Carving a Niche: An Interview with Temsula Ao

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Temsula Ao is a canonical writer from Nagaland,[1] located in India's North-East[2] region. Ao began her writing career early in the 1980s, during which she wrote poems. Her first book of poetry, *Songs that*

Tell,[3] was published in 1988. Ao's foray into fiction began much later in 2006 with her debut collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone* (2006), which was followed successively by *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), a memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2014) and several other works of fiction.[4] Her most notable literary contribution is the *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (2000), a project Ao undertook after her time in the United States as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Minnesota in 1985-86.

Ao's creative works are some of the first few literary works from Nagaland and North-East India included in the curriculum of colleges and universities across India. Her writings have also contributed significantly to the academic discourse on Indian writings in English, with several scholarly works exploring the narrative and thematic engagements in her literature. The distinct thematic exploration of Ao's works that document significant historical movements and narratives of the Naga[5] community, which did not have a written history, received wide attention soon after the publication of her works and charted a new literary tradition among writers from the North-East. The new literature from the North-East reflects writers' active involvement with the community's narratives. The writers take ownership of these stories, utilizing the literary platform as a space for cultural resistance. In doing so, they craft their unique forms of expression, incorporating cultural elements into their writings.

During Ao's time as a Fulbright fellow, she was attached to the American Indian Studies Department, where she came in close contact with Indigenous Americans and had the opportunity to learn some individual cultural practices across Indigenous American cultures. Her encounter with a group of young Ojibwe people attempting to learn their Indigenous language prompted her to examine the similar state of linguistic and cultural erosion taking place across the globe, particularly within marginalized communities. Ao has shared, on several occasions, the urgent need to reclaim and restore the oral traditions of one's community and to recognize the "vulnerability of all Indigenous cultures in the face of rapid modernization and other related forces … to look at one's own culture with a fresh insight and greater appreciation … before time caused any more diffusion and loss of the lore" (1). *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* documents the rich culture and heritage of the Ao[6] Nagas and is one of the first and few kinds of texts that extensively documents the customs, folklores, traditional laws, and belief systems of the Ao Naga community. The book is considered as one of the most authentic ethnographic works on the community. It has been acknowledged in a review for the *North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Humanities* by Jan Brouwer, a Dutch Professor of Anthropology, as a book every anthropologist must

read (qtd. in Ao xi). The book significantly contributes to documenting the folklore and culture of the Ao Naga community, which has endured for generations with little to no written history or literature. Its publication has paved the way for scholarly conversation on the rich and untapped oral history of the Indigenous Naga community.

In this conversation, Ao discusses her writing experiences, the importance of oral storytelling traditions for communities that have evolved from oral traditions,[7] the complex Naga political history, and writing as a social tool for writers from North-East India. The discussion extends to her concern for the continuity of the traditional Naga way of life in the face of progress and development that Ao has mentioned in the preface of her book *These Hills Called Home*. To this, Ao brings her deep-seated concern with recognizing and valuing one's traditions and customs by rightly asserting the importance of retaining one's intrinsic identity while still being a world citizen. This conversation centers on her venture into the world of fiction following her extensive involvement in poetry.

These Hills Called Home, Ao's first work of fiction published in 2006, emerged as a highly anticipated work necessary to cultivate a nuanced comprehension of the region's multifaceted nature—encompassing social, cultural, and political dimensions. This book served as a timely intervention, coinciding with the period when the North-East's characterization was shaped by a singular media-driven,[8] politically protracted image of the people and their environment. In her creative works, Ao's exploration of the conflict narrative from the early 1960s and 1970s in Nagaland was a deliberate attempt to comprehend the period of conflict beyond the governmental struggles. She intended to acknowledge the various forms of violence that profoundly affected the lives of the Naga people, whose stories remained largely unrecognized within the dominating political narrative. *These Hills Called Home* is a seminal text today in various academic institutions and among scholars.

Ao also tries to capture, in her words, "the ambience of the traditional Naga way of life" (x) in her writings. She does this by creating a local context, deploying expressions, and integrating cultural elements that are central to the community. For the Ao Nagas, storytelling occupies a central place in defining communal identity. Rooted in the rich history of oral tradition, Ao adeptly employs a similar technique in her writing in an attempt to weave a narrative that is both reminiscent of traditional storytelling and yet distinctly contemporary. An example is the story titled "The Last Song," which creates a scene of oral storytelling as the narrator engages in the act of recalling and retelling a story from the past. The traditional storytelling setting is deliberately woven into the narrative, where the storyteller—

typically an elder—is seated by the hearth with young listeners. This placement illustrates how knowledge and the community's history were transmitted orally among the Nagas in the pre-written culture era.

> In a remote village … an old storyteller gathers the young of the land around the leaping flames of a hearth and squats on the bare earth among them to pass on the story of that Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children. (Ao 31-33)

Through these literary techniques, Ao has cultivated a distinctive writing style that can translate oral traditions into written form. This process (translating the oral traditions into written) goes beyond mere translation, incorporating Indigenous elements that acknowledge the nuances of understanding and utilizing native resources. In translating the oral to written, Ao is conscious of the continued relevance of the oral tradition within both typographic and electronic cultures. In one of her essays titled "New Literature from the North-East," Ao discusses the fate of oral traditions across communities worldwide, with a heritage rooted in oral tradition in the face of the written culture. She asks:

> What is the relevance of an oral tradition in such a situation [the transference of oral to written]? How have the literate, educated inheritors of such traditions dealt with their inheritance? (125)

Ao takes examples of works that have successfully taken resources from past oral traditions and transcribed them into written forms. She cites the *Kalevala*, a collection of ancient Finnish ballads and lyrical songs, which elevated these oral traditions to the status of a national epic through written documentation. As part of a patriotic movement, Elias Lönnrot, a Finnish folklorist and philologist, "transformed the poems of the 'little tradition' of ordinary folk into a national literature" (Ao, "New Literature" 126). While the creation of *Kalevala* is one of transference of the oral into the written, the 'new literature' of other Indigenous cultures delves into going beyond the mere transference in articulating the relationship between the two forms: the oral and the written. We see this diversity in the contemporary Indigenous American writers' adherence to traditional themes and styles. Writers such as William Oandasan, Zitkala-Ša, N. Scott Momaday, Simon J. Ortiz, and others write and reflect on the impact of historical events on identity, and their works examine the efforts to assert and reclaim Indigenous American cultural distinctiveness. The African literary renaissance strategically employed orature as a powerful political weapon against Western colonizers, who "often took firm measures, banning many of the songs and performances and gaoling the artists involved [in practising the oral tradition]" (qtd. in Ao 128). This movement extended to African universities, where syllabi in English Departments were restructured to emphasize the incorporation of oral literature. In contemporary Indigenous literature, including those from

the North-East, incorporating oral concepts and elements is noteworthy, showcasing a deliberate embrace of oral traditions and techniques in creative works.

Knowledge dissemination among the Ao tribe and the other Naga tribes has traditionally occurred by word of mouth. The absence of written documentation has led to scattered dissemination of history and the knowledge systems of the Nagas, who have historically relied on oral communication. Literature per se in the oral form existed before the advent of written culture around the late 19th and early 20th centuries among the Nagas. The presence of literary elements in oral tradition is evident in the substantial influence it has on contemporary literature, directly or indirectly deriving inspiration from the oral traditions, which, as Ao says, "has always had all the resources of literature like poems, narratives, drama and even magic and fantasy" (138). The oral traditions in the literary works include the various forms of oral expression and cultural practices that the writers incorporate into their works. These characteristics encompass a wide range of cultural expressions, comprising oral narratives, folk songs, proverbial insights, and the transmission of historical narratives. However, its significance was often overlooked, as written forms were typically regarded as the primary yardstick for assessing the literacy of a community.

Along with the loss of language and cultural aspects stemming from colonization, the oral tradition was overlooked and dismissed as an inferior form of knowledge. Writers relying on the oral tradition face a dual challenge, as they must not only convey the oral elements in their writing but also grapple with questions of its literary merit. To this, writers and scholars from the North-East have developed an interesting approach to the folk elements that face contemporary prejudice in the face of an evolving literary society that demands the larger narratives of a pan-national discourse. Within the context of the Khasis,[9] a tribe in Meghalaya, Esther Syiem talks about the centrality of the oral tradition among the Khasi community, highlighting its continued existence and practice in contemporary society. In her essay, "Social Identity and the Liminal Character of the Folk," Syiem observes the culture of oral transmission and archiving, emphasizing that it extends beyond the realms of the written and print culture alone. Syiem's comprehensive exploration of the oral practices of the tribe holds relevance for other tribal communities in North-East India, as they, too, actively cultivate the oral tradition in their artistic and literary pursuits. She states:

> The oral nature of Khasi Society has never completely broke down even in the face of the cultural and religious invasions that brought with them the power of the written script … Although the folk may seem to have been side tracked from its original position of centrality, it can never be recanted, never erased. If at all it has now assumed a position of potent

> 'invisibility', a hidden strata of creativity mirroring the compulsions of a community. (130-131)

The rapid growth of modernization and consumption of global culture has led to the gradual erosion of traditions and cultures. Ao and her contemporaries, such as Easterine Kire, express the need to understand the force of globalization that is beginning to mutate and reduce the cultural identity of ethnic communities of the North-East. In an essay titled "Identity and Globalization: A Naga Perspective," Ao talks about the challenges of the cultures of the North-East in the face of modernization:

> The cultures of North-East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi, or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance. (7)

Ao's documentation effort of the history of the Naga people is intended to reduce our collective ignorance about the communities generally described as Indigenous and to understand their narratives in more complex ways. Similarly, Easterine Kire, a woman writer from Nagaland, underscores the importance of knowing the ways of preserving and claiming rights to ethnic elements that are gradually eroded by the force of urbanization. She talks about cultural theft, emphasizing the inadvertent ignorance of Indigenous people who "readily part with their handicrafts and information on their culture because they do not realize that it is being traded for money in an economically global world" ("Barkweaving").

A distinguishing feature of Ao's writing is the intersection of history and imagination, which results in a narrative that has an interplay between fictional and folk narratives. For instance, in her book *These Hills Called Home*, Ao skillfully intertwines the tumultuous political backdrop of Nagaland during the 1950s and 1960s with vivid narratives depicting the everyday lives of the Naga people. Through her imaginative storytelling techniques, she brings to life the complex interplay between historical realities and the rich tapestry of Naga culture, offering readers a nuanced and compelling portrayal of the human experience in the face of adversity and change. This convergence holds significance for various reasons: a) it mirrors "new narrative voices" that retrace the thematic boundaries of Indian English literature by including narratives that might be less conventional, however important; b) it facilitates the recognition of the literary merits of the oral tradition within academic discourse; and c) provides an alternative space for writers to rewrite and recreate history. While such narrative exercise is a welcome change, it has its challenges as it deviates from the familiar. This results in an unconscious

marginalization of such writings that further underlines a dismissal of the fact that Indigenous writings across the world, as can be seen in the writings of Native Americans, Australian Aborigines and some African American writings, have always had rich literary traditions. Indigenous literature in North America reflects the rich tapestry of Native cultures, historical narratives, and the pressing contemporary issues which Indigenous communities face. These literary works encapsulate the diverse experiences, perspectives, and resilience of Indigenous people, thereby debunking the popular narrative of Native Americans as a monolithic group. Contemporary Native American writers reclaim their history through literature, and some of the notable writers include Thomas King, Simon J. Ortiz, Beth Piatote, LeAnne Howe, and Cynthia Leitich Smith, among others. Therefore, there is a need to create an awareness of such narratives that possess certain qualities that are yet to be recognized and that there is a need for postcolonial studies as a discipline to re-examine its theoretical vocabulary to accommodate the distinct narrative patterns and expressions of Indigenous literary works.

These works are characterized by attributes that share many features of a mainstream literary work but also have their own singular aesthetics. For example, the prevalence of social, cultural, and political narratives in Indigenous literature stems from a profound connection to ancestral traditions, a commitment to preserving cultural identity, and a desire to navigate the complexities of contemporary Indigenous experiences. In the Naga worldview, there is a proximity between the natural and spiritual worlds,[10] and they co-exist, each as important in its knowledge and information as the other. The complex universe of the spirits and spirit encounters narrativized in the literary works of Naga writers such as Ao and Kire are part of Naga's spiritual geography. The references to the oral tradition referred to as aesthetics are not artistic creations but practices that are integral and which, to the native peoples, are valuable. This is understood by the fact that, for the Indigenous Naga people, these mystical presences are not just fantastical or superstitious practices but often have deeper levels of meaning and philosophical truth in them.

Ao and many other contemporary writers from the North-East write in the English language. Yet, this disproportionate focus on writings in English within the postcolonial canon excludes writers from North-East India. The reasons for such exclusion are varied and numerous. For example, discourse on Indian literature, especially post-1947, is often viewed within the context of a larger national narrative. Writers from North-East India write and engage with regional topics with which they can relate and associate. The literary works and scholarly endeavors inherently prompt an interdisciplinary approach, fostering inclusive discussions on the social, political, economic, cultural,

historical, and ideological dimensions of community experiences. Consequently, the intersection of these narratives serves as a thematic backdrop for the writers. Most of the mainstream Indian writings in English, on the other hand, invest in the discourse of the nation and its postcolonial challenges, which become themes and sub-themes in creative works; hence, this imagined nation often excludes elements of Indigeneity and ethnicity that are fundamental frames for North-East Indian literature.

Through her writings, Ao urges readers to realize the unique narratives that belong to each community and to be cognizant of the fact that we all come from completely different cultural, emotional, political, and economic experiences and, therefore, should not hope to write like the other. The distinctive feature of contemporary literature from the North-East lies in how individual writers skillfully navigate and incorporate the oral tradition within their diverse contexts. The unique narratives, derived from oral traditions and deployed by the writers, should allow writers to create a space for shifting cultural borders and boundaries through the English language[11] by molding it according to the individual needs for expression. This reminds us of Mitra Phukan's essay "Writing in English in the North East," in which she talks of the several "Englishes" that shape the narrative of creative works from the North-East. Phukan's discussion is based on how writers from North-East India, as compared to mainstream Indian writers in English, exhibit a level of comfort and authority in transforming their narratives into their unique collective "Englishes" ("Writing in English"). As an Assamese writer in English, she acknowledges the writer's ability to shape the English language according to his or her linguistic expression and, particularly, with the demands of the material he or she or they are working with. Taking the example of authors from two different states from the North-East, Phukan says that the "diverse experiences of Mamang Dai[12] and Temsula Ao, and the cultures they write from, inevitably shape the vocabulary, the cadences, even the sentence structures of their work, because of the different languages that they call their Mother Tongues" ("Writing in English").

Salman Rushdie addresses a similar concern regarding language, advocating for the development of constructing "new Englishes" (qtd. in Margulis and Nowakoski). Although Rushdie's works often traverse key historical topics related to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Great Britain, the persistent language debate remains a recurring and pressing issue that needs to be examined. He asserts: "working in new Englishes can be a therapeutic act of resistance, remaking a colonial language to reflect the postcolonial experience" (qtd. in "Language"). In his essay "Imaginary Homelands," he contends that rather than trying to ignore or escape from the use of colonial language (as Ngũgĩ

does by shifting from English to Gikuyu in the act of stressing the importance of linguistic and cultural decolonization), postcolonial writers should utilize the English language as a foundational tool to address challenges that confront emerging or recently independent colonies.

> One of the changes [in the location of anglophone writers of Indian descent] has to do with attitudes towards the use of English. Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes... To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (Rushdie 17)

The role of language is an old reflection. Frantz Fanon makes a similar argument in his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), in which he talks about the significance of language in the black colonial experience. Fanon sheds light on how linguistic choices and expressions play a pivotal role in shaping identity and resisting the cultural impositions of the colonizer. He asserts that language fundamentally revolves around the concept of the "other" and, in a sense, encapsulates the "weight of a civilization" (18). Additionally, he makes a crucial statement, "Every dialect is a new way of thinking" (14). The statement resonates with the creative endeavors of writers like Phukan, Dai, and Ao, who adeptly reshape and adapt the English language to align with their unique expressions. This is important because while inventing their own form of English is a Pan-Indian postcolonial phenomenon, the writers navigate the shift from the oral to the written without being significantly influenced or guided by established writing conventions from another tradition. In doing so, Indigenous writers from the North-East and other parts of the globe are forging their path in shaping the written form of their expression. These writers are tasked with innovatively utilizing language, first, to assert their unique identities in creative works and second, to understand Indigenous aesthetics,[13] which refers to the artistic and cultural principles, values, and expressions inherent in the creative works of Indigenous people, in more complex ways than its exoticism[14] or otherness.

This relates to Harish Trivedi's substantial contributions and involvement in translation studies, which have yielded fresh perspectives in the context of postcolonial societies. In his essay "Translating Culture Vs. Cultural Translation," Trivedi underscores the pressing necessity to "protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters through cultural translation, for some old and old-fashioned literary translation" (2005). This reflects Trivedi's concern regarding the many Indigenous languages of the world that are yet to be translated as he states, "those of us who are still bilingual, and who are still

untranslated from our own native ground to an alien shore, will nevertheless have been translated against our will and against our grain" (2005).

Temsula Ao was awarded the Padma Shri for her contribution to literature and education. She also received the Nagaland Governor's Award for Distinction in Literature and the Meghalaya Governor's Gold Medal. Her book *Laburnum For My Head* received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in the short story category. Her works have garnered interest globally and have been translated into Assamese, Bengali, French, German, Hindi, and Kannada. She is among the first Ao Naga scholars to translate folk stories from the local Ao Naga language to English and to offer a critical appraisal of the stories. After she retired from her long teaching career at the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong, Meghalaya, in 2010, Ao moved to her hometown in Dimapur, Nagaland. After retirement, Ao published a memoir, two works of fiction and a collection of essays titled *On Being a Naga* (2014) on the Nagas and their way of life. The essays reflect Ao's profound concern for cultural loss and underscore the urgent need to "search for the historical roots that can define the 'Naga identity,' not as perceived by 'others' but as viewed from within the society" (xv). Ao passed away on 9th October 2022, leaving behind an extensive literary repository for readers and scholars to explore.

This interview is one of the last few unpublished scholarly discussions with Ao, highlighting its significance. At the time of this interview, Ao had released two collections of short stories, *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*. The conversation centers primarily on her debut collection of short stories and will benefit readers and emerging scholars interested in this field of study.

I Watitula Longkumer (IWL): Thank you for agreeing to conduct this interview. Let me begin by asking how you would like/prefer to be known. As a poet or an author?

Temsula Ao (TA): As a poet, first because it tells you what exactly I write. Then, as an author or writer whose works may be fiction or non-fiction. So, poet and author suit me.

IWL: *These Hills Called Home* is your first work of fiction. How was the shift from writing poetry to fiction?

TA: By the time I decided to try my hand at fiction writing, I had already published four books of poems and was a bit hesitant to tackle this new genre. Incidentally, *The Jungle Major*, a short story from the collection *These Hills Called Home*, was the first story I completed,

and the rest simply seemed to tumble out as though from a hidden treasure trove and within a year, all the stories were completed. It may sound strange, but as I look back, the story seemed to write them!

IWL: You have chosen short fiction writing and incorporated elements of oral storytelling traditions into your narrative. What does this tradition of storytelling mean to you?

TA: Storytelling for me has been like sharing glimpses of life with readers from different walks of life and being happy when they say that they 'understand' what I am trying to say. Along with this, writing in shorter narratives like that of short stories has made it much easier to enter into the world of fiction writing.

IWL: The stories you have written in your debut collection of short stories narrate the compelling political history of Nagaland, your home state, and how it altered people's lives. To what extent are your writings influenced by personal experiences?

TA: The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because in writing, say, a personal memoir like I have done, it has to do mainly with personal experiences and observations based on them.

On the other hand, there is another kind of writing which evolves from not so much personal 'experience' as such but personal 'knowledge' about events and personalities involved in the events. One can apply this to the stories in *These Hills Called Home*, where most of the stories are based on such knowledge.

There may yet be another interpretation of 'personal experience' where a writer fictionalizes these experiences to create a kind of objectivity and universal appeal.

IWL: In the preface of your book, you express a concern about the responsibilities placed upon the inheritors (the young Naga people) of Naga history. Given the transformative changes and shifts in traditional Naga life, there is a call to make sense of the impact of the struggle on their lives. You have mentioned, "The traditional Naga way of life … is increasingly becoming irrelevant in the face of 'progress' and 'development' which is only now catching up with the Naga people. The sudden displacement of the young from a placid existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and confusion … has left them disabled in more than one way" (x). Can you elaborate on this?

TA: The paragraph within the book where it is discussed is self-explanatory. However, to elaborate it further, it can be said that the core of the traditional way of life resides in the villages where age-old norms dictate the lives of the people. But as education[15] was introduced, the youngsters had to leave their ancestral homes in pursuit

of higher education and other better prospects of life elsewhere in the townships and even outside the state. It was a price they had to pay in order to participate in the 'progress' that was overtaking the old way of life. It was inevitable, and in the new surroundings, the old norms were no longer applied, and many of the newly educated young men and women could no longer adjust to the village's existence even if they wanted to come back. It was in this sense that I used the word 'irrelevant' because, indeed, the traditional way of life, to a great extent, had become so for them. 'Development' would also mean more or less the same because, through education, the new generation living outside the villages adopted a new way of life.[16] This is how the urban/rural divide came into existence in all our villages. But I must add that the tradition still lives on in the villages, which is why one can say that the village is the heart of the people.

IWL: In our contemporary, fast-paced era, marked by dynamic shifts in lifestyles, thought processes, and existence, what strategies can be employed to safeguard and preserve cultural heritage, ensuring its resilience against the forces of erosion and change?

TA: There can be no such 'prescription' for preserving any culture. It is the people themselves who will have to decide how to adapt to the old ways to suit present circumstances without abandoning or compromising the values enshrined in the culture. It is here that the question of identity comes in, and I believe that one can retain one's intrinsic identity and still be a world citizen.

IWL: Rightly said! Given the current political challenges and the hopeful perspective on the youth, can you elaborate on specific measures or initiatives that could guide the political landscape towards more meaningful pursuits? Additionally, in fostering the resilience of our social fabric, what specific factors contribute to your optimism about the young Naga people, and how do you envision their role in shaping a positive future for our community?

TA: I can only answer by saying that politically, we seem to have lost our way in the quagmire of pursuing cheap gains and dubious power. As for the social scene, I still have great hope in our youth who are excelling in many fields, and I pray that they will be steadfast in their belief in themselves and the future of our people.

IWL: In some of the stories from *These Hills Called Home*, you shed light on how insurgency has profoundly impacted people's lives, affecting their understanding of right and wrong. How do you envision fostering a more unified approach to address the challenges of insurgency in Nagaland?

TA: It is a mind-boggling issue, and there can be no simplistic answer to it. There seems to be no coherence in the Naga people's demands and aspirations; because of this, we have played right into the machinations of unscrupulous agents on both sides of the divide.

IWL: North-East India remains unfamiliar to those residing outside the region, both geographically and in terms of its social and political dynamics. Additionally, there is a prevalent sense of fear and apprehension toward the region, largely influenced by the conflict narrative. In your opinion, what factors contribute to this phenomenon?

TA: In the first place, the geographical location and the overall history of the region have placed it in such a position. Coupled with this, the relative backwardness of the North-East as compared to other regions of the country has only accentuated this disparity. The political turmoil that beset the region is also a major factor in perpetuating this state of affairs.

IWL: As one of the pioneering women writers from Nagaland and North-East India, could you share insights into your writing experience? What influences, both in terms of content and individuals, have shaped your journey as a writer?

TA: I have always been an avid reader of the written word, especially poetry and fiction and being trained in recognizing 'good' literature from the 'bad' to a certain degree, I suppose I have imbibed many of the sensibilities in the course of my readings. But honestly, I cannot name just any one author or even authors who have directly influenced my writing. At the same time, I must admit that the great writers whom I have had the privilege of reading and teaching have surely helped me to hone what little native talent I have for writing.

IWL: Your literary creations, encompassing your poems and your broader body of work, intricately mirror the cultural and traditional sensibilities of the community (Ao Naga) to which you belong. Could you expound on the motivations and influences that led you to adopt such a method in your writing?

TA: I belong to a generation for whom the cultural and traditional background is still very relevant, and I am happy to know that you, as a reader who belongs to the same tribe, have been able to discern it in my writing. My background and personal experiences form the context from which the inspiration for writing comes.

IWL: A growing number of young writers from North-East India are starting to contribute. I am interested in hearing your thoughts on the emerging literary works and voices originating from the region.

TA: Our writings have definitely stirred the imagination of people around the country, and they are beginning to see and appreciate our efforts as real contributions to the genre of literature popularly known as Indian Writing in English, which is on the syllabi of many universities in the country.

IWL: In much of the contemporary literature emerging from the region, there is a notable emphasis on engaging with the political landscape of the writer's place. While the prolonged political turmoil of the region understandably features prominently in their works, there is a prevailing tendency to perceive North-Eastern literature solely through the lens of conflict and violence, overlooking other thematic dimensions. How do you view this tendency, and what is your perspective on the broader thematic spectrum present in literature from the North-East?

TA: I would say that they have a 'limited' imagination those who try to equate the North-East only to violence and conflict. But I suppose they are being gradually outnumbered by those who have started to look at our writings as 'literature'.

IWL: Coming to your book, I would also like to highlight my observations on the women characters depicted in your short stories, which notably stand out. Is there a particular message or underlying theme conveyed through this portrayal?

TA: Through the women characters in the story, I hope our men-folk also read my stories and see for themselves what I have said about our women.

IWL: Finally, in your exploration of Naga ways of existence and the documentation of historical narratives through writing, to what extent do you believe that writing serves as a means to preserve and uphold cultural values, contributing to the pursuit of peace in the state of Nagaland?

TA: Written literature came to us in the late nineteenth century, and that, too, was only in the form of basic text from the Bible. Whatever literature the succeeding generation read was from other cultures and civilizations as prescribed texts in schools and colleges. It is unfortunate that even today, the Nagas have not formed any serious reading habits. The interest is alive only among a small percentage of the youth, but I cannot say with any authority what kind of books

arrest their imagination. Therefore, to hope that at this stage that Indigenous writings will bring about any dramatic changes in the outlook of the people would be impractical, either in terms of cultural values or political effort toward peace. Even the so-called 'cultural values' alone may not be enough to bring about lasting peace in Nagaland.[17]

IWL: Thank you for your time. This interview will be a useful source of additional information for scholars and academics interested in the studies of North-East Indian literature.

TA: Thank you for reaching out.

Notes

1. Nagaland is one of the eight states in North-East India. The state is home to seventeen major ethnic groups, each distinguished by its unique customs, language, and festivals.

2. North-East India is located in the eastern-most region of India and is home to eight vibrant and distinct states comprised of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, and the Himalayan state of Sikkim. The region has the largest concentration of Indigenous peoples in India, besides the area known as the central tribal belt stretching from Rajasthan to West Bengal.

3. Ao published seven poetic works, which include *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), *Songs From The Other Life* (2007), *Book of Songs: Collected Poems* 1988-2007 (2013) and, *Songs along the Way Home* (2019).

4. Following her retirement from academia, Ao wrote, and published fiction works alongside a collection of essays titled *Aosenla's Story* (2018), *The Tombstone in my Garden: Stories from Nagaland* (2022), *On Being A Naga: Essays* (2014).

5. The Naga people are an ethnic group of several tribes native to the North-Eastern part of India. They are traditionally an oral society and speak distinct Tibeto-Burman languages. The state of Nagaland officially recognizes sixteen Naga tribes. English is the state's official language and is used for communication between tribes that speak around sixty native dialects. While Naga cultures share many traits,

each is distinct, and hence, we agree with what Naga author Ayinla Shilu Ao says, “every tribe could virtually be a nation unto itself.”

6. The Ao Nagas, a prominent Naga ethnic group, represent the major Naga tribes. They were the first Nagas to embrace Christianity, thereby gaining access to Western education that accompanied the introduction of Christianity.

7. For Naga tribes and many Indigenous communities, oral traditions are integral to their identity and existence, encapsulating substantial knowledge and practices. This oral tradition encompasses a wide spectrum, including history, religious practices, cosmology, rituals, folktales, myths, and narratives. The oral narratives, passed down from generation to generation, not only contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage but also play a crucial role in shaping the literary world and creative works.

8. North-East India frequently experiences marginalization in mainstream national news, resulting in minimal representation. The limited news coverage tends to spotlight the region’s troubled conflicts, becoming the predominant narrative. This media-driven emphasis on political unrest significantly influences literary scholarship, framing literary works from the region solely within the context of political implications. This skewed representation needs to pay more attention to other essential aesthetic and literary parameters, leading to an imbalanced discourse on North-East literature.

9. The term “Khasi” refers to the tribal inhabitants of Shillong, Meghalaya. Predominantly populating the eastern part of Meghalaya, the Khasi community is the sole matrilineal society in the North-East region. Identifying themselves as Ki Khun U Hynñiewtrep in the Khasi language, which translates to “The Children of The Seven Huts,” this community is known for its vibrant oral tradition. The Khasi ethnic group shares affiliations with related tribes such as the Khmers, Palaungs, Was, and Mon-Khmers.

10. The term “spiritual world” in this context pertains to the belief in spirits and supernatural elements within the Naga community during the pre-Christian era. The Naga people’s spiritual realm has been intricately intertwined with their beliefs, forming an essential component of their cultural and identitarian tapestry. Despite the mystical connotations, the present-day Naga society exhibits a coexistence of the natural and spiritual worlds, where these beliefs continue to hold relevance in the modern societal framework.

11. This means creating a linguistic space whereby each writer should be able to use English to complement his/her form of linguistic expression. This is synonymous with what Salman Rushdie states in his essay "Imaginary Homelands," in which he emphasizes the need to reconstruct "new Englishes" (1992) by remaking colonial languages to reflect the postcolonial experience. Mitra Phukan's essay "Writing in English in the North East," mentioned in the following sentence, offers a more comprehensive and understandable explanation when she reflects on inventing several "Englishes" (2013) in order to bridge the gap between writers and readers of Indigenous literary works that are more "indigenously" inclined or "culture-specific" ("Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation"), to borrow the words of Harish Trivedi.

12. Mamang Dai is a contemporary woman writer from Arunachal Pradesh. Dai belongs to the Adi tribe, an ethnic group that lives by the Siang valley. The literal meaning of Adi is a hill or mountain top. Dai writes in the English language and has authored several poems and novels. *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is one of Dai's most celebrated books, a non-fiction re-telling of the legends of the Adi tribe.

13. The term is also widely used in the scholarly discourse of Naga literature and global Indigenous studies to emphasize the diverse themes that represent the native ways of seeing and being. For the Naga writers and the native community, the aesthetics represent the oral art (expressed in various forms: fiction, poetry, music, painting etc.) that is present and, at the same time, confirms a sense of place and belonging for the community. The Cherokee writer Daniel Justice's statement on Indigenous aesthetics is a good explanation. Although the reference here is specific to the Indigenous community of the West, his explanation underscores how I use the term to identify the aesthetic narratives.

14. In his essay "An Image of Africa," Chinua Achebe asserts a similar argument in context to the oral narratives in African literature: the oral traditions having significant functionality and purpose contradicting the mainstream imagination as simply an act of 'cultural' preservation and survival. Irrespective of differences in geography, culture, beliefs and practices, the oral literature of all Indigenous communities is a medium to educate, preserve history and a system for transmitting important philosophical and moral concepts.

15. Education here refers to the formal process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and academic qualifications. It implies the introduction of a structured educational system that required young

individuals to leave their villages to pursue higher education opportunities.

16. Ao discusses the transformative journey from traditional to modern lifestyles among the Nagas, mainly influenced by the arrival of American missionaries in the then-Naga Hills in the late nineteenth century. These missionaries played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-cultural landscape, introducing Christianity and formal education. The shift towards formal education changed traditional learning methods and altered customary Naga practices. Ao emphasizes the emergence of modern living and underscores the responsibility of the younger generation (inheritors) to preserve traditional cultural knowledge for the sustainability of Naga's cultural identity amid evolving ways of life.

17. The interview was carried out as part of my M.Phil's dissertation at Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India, and the authors would like to acknowledge Pondicherry University for providing the necessary resources to accomplish the research work.

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