got what he unconsciously needed.(psychoanalytically).

'A Simple Question' deals with many issues at the same time. It traces the innocuous start of the demand of 'tax' as they were termed by the underground. The very first time one rupee was collected from every household to pay for the travel expenses of the rebel leader going to the foreign lands to plead for Naga independence from India. However, it later grew into an ugly business. The land was gripped by the unleashed terror both by the underground forces as well as the government soldiers. One could not take sides with either of the two or remain indifferent. The gaonburah of the village, Tekaba was a disturbed man. His sensible wife Imdongla realized the effects of the terrible pressure on her husband. She was barely literate, able to read the bible and the Hymn book only. But, she was otherwise a worldly-wise woman, knowledgeable about the history and politics of the village. She had grown up in a household where discussions about these were daily fare because her father was a gaonburah .

However, she encouraged her husband alot. She believed in speaking for herself and even for her husband, never missing a chance to utilize her good presence of mind. Even at times when Tekaba tried to hush her, saying "keep quiet, woman, you know nothing", Imdongla would flare up. At times it would even seem like Imdongla was emasculating her husband. However this very attitude of Imdongla saved her marriage. When all the elders of the village including her husband were dragged to the army camp on charges of giving supplies, Imdongla grabbed her husband's symbols of status; red blanket along with his red and black jacket and started for the camp. The gaonburah was nothing like the earlier traditional chieftainship system. The gaonburahs were appointed by the government from the major clans as their agents to help maintain

¹⁶ Pg.no 44.

¹⁷ Pg. no. 50

order in the village, and were issued a kind of uniform: red and black jackets and red blankets. They worked in tandem with the traditional village council, which was also founded on the principle of clan representation. It can be termed as a colonial construct because it was set up during the British days, the system continued even after India gained independence. Imdongla defied death by going to the army camp to bring back her husband home. When the army captain approached her, she almost took off her waist cloth in protest as well as her defence because it signified an ultimate insult a Naga woman could hurl at a man signifying his emasculation. Through an interpreter, Imdongla asked many questions that kept the captain mulling for a long time. "What do you want from us?" affected him the most. It made him see the impossible situation faced by the villagers. Imdongla's voice made him hear the essence of existence as a subjugated. He released Tekaba. To calm his nerves he wanted a smoke. Then he realized that Imdongla had used his box of matches to light her home grown tobacco metal pipe. The petty thievery made him realize how the coarse and illiterate village woman had managed to unsettle his military confidence by challenging the validity of his own presence in an alien terrain. Imdongla mustered confidence because she was playing on home turf; 'the belongingness' played a huge role. As for the army captain, though he wielded power and authority, things were different on his platter, he remained the other because he could not understand or embrace the idea of cultural hybridity. Because every human being, in addition to having their own personal identity, has a sense of who they are in relation to the larger community—the nation. Imdongla's self-awareness gave her the power of self-expression.

Benedict Anderson in his definitive book about the concept of "nation" and "nationalism," *Imagined Communities* maintains that the concept of "nation" is truly a cultural construct, a man-made artifice and thus, it is "imagined." It moves out from the center of one's family and closest friends in an ever widening ripple-like motion. The Indian state remains imaginary because its identity depends not only on its demarcated boundary but on how ethnic people like Imdongla identify herself to the army captain or for that matter the rebels to the government. It is a contemporary example of how two different people belonging to the same country have nothing to identify with each other. It is only their personal identity that they hold on to or identify with. It is this same sense of nationalist sentiment that draws people like Sonny, the 'armed man' or the whole revolutionists to identify with one another for the cause of their 'nation.'

Antonio Gramsci postulated the idea of "hegemony" where he maintained that colonial powers would not have been able to maintain their rule over colonized people without the implicit, if unconscious permission of the colonized subjects. Likewise it is relatively easy for the colonized subjects to adopt and live a national identity when that very identity adopted by the oppressed has been most likely encouraged by the oppressor itself. Gramsci was interested in the subject of subordination as it existed within a colony or nation. He believed that subordination over long periods entailed the participation of those subordinated. Ania Loomba also points out in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* that Gramsci argued that the ruling classes achieve domination not by force or coercion alone, but also by creating subjects who 'willingly' submit to being ruled. Colonial authority is to enforce a sense of national spirit. The British colonizers had wanted the 'Indians' to embrace the idea of their being "Indian," albeit in a form laid out by them. This is what Benedict Anderson refers to as "mental miscegenation."

Ao is a revisionist stalwart. She speaks of her land ravaged by the misgivings of the 'local' dwellers and the Indian government. She presents before her readers a plethora of emotive sentiments by allowing her characters to voice out their plight. Her mastery over story telling is felt in her stories, some of the stories in first person narrative, few others in third. The 'dispute and debate' that gets referred in the stories also relates to the concept of "cultural hybridity." Ao brings out a formulation of identity in her book. The stories point out how narrow this identity had become, limiting itself more and more in every individual's respective concept of 'nation.' These concepts create differentiation between one member of the society and another. As these differentiations are further acknowledged, a pattern of hegemony and violence ensues which threaten to tear the nation apart.

Homi K. Bhabha put forth his idea of hybridity in order to explain the very unique sense of identity shared and experienced individually by the members of a former colonized people. He maintains that the members of a postcolonial society have an identity which has been shaped jointly by their own unique cultural and community history, intertwined with that of the colonial power. Thus, for people like Sonny, in the story titled on him, his personal and national identity incorporates the traditions inherent in being a 'Naga' under

the 'Indian' rule. However, in the short story 'Sonny', Ao talks of the spectre of Sonny's final commitment to the 'cause' as he calls it, that loomed large like a dark cloud between him and the irrevocable yet unvoiced misgivings his relations had on it.

Sonny, the man who dared the fates and tamed his passion to follow a dream, gunned down in cold blood.¹⁸ 'Sonny dead' was something incomprehensible; what I had cherished and kept alive in my innermost being was the image of 'Sonny alive', the way I had remembered him all these years: vibrant and so full of hope. If it had been difficult to live a desolate life without him then, now I felt truly bereaved, more than ever before, though he had been out of my life these last twelve years¹⁹.

The story is being narrated by the 'sweetheart' of dream-chaser Sonny. Twelve years had passed since Sonny left her to pursue his dream. He had told her, 'Sweetheart, you don't understand, this is something bigger than you or me and everything else put together. This is my destiny.' However, he got assassinated by his fellow dreamers, a rival faction of the underground group and that gives rise to the question 'whose dream is it anyway?'. The spectre of his final commitment to the illusive 'cause' had loomed large like a dark cloud between Sonny and his ladylove. However, the sweetheart who remains unnamed in the story never had voiced her misgivings to Sonny before he set out on his mission. Now when she had considered herself 'cured' of Sonny, she speaks in retrospect.

"What neither of us had understood 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. And today Sonny had become a victim of his own convictions when the assassins pumped bullets into a fellow fighter's bosom".²⁰

She rather prefers to compare it to 'walking a tight-rope in a multi-headed ideological minefield within. When Sonny had quietly slipped from his ladylove's life into another sphere of existence, she was plunged into an abyss of self-doubt and self-recrimination for her obsessive love for a man who regarded his own nationalistic passion more than the love of a woman.

In other story, 'Flight', the narrator of life is a caterpillar. Its growth and embarking on a journey of life. This produces or gives light to a different form of life unlike the earlier stories in the book. One gets to see or take note of life from a different angle. The love shown to the caterpillar by its 'owner' Johnny or the tender love and care bestowed on it by Johnny takes the attention away from the humdrum of life. The caterpillar however emerges into a beautiful butterfly and leaves Johnny forever. It is strange pattern of life shown. The journey from a vast cabbage field to a dragon box on a dresser also shows how life under cage is like. It is a simple portrayal of life given from the least expected quarters of life. 'Dragon' as Johnny lovingly calls it, towards the end of the story and his captivity says

'as I fluttered my wings for the final take off, a tiny voice within me said, 'wait, what about Johnny? Are you going to leave him all alone?' I hesitated for the briefest while, but I knew I had to leave his dying universe. I looked at his pale, grief-stricken face but my resolve was stronger than the appeal in his eyes. As though propelled by an unknown force, I flapped my wings and was soon fleeting away without a backward glance, the worm within me urging, 'Fly, you are your own universe now, fly to your destiny'²¹.

It is strange how 'Dragon' is able to leave feeble Johnny who is dying and who had taken so much care of him and had loved him so much. Yet Ao does not linger on the conventional pattern of life. Rather she tries to break away tradition and showcase the need for individuality inherent in each and every individual. The monotony of life is broken with the beautiful butterfly flying to an unknown future yet it was its calling. That is

¹⁸ Pg. no. 88.

¹⁹ Pg.no.89

²⁰ Ao, Temsula. Laburnum for my head. Pg.no.91.

²¹ Pg.no 107. Ao, Temsula. Laburnum for my head

the need of the hour. The sense of identity built up on our own, and not given by anyone else. It is amazing how the need is felt even in the most little acknowledged lowly insects as portrayed by the writer. The darkness of the limited space inside the shoe-box gave the emerging butterfly a sense of restlessness and a deep longing for the open spaces of its earlier life because that was where it belonged. That very sense of belonging and identity is what Ao tries to repeat in all of her stories in 'Laburnum for my head'. She sketches a subtle picture on the canvas of life. She does not leave out on the minute details of life.

'Three Women' is beautifully woven. She becomes a master story teller in this particular story. Just as the story suggests, it is a story of three women related over generations. It begins with a prologue to the story;

A young man is hovering near the doorway of the humble cottage in a village. He can hear the happy chatter of several women who had assisted at the birth. Some of them leave after a while, greeting him with broad grins. Only three women, standing near the bed, are left. He wants to see the baby but their backs obstruct his view; he can only wait. These three women, though distinctly different, are linked through a mysterious bond that transcends mere blood ties.

Martha begins her story at this point. She starts where she was still a small girl 'coolie' as she was called by her fellow tribal friends. She was different: her hair was curly and thick and she had lice. Ao gives minute details of a village life and a in being a village child. Then Medemla's History begins. Medemla is the mother of Martha. Later in the course of the story we come to know that Martha was adopted by Medemla. Martha's mother had died in childbirth in the hospital where Medemla was working as a nurse. Ao tells that the people did not avail of the modern sensibilities of life living in a village. Here, the modern sensibility being going to a hospital for delivery. She says people saw hospital as a last resort only when things got real bad. Then Martha's mother further suffered because her husband did not give assent to a caesarean section for the delivery. Such simple yet complicated somehow events fill up the life of these village people. It is amazing how one gets away with such serious matters of life with such complacency. Then emerges Lipoktula's secret. Lipoktula is the mother of Medemla. Though she kept it secret for the whole time of her life, we come to know as a reader that Medemla is not Lipoktula's legitimate child. Lipoktula was raped by Merensashi, who with the passage of time becomes the father of Imsutemjen, the unfortunate love of Medemla. Ao takes us on the crux of the story. Things become clearer as the fog clears over the disturbing turn of events, the impossibility of marriage between Imsutemjen and Medemla, leaving Medemla hurt forever. The devastation caused by the loss of relationship leaves a deep scar on Medemla's life for all of her life. She never really gets over the fact that her love remained unrequited. Medemla becomes a mother by adoption of Martha over the course of time but the pleasure as well as the pain of motherhood was never her forte. Martha However grows to become a very fine young lady and is good in studies. Her mother wanted her to become a doctor but as life would have it she fell in love. Meeting Apok secretly every weekend in her grandmother's barn mainly to talk at first led to many others exciting encounters. Martha became pregnant. She however justifies her position when her mother rebukes her saying;

I looked at her pained expression and wondered: how could one describe the responses of a woman's body to the touch of a man she loved to such a person as my mother, who never had felt the demanding power of such love? And harder still, convince her that once you've tasted love like that, there was no stopping?

However, at this juncture, Medemla also questions herself over a long meditation as to why she had never felt the same way when she was with Imsutemjen: Am I abnormal or just a different kind of woman? Even Lipoktula's life comes full circle when her adopted granddaughter gives birth to a baby son. She recalls the fateful day when she was being raped by Merensashi long time ago giving birth to a new life, Medemla. She ponders why she had not run away the moment she understood the intentions of Merensashi. She only recalls the contagious craze passion of the man and the inexplicable reaction of her body turning her feeble resistance into participatory submission. After the birth of the long awaited baby boy;

The three of them just stood for quite some time; a strange trio, as though enacting a ritualistic affirmation of the power of mother-love to mesh the insecurity of innocence in the magic of an emotionally enlarged truth.

In the epilogue, Apok is seen as reluctant to intrude in this spell because a feeling of being an intruder came to him to the sacred ceremony, he slips out unobserved. Ao shows how gender also plays an important role in creating an identity. Here Apok himself differentiates from the trio because he feels he does not belong there and does not understand them anymore in their strange ritual of motherhood. Apok silently accepts the joys of fatherhood on his own because he does not identify himself to the other three women. Ao puts it in simple language which breaks away from the monotony of a conventional reading of life.

All said and done, Ao embarks to provide a lingering taste of the simple traditional lifestyle still adopted by people in the hills of Nagaland. She never breaks the pace in which the traditional village life moves on even in her pattern of story-telling. She gives her ideas in a revisionistic pattern. The postcolonial element vividly present in the writing. This reminiscence is what the entire book talks about. The cultural space that she provides to each of her story gives her characters an authentic appeal. She delves into intricate patterns of traditional life though holding the fact that the life is under transition from a simple village life to adopt a more modernized outlook. The modern sensibilities of life never leaves the scene even while the story talks about the simple village life.

Ao celebrates life just as it is and for what it is. She tries to capture the transition or the 'betweenness' that a postcolonial nation may face with the coming of many new concepts. The Naga nation saw many changes with the knowledge of identity or the need to realize where they belonged or who they were. The attempt to hold this ethnic component intact in her story is also evident in almost all the stories. Ao's mastery over story-telling helps to camouflage the political nuances though in a very subtle way. Various aspects of government oppression had led the Naga nation to rebel against it. However, with the passage of time things turned to take different shape, and the ones who had taken up arms to protect and safeguard the nation, became the violators of their own ideologies and upset the whole system of society as a whole.

Ao, however moves away from the canonized pattern of presentation of insurgency in the Naga hills. She does not praise or refuses to refrain from accepting the ideology of the Naga nation. She remains a true story teller giving her readers only ample space to develop their own reading of the text. She does not draw any 'margin' as such and lays out before her readers what could be developed on its own. The authorial intention therefore is not known and that remains the best part of this book, except the fact that Ao showcases the traditional proceedings of life in its own pace which is remarkably beautiful.

This crisis is what Ao's characters in the stories face repeatedly, effecting their lives, relationships, their belongingness and their identity. The writer has taken note of the changing trends in the tribal society as it comes into contact with modernity. The changes are brought about by modern education and the political system coupled with new cultural influences through different forms of life and its representations. There are multiple layers that the writer brings out about her belief in cultural identity who is an enlightened Ao Naga. The book gives inspiration, providing details of what made the person that she is. It is almost like a running commentary of a life in a society, at a particular time. The book also is like a guide to that particular period of time, an illumination of the society in the backdrop of every character's association with time and society, with ritualistic details at some points to attempt a projection of the traditions and ancient customs. With the advent of modernity, the past traditions and culture are being forgotten with the dilemma facing everyone being a political one. The wish of the Naga tribe to live as a homogenous tribe faces an uncertain future. Ao reasons the practices adopted by the 'national workers' and the common people alike to survive and be known as a unique, ethnic entity. This examination of how the Naga nation has survived this length of time in an area with hostile environment and lacking in resources is what Ao tries to portray and make her readers understand. Using the medium of fiction writing, though her works may be inspired by facts or certain events, she maintains a certain amount of freedom that fiction writing gives. Just as author Kishwar Desai says, "You can get into the heads of characters and enjoy the sheer liberty of self-expression", Ao indulges into her characters narrating life as it is.

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