

CULTURAL MEMORY AND REMEMBRANCE: EXPLORING ORALITY AND IDENTITY IN NORTHEAST POETRY

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Abstract

‘Cultural Memory’, have reinforced the stance according to which memory is a source of human identity. According to Maurice Halbwachs, ‘memory’ is a matter of how minds work together in society, how their operations are structured by social arrangements: “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs 1992). “Identity” today is increasingly pathologized as confluence of syndromes, Baral contends; and all identities are by nature hybrid. Cultural identity, according to Stuart Hall is “not an essence but a positioning”. Memory in oral cultures functions as an instrument of not only connecting the present with the past but the whole tradition of orality continues because of rememory by which folk narratives are retold from generations.

Northeast literatures aspire towards a vision beyond the narrow ethnic groove and represent a shared history. For a region marred by decades of violence, its literature is a medium of telling stories to the world. In the yarn of such a region, one often finds anger, fear and pain but also endurance, restraint and hope inextricably woven. Northeast poets represent the voices in literature of this region and landscape the past and present with recurrent images embedded in nature. Taking all these into consideration, this paper would make an attempt to explore and analyze some of the selected poetry of Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh), Desmond Kharmawphlang (Meghalaya) and Temsula Ao (Nagaland).

Key words: Culture, Remembrance, Orality, Memory, Identity

“When there is no penman to record the memorable acts and passages of times, the memory of them is swallowed up in the gulfe of oblivion”
-Sir Thomas Widdrington

“A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people”
– M.K. Gandhi

The issue of ‘memory’ is as difficult to approach as it is exciting to look into. Indissociable from current human activities, ‘memory’ is crucial in defining extraordinary situations. Thus memory is unavoidably related to the multifaceted reality of traditions and legacies, to the ways, forms and places (*lieux de mémoire*) fleshing it out as values, practices and institutions at work in human communities. Needless to say, ‘collective memory’ has a substantial relationship with ‘individual memory’. ‘Cultural Memory’, has reinforced the stance according to which memory is a source of human identity. For Maurice Halbwachs, memory is a matter of how the minds work together in a society, how their operations are structured by social arrangements: “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs 1992).

‘Cultural Memory’ as defined by Jan Assmann is the “outer dimension of human memory” (1992: 19), embracing two different concepts: “memory culture” and “reference to the past”. Memory culture is the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity. References to the past, on the other hand, reassure the members of a society of their collective identity and supply them with an awareness of their unity and singularity in time and space - i.e. a historical consciousness - by creating a shared past (Assmann 1992). For both individuals and groups, ‘memory’ is the process by which people construct personal narratives supportive of integrated and efficacious identities in the present. Without memory, that is to say, without a past, individuals and groups can neither make sense of their current existence nor plot their futures. Individual and group memories, like individual and group identities, are the product of active creation, not passive inheritance: through selective remembering and forgetting, people construct out of the randomness and fragmentation of human experience comprehensible stories in which past events cumulatively determine present existence and provide signposts to guide future action.

Erikson (1959) usually credited for his concept of “identity” describes psychological development over the life course: personal identity, despite periodic crises, he says is self-sameness over time. A recent narrative turn in identity theory, however, has warned against essentializing identities; instead, they are seen as ongoing processes of construction in narrative form (Bruner 1990, Calhoun 1994). As MacIntyre (1984, p. 218) puts it, “...all attempts to elucidate the notion of personal identity [and, by extension, group identity] in-dependently of and in isolation from the notions of narrative... are bound to fail.” As Hall writes, “Identities [personal or collective] are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past” (Huysen 1995, p. 1). William Connolly in his book “Identity/Difference” detects in the very conception of identity an intrinsic paradox. He writes: “Without a set of standards of identity and responsibility, there is no possibility of ethical [or political] discrimination; but the application of any such set of historical construction also does violence to those to whom it is applied.” Rajeev Bhargava writes that “the identity of a person is largely a matter of social construction,” adding that this holds true for the

“manufacturing” of both personal and social identity. Stuart Hall is right in saying that cultural identity is “not an essence but a positioning”. He explains:

Cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power (Mongia, 112).

In “Identity and Cultural Aporia: Globalisation and the Tribes of India’s Northeast”, Kailash C. Baral focuses on the problematic ethnological studies of the global/ local binary of identity politics in Northeast India where he asserts that the “dialogue” between the global and the local transforms culture itself into a productive interstitial space, constantly evolving and being transformed by its own dynamics. Thus a “fixed” identity becomes as suspect as its counterpart global genre. Identity today is increasingly pathologized as confluence of syndromes, Baral contends; and all identities are by nature hybrid. However, all present identities carry their traces from the past. The clash of cultures has often led to the loss of traditional forms and the adoption of new cultural icons threatened the existing ones. While there have been attempts at reviewing and critiquing one’s own culture and society in the light of new ideas from time to time, yet whenever the xenophobic fear of the ‘outsider’ has seized a community, a tendency to retreat into the cocoon of cultural isolation has been quite evident. Most of the communities from northeast can take pride for possessing a vibrant story telling tradition. Collecting and printing oral and written literature became a part of nationalistic agenda of identity-assertion. People whose history had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the Eurocentric concept of modernity, have taken up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present development from the past to the future.

The land mass that is designated as India’s northeast is not the same to the people who inhabit this geographical area that has existed for centuries through its ecology, myths, legends, stories, poetry, dances, arts and crafts, its conflicting history and moribund politics. This territory has many facets and many faces; it is not just a map; it is a cultural and linguistic geography - diverse, vibrant and variegated. The people who call this territory their home define the uniqueness and diversity of their cultures, customs and social practices through their oral and written literatures. Some of the communities in the Northeast are still embattled being caught up in a never ending conflict between the Indian State and ethnocentric autonomy movements. The fluid political situation is a carryover of the colonial past. The colonial past has shaped and reshaped the cultural identities of most communities in Northeast while Christianity has added another dimension to cultural loss and recovery. The historical is always the political in that different articulations have captured the complexity of life in Northeast. What is edifying in the face of the fragile and fluid political situation is the emerging literatures that seek and articulate the wholeness of life in the face of disintegration and fragmentation. The act of creativity in its self-knowledge and dynamics seeks to affiliate and connect the individual to the society holding together the home and the world. Tribal traditions need not be devoted to, or perceived solely as something of the ‘past,’ but instead be the catalysts for the creative instincts of a people that identify their culture. In this way the literature of oral narratives also gives us our sense of identity.

Oral tradition is a complex phenomenon which configures its own ways and means of expression and transmission. It expresses self-identity and upholds social organisations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of the mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of contemporary social order. It also articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concern over reform and redress. In oral cultures, ‘memory’ functions as an instrument of not only connecting the present with the past but the whole tradition of orality continues because of rememory by which folk narratives are retold from generations. Memory becomes a dynamic force for continuance of culture and is thus embodied in culture. Storytelling, as a practice has been a means for handing cultural values, practices and beliefs down to the younger generation in many tribal societies of Northeast India. Oral narratives can be in the form of prose, poetic prose or in the form of verse that are generally chanted or performed by singing. Each narrative in whatever form it is rendered, always has a sense of novelty. In addition, it has a spirit that the narrator has to bring into or is supposed to bring into the rendering, for it provides its *raison d’être* or explanatory context. The explanatory contexts provide the logical, moral and causal connections between the world in which these narratives are created and what they “narrate” about that world. Through these stories, myths, legends, proverbs and other intangible cultural products get distributed. As Esther Syiem argues, “folktale is the repository of cultural values that inform the present and invests it with a living sense of tradition” (2005:29). Some variations in the tales may emerge especially when the same tale is told by different people or in different places, yet the content remains the same. These tales are pregnant with deep social meanings and have an intimate relationship with the tribe’s ways of life and tradition. It holds the people together as a distinctly identifiable tribal group whose lives are still regulated to a great extent by the legacy of those folktales from their oral tradition (Ao 2004:9). Oral tradition thus plays a pivotal role in maintaining cordial relations among various tribes and with the neighbouring communities in Northeast.

Northeast India is a mosaic of tribal culture and beliefs. The poetry from Northeast consists of paradoxical realities of violence and myth, past and present, love and bloodshed, cultural and political dilemmas. Even as they talk of contemporary evils, they go back to their myths and legends as their poetry reveals the “complex terrain of everyday negotiations where nature and politics, the physical and the cultural, are inextricably engaged” (Subramanian). Poetry from this region protests against the homogenisation of a country where regions are marginalised and oppressed as the Other within the nation-state. In such a scenario, the poets from this region are constantly examining the nature of these causes and trying to give voice to their concern for the growing deterioration that seem to paralyse the region. The ethno-linguistic complexities and the accompanying violence have submerged Northeast in a cauldron of unresolved conflicts. A major issue in this region is the search for ‘identity’, a quest for self-assertion, which has a “highly emotional content including a feeling of age long deprivation” (Sen, 2002). The richness of this region lies in its vibrant cultures, its rituals, traditions, dances and folklore, “the way of life of the masses is still rooted in the traditional social base, - group solidarity and group consciousness for collective endeavour and welfare ..., creativity is collective and participating. As a result, folklore is still a major component of the living culture of the people of the region. It has been growing and absorbing new elements” (Bhattacharjee). To many writers of this region, legends and short stories are still a wellspring of thoughts and emotions that are restored in a particular blend of myth and memory unique to the region.

In Mamang Dai's poems the mystique and grandeur of mountains along with myth and folklore surrounding them weave an ethereal story around these land masses. The mountain, for her, is not merely another memory of childhood and youth but it forms part of a continuing relationship with the environment. In *The Voice of the Mountain*, Dai says that the mountain can identify itself with the desert and the rain. The mountain tells us of 'life with particles of life that clutch and cling for thousands of years'. It represents life forms and contributes to a churning of life of 'thousands of years'. The tribes' belief systems are intrinsically entwined with nature and its preservation and their lifestyles replicates the traditional practices. The mountain is like an oracle, telling stories of change and yet bearing the nature of permanence.

In an interview with Nilanshu Aggarwal, Mamang Dai has explicated the beliefs of union among the Arunachali tribes. She says that the traditional belief of the Adi community to which she belongs is full of respect for nature. Everything has life - rocks, stones, trees, rivers, hills, and all life is sacred. They worship Donyi-Polo, literally meaning 'Sun-Moon' as the physical manifestation of a supreme deity, or what she calls 'world spirit.' In *The Voice of the Mountain*, Dai says that the mountain is like an old man sipping the breeze that is 'forever young'. In the poem, the mountain narrates the story of its omnipresence and the mountain claims to be all-knowing. These memories hibernate in the minds and thus the mountain becomes symbolic of being a repository of traditions and events of the past. "I am the place where memory escapes/ the myth of time/ I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain". In the end of the poem, the mountain knows that the universe gives nothing but 'an appearance of being permanent'. The last line of the poem is significant as it is a resonance of the conditions of the world. Regimes may change and the dream of a true homeland may be fulfilled, but peace ever eludes. The existence of truth is an existential reality, but behind it is the turmoil and dissatisfaction of a nation. Thus for Mamang Dai, the mountains are not merely a landmass or a hunting ground for tribal folk; it is a living oracle of the past and the future.

Most of the poets from Northeast use myths and nature alongside other themes of corruption, violence and politics. Being deeply rooted in their past, these poets articulate about their history and their past, the land and its people, its myth and rituals, cultures, values and traditions. Legends are portrayed with the "intensity of reality and reality is portrayed with the intensity of longing for a vanished past" (Dai, 2006). Thus:

The history of our race begins with the place of stories.
We do not know if the language we speak
belongs to the written past.
Nothing is certain. ("An Obscure Place")

Mamang Dai's poem landscape the past and the present with recurrent images embedded in nature. Through these lines, Mamang Dai tells about the mystery that conceals the origins of the people of this region. In *The Voice of the Mountain*, Mamang Dai talks about the people who still follow the age old tradition even in a rapidly changing world:

The other day a young man arrived from the village.
Because he could not speak
he brought a gift of fish
from the land of rivers.
It seems such acts are repeated:
We live in territories forever ancient and new,
and as we speak in changing languages. ("The Voice of the Mountain")

Here, Dai shows gratitude as a part of a tradition that her people diligently try to preserve even in a fast growing world. The treatment of rituals and traditions form an integral aspect of the poets from this region. Mamang Dai in *River Poems* describes thus: “When the singing rises/ death itself will cease/ Blue beads in your hair will turn you.” Here the poet explains the strengthening of bonds, through women who tell stories and then who sit near the dead. They sing songs of lamentation recalling youth, as the relatives of the deceased fatten beads and sacred twine on their wrists. The overwhelming presence of nature in their poem is another important aspect. One hears the “river with its magical voice, the twin gods of water and mist, the land heavy with memories, the forest that lingers ...” (Satchinandan). They show their disappointment over the barrenness of the region and call out the virgin forests of the past with their tall trees that seem to be “Unpenetrated/ Even by the mighty sun” (Ao). The conflict between the past and present and their subtending realities are also present in Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang’s poetry which was sensitized deeply by his love for folk traditions, the oracles of the past, the folk narrator and the spoken oral tradition. In his poem *The Conquest*, he sings of the past and connects it to the present when he says,

Long ago, the men went beyond the
 Surama
 To trade, to bring home women
 To nurture their seed
 Later came the British
 With gifts of bullets, blood-money
 And religion
 A steady conquest to the sound of
 Guns began
 Quite suddenly, the British left.
 There was peace, the sweet
 Smell of wet leaves again. (“The Conquest”)

Poetry from the region also links nature with culture in an uncomfortable relationship – topography and guns come together where Kharmawphlang concludes *The Conquest* thus:

You stricken Land, how they love
 Your teeming soil, your bruised children.
 One of them told me, ‘You know,
 Yours is a truly metropolitan city.’ (“The Conquest”)

Patricia Mukhim in *Where is this North-east?* says that, “North-Easterners are conscious that they have no recorded history about their antecedents. Their historical past and migration routes are shrouded in mystery.” Some of their myths and legends are concerned with the coming of the first progenitors of their own communities. In relation to this, in one of her best-known poems, “Stone-People of Lungterok”, Temsula Ao utilizes various folk images and themes in different ways. The poem draws on tradition-rich imagery of assemblies of stones that mark sites associated with the origins of the ancients (Aier and Jamir). A note attached to the poem explains that in the Ao-Naga language, “Lungterok” means “Six stones”. It explains that, “According to the Ao origin myth, their forefathers, three men along with their companions (three women) emerged out of the earth at the place called “Lungterok”. Some of these stones can be seen even today.” The poem begins by invoking the name Lungterok, and identifying it as a place of origin, where the original ancestors emerged from the earth:

Lungterok

The six stones
Where the progenitors
And forebears
Of the stone-people
Were born
Out of the womb
Of the earth. (“Stone-People”)

Songs From The Other Life is an exquisitely crafted collection of poems by Temsula Ao, alive with the spirit of the Ao-Naga culture. Here she says that the past and the present meet and merge like rivers – flowing as one. Pure images, clear lines and visionary force are the hallmarks of these poems. Some of the poems in this collection deal with the Ao myth, their beliefs and practices. In the poem “The Old Story Teller”, the story teller emphasized his role as a narrator to let the young generation develop a propensity for poetry and folklores, so that they grow up in wisdom possessing original ideas and a love for their own culture. But towards the end of the poem, she laments the end of an era when she says:

But now a new era has dawned
Insidiously displacing the old. (“The Old Story Teller”)

In another poem “When A Stone Wept”, the note explains “According to an Ao-Naga myth, the first Ao people, three males and three females emerged from six stones, at a place called Lungterok. The Aos also say that certain big stones ‘give birth’ to small stones, which move away from human sight to grow and become big stones themselves to procreate, thus making sure that they dominate certain landscapes where no life can ever exist”. “Trophies” recounts the age-old custom of head hunting practice among the Nagas. The head of one’s enemies were brought home as ‘trophy’, which was considered as a priced treasure to the villagers. The advent of Christianity in the region is a historical happening: it has deeply touched the lives of many communities in the Northeast. In “Blood of Other Days”, the poet laments the fact that even the hills never remained the same after the departure of the Britishers. She says:

We borrowed their minds,
Aped their manners,
Adopted their gods
And became perfect mimics. (“Blood of Other Days”)

Jayanta Mahapatra says that, “the miseries of contemporary dilemmas are apparent” in the poetry of North East India. This is specifically reflected in its persistent search for “identity”. Most of the poets from North-East feel threatened that “outsiders” may swamp their identity, tradition and culture. This fear surfaces their poetry and they blame them for distorting their culture: “They dislodged me from my moorings/ They tore me from her side/ They chipped and chiselled/ They gave me altered dimensions” (Temsula Ao). Using the chipped monolith as an image, Ao describes how the ways of the hill people have been changed by the “outsiders”, who come from far off land to influence them. She feels that her own people were denied their real selves.

Thus poetry from Northeast India reflects two contradicting worlds: the ‘natural/ spirit world’ and the ‘human world’ and these poets have, with dexterity, manoeuvred their poetry through these two paradoxical worlds. They articulate the contradictions and speak about them in order to make sense of the senselessness around them where “tradition rubs shoulders with modernity, folk rhythms jostle uneasily with the western pop, virgin forests stand a mute testimony to the debauchery of urban life, and recalcitrant nativism co-exists with the ‘otherness’

of the outsiders” (Nayar, 2003). Despite being plagued by issues like insurgency, corruption, savage atrocities, politics, violence etc, their poetry reveals the beauty of the natural landscapes and the enduring quality of their myths and legends. However, against all odds the poets from this region believe in survival of life and they celebrate life as it were. Though firmly rooted in their land, their poetry has an appealing universality that disseminates itself amongst all readers.

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