

Articulation of Dissent, Assertion and Resistance in Death through “Laburnum for My Head”

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Abstract

This paper discusses “Laburnum for My Head” as a springboard to analyze the transition in the socio-cultural attitudes from the pre-Christian to the postcolonial Christian era towards death in the Ao Naga society where patriarchal power seeks to control and haunt even in death. The paper shall attempt to argue how the short story creates a space of transgression for the Ao Naga women and Naga women in general in a society where feminism is still in its nascent stage. The subversion of the age-old relationship between women and nature by the protagonist of the story becomes an important event in the articulation of female desire and agency, achieved through dying on her own terms in the story.

Keywords: Naga Literature in English, Tamsula, Feminism, Death

In my paper, I shall discuss “Laburnum for My Head” as a springboard to analyze the transition in the socio-cultural attitudes from the pre-Christian to the postcolonial Christian era towards death in the Ao Naga society where patriarchal power seeks to control and haunt even in death. Through this, I shall discuss how the short story creates a space of transgression for the Ao Naga women and Naga women in general in a society where feminism is still in its nascent stage. The subversion of the age-old relationship between women and nature by the protagonist of the story becomes an important event in the articulation of female desire and agency,

achieved through dying on her own terms in the story.

“Laburnum for My head” is a short story by Tamsula Ao that appears in her collection of short stories under the same name. The story is about the life-long obsession of a woman named Lentina and her wish to be buried beneath a laburnum tree. Her attempts at growing a laburnum tree in her garden is futile as her every attempt is thwarted by forces out of her control. At her husband’s burial, the sight of “man’s puny attempt to defy death” and attain immortality by erecting tombstones evokes a sense of antipathy in her (Ao, 2009, p. 1). It is at this moment that the idea of

being buried beneath a laburnum tree dawns on her. Laburnum blossoms for Lentina symbolize feminine grace and humility “not brazen like the like the gulmohars with their orange and dark pink blossoms” (Ao, 2009, p. 2). The rest of the story is about how she executes her plan in secrecy with the help of her husband’s old driver who is also a widower. The story inevitably ends with Lentina’s death and her burial beneath the laburnum tree in a plot of land that she originally bought but was taken away from her by the town committee. The story as a work of literature is important as it opens up the possibility for an analysis of the patriarchal order of the Ao Naga society through the socio-cultural attitudes towards death manifested in its social customs of burial, the handling of the dead, expectations of mourning and the haunting of the living by the spectral presence of the dead among the living where the dead still exercises control over women.

In the pre-Christian era, the Nagas followed animistic religious beliefs. The life of animism was prevalent among the Nagas till the end of the 19th century when Christian missionaries came to the Ao Naga areas and began the proselytization process which gradually spread to other parts of the Naga inhabited

areas. Dr E. W. Clarke and his wife Mary Mead Clarke first came to the Ao Naga region of the Naga inhabited areas in 1872 (Chasie 2005, p. 1). E. A. Gait, in the Census of India 1891 writes:

There is a vague but very general belief in some one omnipotent being, who is well disposed towards men, and whom therefore there is no necessity for propitiating. Then come a number of evil spirits, who are ill disposed towards human beings and to whom malevolent interference are ascribed all the woes which afflict mankind. To these, therefore, sacrifices must be offered. These malevolent spirits are sylvan deities, spirits of the trees, the rocks, and the streams, and sometimes also of the tribal ancestors. (as cited in Eaton 1997, p. 249)

Godden also writes:

No uncertainty hangs over the Naga beliefs in the power of the unseen agencies who cause sickness, and gives prosperity, to whose favour riches are due, whose dwelling is in the uncut jungle, or rocks or water, before whose presence on a day of sacrifice all evil spirits must be driven away from the village, and who are challenged for the death of a tribesman with curses and war cries. (1897, p. 186)

Such beliefs in the existence of

supernatural beings influenced death rituals and the handling of the dead. Godden writes on the funeral rites in the Ao Naga society:

The customs of the Aos of the present day is to leave the body on a platform in the cemetery without the village gate. The body, placed in a coffin, is smoked for a period extending from ten days to two months; then the coffin, over which is laid one of the dead man's cloths, is taken out and placed on a bamboo platform in the village cemetery. (Godden, 1897, p. 199)

T. Senka Ao, however, in his book on Ao Naga customs and traditions, writes that the period of smoking, which was also the period of mourning, was limited to a period of five days for women and six days for men. Only in the event of the death of well-known members – leaders, rich men and warriors – of the community was the cadaver exposed to sunlight. If the bodies of unworthy individuals were exposed to sunlight, it was believed that it would invite curse upon the entire family from the spirit of the underworld *motsüingba* who was a malevolent spirit (Ao, 2013, p. 221). What happened to the corpse after it was placed in the cemetery was also an indicator of how the person had lived his life. If the corpse was devoured by wild animals or if the bamboo platform upon which the

corpse was laid collapsed, it was an indication that the person had led an unrighteous life. It is not uncommon among the Ao Nagas even today in the event of disputes to use the idiom “*tasü nü reprangteptsü*” meaning that the nature of one's death will indicate if the person had wronged another while they were alive. Dying a good death becomes a marker of a life lived well even in the modern era where Christian practices of burial exist alongside such older beliefs in the supernatural forces. West also writes on how the idea of the passage to the Land of the Dead was one “beset with dangers” (West, 1985, p. 28). T. Senka Ao writes:

Once the soul had set out on this path, sometime after death, it had to struggle with spirits and its headless victims. The part of the soul which made this journey carried with it the status achieved in this life; thus, a successful headhunter was investing in his future or next life. (Ao, 2013, p. 28)

A discussion of the customs and attitudes to death in the pre-Christian era becomes necessary in order to understand the context under which certain socio-cultural attitudes towards death developed in the modern Naga society. It is pertinent to note that in the discussion of the rituals and

attitudes towards death, women occupy a very marginal space. The heads of women, especially young maidens, were considered to be among the most prized possessions of headhunters and they often feel victims to raids from invaders. At the same time, “the body and the persona of a headhunter’s victim were consigned forever to obliteration”. “There was an important distinction between proper and improper deaths; the latter being deaths for example by accident, in childbirth, having one’s head taken. Improper or calamitous deaths brought dangerous souls and such deaths were not accorded the usual ceremonies” (West, 1985, p. 28). Women were more prone to such deaths as many would die during childbirth and were exposed to enemies as they worked in the open fields. While West fails to mention how women are to undertake this rite of passage, T. Senka Ao in his book on Ao Naga customs and beliefs writes about how this rite of passage to the Land of the Death for a woman is through her *allem*, which was the most important part of a woman’s traditional handloom. He writes:

Allem is the most important and valuable tool that a woman uses on the handloom to weave...The power and the right of a woman

this *allem* and cannot be taken away from the woman by a man. If a man touches the *allem* when the woman is weaving on her loom, he is either rendered impotent or wifeless for the rest of his life...When a man goes down to the Land of the Death, he hurls his spear at *Akumliba Sungdong* (the Tree of Life).

Those who lived truthful and righteous lives strike straight at the tree. If a man had not led a righteous life, he misses the strike and is put to shame. In the same way, women also hurl their *allem* at the tree. *Allem* is one of the most powerful objects in the Ao Naga cosmos that a woman carries with her even to the Land of the Death.¹ (Ao, 2013, pp. 130-131)

The spear and the *allem* become the symbolic markers of men and women according to the social roles they play in the society that extend beyond their earthly existence. There is a sense in which the woman is the strongest in the domestic space where she is engaged in domestic production activities while a man’s prowess lies in his spear, a weapon used for both protection of the village as well as in the battlefields.

With the advent of Christianity,

¹Originally written in Ao language. Translated by the author.

there were significant changes in the attitudes towards death and the handling of the dead bodies. Ao Nagas no longer placed their dead in the open on the bamboo platforms. It was because of the Christian influence brought about by the American missionaries that the Ao Nagas started burying their dead. The period of mourning with the dead body in the house was also cut short considerably and burial funerals are often conducted a day after the death. The practice of memorialization of the dead through the installation of tombstones also became common. Prior to this, there were no markers that indicated the site where the remains of the deceased laid. The cemetery was a communal space where the remains of the body were left to the elements. However, as Eaton comments, "For all their condemnation of Naga ritual and social life, the missionaries were extraordinarily accommodating toward Naga doctrine and cosmology, in which they and the Naga converts systematically sought points of entry for Christian terms and ideas." (Eaton, 1997, p. 259) Hence, older forms of beliefs, especially in the supernatural, continue to exist comfortably alongside Christian beliefs and practices.

This transition was also marked by

a change in the socio-cultural values. As Chasie writes, "The stress on personal salvation introduced a new individualism in place of the former community spirit" (Chasie, 2005, p. 256). He continues to write, "The notion of personal salvation encouraged individualism in a society where individual identity was indivisible with that of family, clan, *Khel* and village. The values by which the Nagas lived were turned upside down" (Chasie, 2005, p. 261). The notion of individualization is also manifested in "Laburnum for My Head" which is set against this context, where the memorialization of the dead becomes a project in seeking individuality in death. This is resonant of what Aries speaks of, where cemeteries and tombstones in the modern era are associated with perpetuating the memory of the deceased. He writes, "The exaggeration of mourning in the nineteenth century is indeed significant. It means that survivors accepted the death of another person with greater difficulty than in the past...This feeling lies at the origin of the modern cult of tombs and cemeteries" (Aries, 1974, pp. 67-68).

The antipathy of the protagonist of the story "Laburnum for My Head" arises out of these attempts at immortality by men in the advent of modernity. The omniscient narrator

reveals:

But each year as the bush grew taller and the blossoms more plentiful, the phenomenon stood out as a magnificent incongruity, in the space where men tries to cling to a make-believe permanence, wrenched from him by death. His inheritors try to preserve his presence in concrete structures, erected in his homage, vying to out-do each other in size and style. The consecrated ground has thus become choked with the specimen of human conceit. More recently, photographs of the dead have begun to adorn the marble and granite headstones (Ao, 2009, p. 1)

The protagonist is skeptical of the modern practices of memorialization as it is rendered futile for “nature has a way of upstaging even the hardest rock and granite edifices fabricated by men” where “the particular spot displays nothing that man has improvised; only nature, who does not possess any script, abides there: she only owns the seasons” (Ao, 2009, pp. 1-2). At the same time, her desire also is not that of a pre-Christian tradition where domesticity becomes an intrinsic attribute of the feminine. The laburnum tree flourishes and blooms in a space away from the masculine space.

Characterized by its concrete structures and edifices, the cemetery and the tombstones symbolize the attempt of men to defy death and in doing so tries to tame nature, where ageing and dying are a part of the natural processes. Lentina’s wish is fulfilled when she lets nature take its course instead of trying to tame it in her garden. The garden like the cemetery also is artificial and hence the laburnum trees that grow freely on the highways cannot grow in the garden. At the same time, gardens are usually seen as an extension of the domestic space. Domesticity ascribed traditionally to the feminine, also chokes the laburnum trees.

Like most agrarian societies, women and land has had a close relationship in the Naga society. “In the Naga society, title and ancestral property are inherited solely by the male members...The Naga women have no share in such inheritance. The right to ownership of land whether private, clan or community land, always rests with men and is never owned by women...Naga women constitute about 47 per cent of the total population and contribute more than 75 percent of the labour force involved in agriculture” (Longkumer & Jamir, 2012, pp. 32-33).

This is why women in Naga society tend to have a very close relationship with the environment they live in. However, what one could easily miss is the systematic patriarchal marginalization in the name of maintaining an order in society where each gender performs designated roles. Hence, although women are closer to land and nature as majority of the women especially in rural areas engage in production activities, men possess the sole ownership of the land. The inherent relationship between women and land/nature becomes problematic. As Kaur writes:

In dominant modes of patriarchal thought, women are linked closer to nature and men are identified as being closer to culture. Nature and women then are seen as inferior to culture and men. The impact of such dualistic thinking, where hierarchies are set up between dominance and submission, is that the inferiorised group...must internalize this inferiorisation in this identity and collude in this low valuation, honouring the values of the centre, which form the dominant social values.

(Kaur, 2012, pp. 32)

Hence, an ecofeminist reading of the text gives rise to the problem of not only essentializing but also stereotyping women by assigning

them roles that are already dominant in patriarchal discourses. As Plumwood writes:

The inferiorisation of human qualities and aspects of life associated with necessity, nature and women—of nature-as-body, of nature-as-passion or emotion, of nature as the pre symbolic, of nature as primitive, as nature as-animal and of nature as the feminine continues to operate to the disadvantage of women, nature and the quality of human life. (1993, pp. 21)

Lentina's identification with the laburnum blossoms and her desire to be buried under a laburnum tree should not be read as the essentialization of woman and nature. Rather, this obsession of Lentina propels her to be the author of her own death and memorialization, an agency denied to her by patriarchy.

Lentina's acquisition of the plot of land beside the cemetery, which was almost an unwanted wasteland becomes a source of great discomfort for the Town Committee. Lentina's possession of the plot of land threaten to dismantle the patriarchal order that has been so fiercely guarded by the Aos over the ages. What Lentina does in the story becomes significant. Although the land is ultimately taken away as a donation

to be converted into a burial ground, it is done on her own terms. "The new plot of land could be dedicated as the new cemetery and would be available to all on fulfilling the condition that only flowering trees and not headstones would be erected on the gravesites" (Ao, 2009, p. 12). This space becomes the space of female assertion where the dead becomes one with nature in a willing embrace. This is unlike the other male dominated spaces where attempts at resisting mortality are made through artificial monuments. This also becomes the space where Lentina's laburnum trees are finally able to bloom into its full glory. Lentina's victory lies in her ability to work within the patriarchal order and negotiate with it through the creation of a space of resistance which comes to fruition with her death.

The spectre of Lentina's dead husband also haunts her by continuing to exert control. The status of Lentina's widowhood is not peculiar to her. A number of studies conducted across the different tribal groups among the Nagas suggest that there is a higher incidence of widows in the Naga society. A study conducted among the aged population above sixty years of Kohima town revealed that there is a predominance of widows

over widowers. Out of the one hundred people that were taken into account for the study, there were only eight widowers as against fourteen widows (Visilie, 2007, p. 46). A similar study in Mokokchung district in Nagaland has similar findings. Out of the one hundred and six people aged sixty-two and above that were considered for the study, there were eighteen widows as against seven widowers (Ao, 2007, p. 73). It is not just mere coincidence that the number of widows are higher in the Naga society. Women are often encouraged to marry earlier than men and often married off to older men. As Visilie suggests, "Women tend to marry men older than themselves, and sometimes the age gap in marriage is as huge as 8-10 years, which compounds the likelihood of women outliving their spouses" (Visilie, 2007, p. 46). Although there are no restrictions on widow remarriage, it is not encouraged either. On the other hand, widowers, especially those with children are encouraged by the family and the community to marry again in order to nurture the family.

The customary laws allow remarriage, however it discourages widow remarriage.

The church does allow widow remarriage but remarrying after having many children after a certain age is discouraged. The

consequence of a widow having relations with another man is the same with the case of adultery, because as long as she remains in the marital home, she is expected to maintain the sanctity of the first marriage. (North East Network, 2016, p. 108)

Loneliness and melancholia therefore becomes symptomatic of widowhood, more so among older women. As the Naga society makes its way into the modern ways of living, the communal spirit of the traditional society is fading away and as a result of which loneliness among the aged, is becoming more pronounced.

Lentina's growing intimacy with her dead husband's old driver, who also is a widower, although platonic, would be inappropriate not only because she is too old to remarry again but also because customary laws would expect her to mourn the death of her husband at least for a year (Godden, 1897, p. 176). "She had always maintained a discreet distance as befitting a master-servant relationship. But she gradually broke down the barriers by showing her dependence on him, first only by extracting dutiful service; then imperceptibly as a friend; and finally, a confidant" (Ao, 2009, p. 17). Interestingly, her driver becomes the vehicle through which her desire to be buried under a

laburnum tree is fulfilled. Lentina's transgression lies not just in building a relationship with her husband's driver but also in her refusal to be buried beside her husband. Although there are no customary codes that say that a wife should be buried beside her husband, Lentina's refusal to comply with the arrangement made would be a source of embarrassment for the family as it would amount to undermining the patriarchal power symbolized by her husband.

The death of the husband, who is a symbol of patriarchal control in the family, is also the beginning of reconciliation and healing for the family. "The sons too, sensing a new spirit in their mother, began to ask for her advice on business and family matters, something which had never happened during the father's lifetime...They also discovered how uncannily like their father she sounded sometimes" (Ao, 2009, p. 15). Lentina, invisibilized by her husband when he was alive, becomes visible to her sons. In Ao Naga households, the oldest male member has the final say in all decision-making processes. It is also unlikely that a woman's opinion would be taken into account in matters of business. The debates in Nagaland over the reservation of seats for women in

the municipal bodies quickly escalated into the question of what a woman is entitled/ not entitled to do according to customary laws including ownership of land and political participation which are both restricted to women. Hence, it is only in the absence of the patriarchal bind over Lentina that she is able to realise her full potential as her sons become aware that she is not very different from their father in terms of ability.

Feminism in the Naga society is still in its nascent stage. The articulation for a feminine subjectivity in order to give more agency to women is the need of the hour. However, as Longkumer and Jamir writes, "Till date, there has been no significant move by Naga women against their limited role in resource control and management. Though voices from certain sections of women have emerged against the prevailing ownership and control system which remains heavily gender-biased, these voices have so far been isolated ones and simply not strong enough to cause any major stir in the status quo" (Longkumer & Jamir, 2012, pp. 35-36). The political space cannot offer the space for resistance and the articulation of a feminine subjectivity as it remains a male-dominated bastion with little to no women representation.

It is the space of literature therefore that provides the space for transgression, of dissent and resistance for the Ao Naga women. Ao's "Laburnum for My Head" becomes important because of the socio-cultural context that the story is rooted on. The story then not only becomes the story of Lentina's resistance but also the author's individual dissent by reworking patriarchal structures and accommodating female desire through fiction. The familiar is deconstructed and the underlying socio-cultural structures are made apparent which becomes an important exercise of dissent even as Ao Naga women are told by the men to be satisfied with the comparatively better status they enjoy than women from other communities even within the Naga society. The idea of death becomes important not only because of the transgressive potential and the quiet victory of the protagonist of the story but also because of the socio-cultural significance. As discussed earlier in the paper, dying a good death determines if the deceased had led a righteous life. By dying peacefully in her sleep, Lentina's righteousness is proved beyond doubt to the reader who is aware of Lentina's dissent throughout the story. It is death alone that can justify the course of action that Lentina has taken.

Hence, the story ends on this victorious note, “And if you observe carefully, you will be amazed to see that in the entire terrain, there is so far, only one laburnum tree bedecked in its seasonal glory, standing tall over the other plants, flourishing in perfect co-existence, in an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality” (Ao, 2009, p. 20).

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