

The Role of Folklore and Myth in Tamsüla Ao's Narrative Structure: Re-imagining Naga History and Culture

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Abstract: Tamsüla Ao's literary works intricately weave the fabric of folklore, mythology, and oral traditions into a profound narrative structure that offers a re-imagined view of Naga history and culture. By analyzing the narrative techniques and thematic concerns of Ao's works, this paper explores how Ao uses indigenous storytelling methods to critique colonial and postcolonial narratives. Folklore and myth not only serve as a medium for preserving Naga cultural heritage but also function as subversive tools to reclaim history, offering an alternative, nuanced vision of identity and cultural resistance. Ao's works stand as an exemplary contribution to postcolonial literature, providing a powerful commentary on the intersection of folklore, culture, and colonialism.

Keywords: Folklore, Mythology, Oral Traditions, Naga Identity, and Postcolonial.

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Introduction

Tamsüla Ao, one of the most influential Naga writers, has used her literary platform to explore and assert the cultural heritage, identity, and history of the Ao-Naga people, a tribal community from Nagaland, India. Ao's works, such as *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2012), are deeply rooted in the socio-political realities of the region and employ folklore, mythology, and oral traditions to examine the complexities of Naga culture. By skillfully utilizing these traditional elements, Ao crafts narratives that not only preserve the Ao-Naga's cultural memory but also reimagine the region's history through an indigenous lens that critiques the colonial and postcolonial experience.

Ao's literary works serve as a bridge between the past and present, offering a re-imagining of the cultural, social, and historical experiences of the Ao-Nagas. This paper examines the critical role that folklore and myth play in Ao's narrative structure. It explores how Ao integrates oral traditions to reflect the complexities of Naga identity, historical trauma, and the ongoing struggle against colonial and postcolonial forces. Ao's narrative technique of re-imagining the past through mythic storytelling disrupts the linear conception of history, instead offering a cyclical and culturally rooted perspective that challenges the dominant historical discourse.

The Role of Folklore and Myth in Naga Culture

Folklore and myth form the backbone of Ao-Naga culture. These oral traditions—passed down through generations—have not only served as a repository of collective memory but also as guiding principles for understanding the natural and spiritual world. The importance of folklore in Ao-Naga society is underscored by its role in teaching moral values, preserving historical events, and connecting the living to their ancestors and the divine. These mythic narratives, often dramatized through stories of gods, spirits, and legendary heroes, provide Ao with a rich reservoir for developing complex characters and themes in her work.

In Ao's narratives, folklore is not merely decorative but serves as a tool for asserting Naga identity and resisting colonial erasure. Temsula Ao consciously incorporates these traditional elements to convey cultural pride and reaffirm the significance of indigenous knowledge systems. As A.J. Appadurai states,

“the tradition of storytelling is a mode of constructing memory, community, and identity,” and this is precisely what Ao achieves in her works (Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*, 2013).

Through her short stories, Ao evokes characters like the “Jungle Major,” who embodies the resilience of the Ao-Naga people. This figure, symbolizing cultural resistance, echoes the mythic role of tribal heroes who protected their people from external threats, be they foreign invaders or colonial forces. Through the character of the Jungle Major, Ao evokes the valorization of Naga traditions, which were often marginalized or dismissed by colonial powers.

Ao's narrative strategy goes beyond the surface-level use of folklore; it allows her to present history as a continuous, cyclical force. Rather than a static record of past events, history becomes a living and evolving force that constantly informs present-day struggles. This perspective challenges Western historical models that treat the past as something fixed, linear, and separate from the present. Through folklore, Ao creates a space where the past and present are interconnected, where the narratives of resistance, identity, and survival can be revisited and reinterpreted for contemporary relevance. As Ao herself writes in *These Hills Called Home*, "The past is never gone. It is always with us, like the hills that shape our lives" (Ao, 2006). This cyclical understanding of history becomes a powerful force of resistance against the colonial narrative of erasure.

Myth and Colonial Critique: A Subversive Narrative

Ao's engagement with folklore and myth extends beyond the preservation of culture; it functions as a powerful critique of colonial and postcolonial histories. Colonialism often attempted to erase or distort indigenous cultural practices, replacing them with Western ideals of progress, civilization, and rationality. In response to this, Ao uses folklore to reclaim the narrative of the Naga people, subverting the colonial constructions of Naga culture as primitive, uncivilized, and backwards.

In *These Hills Called Home*, Ao juxtaposes the rich oral traditions of the Ao-Nagas with the destructive forces of British colonization and Christian missionary activity. The narrative critiques how these forces sought to supplant indigenous knowledge systems with foreign values. In one instance, Ao depicts the arrival of missionaries as a violent intrusion that not only disrupts indigenous ways of life but also reinterprets Naga spiritual practices through a Western lens. However, Ao's use of folklore demonstrates how these ancient stories persist as resilient, subversive forces.

For example, Ao presents the tale of the "Jungle Major," a character who embodies both the strength of the indigenous people and the resistance against colonial domination. The Jungle Major's role in Ao's narrative is to protect the cultural integrity of the Naga people, fighting against those forces that seek to exploit and diminish Naga identity. Ao's inclusion of such folklore in her narrative does more than preserve tradition; it reimagines history by offering

counter-narratives to colonial discourses. Her characters navigate the turbulent relationship between colonial modernity and traditional Naga culture, revealing the tensions between resistance and adaptation.

Furthermore, Ao's critique of colonialism is not just historical but extends into the postcolonial era. By weaving folklore into her narrative, Ao critiques the continued marginalization and misrepresentation of indigenous cultures in postcolonial India. Her characters, often grappling with issues of displacement, cultural assimilation, and identity, reveal how the legacies of colonialism persist in postcolonial societies, where the indigenous remains marginalized within the national narrative. Folklore, in Ao's hands, becomes a medium through which colonial impositions are resisted, and indigenous voices are amplified.

As noted by Edward Said, "the colonial subject becomes a victim of the representation created about them" (*Orientalism*, 1978), and Ao challenges this representation by reclaiming her people's stories. Folklore becomes a tool for self-representation and empowerment, subverting the external narratives imposed by colonial powers.

The Postcolonial Reimagining of Naga History

Ao's re-imagining of Naga history in her works is not merely an academic exercise; it is a transformative act of cultural reclamation. For the Naga people, their history has been shaped by centuries of colonial intrusion, conflict, and forced assimilation. As a result, the historical narrative of Nagaland is often fragmented, obscured by colonial archives and modern political agendas. Ao uses folklore and myth to reconstruct this fragmented history, offering a vision of the past that is both healing and empowering.

In *Laburnum for My Head*, Ao delves into the complexities of personal and collective identity within a postcolonial context. The protagonist's search for identity is entangled with the myths, stories, and rituals that form the foundation of Naga culture. The use of traditional stories and rituals in Ao's writing serves as both a guide for self-discovery and a resistance against historical erasure. For the protagonist, these stories are not mere relics of the past but essential tools for understanding the present and future. The tension between the protagonist's personal quest for belonging and the larger historical forces shaping her identity highlights the power of folklore in the postcolonial context.

Ao's narrative technique also emphasizes the cyclical nature of history, a perspective deeply rooted in indigenous worldviews. This cyclical understanding of time rejects the linear, Western model of history, which often emphasizes progress and forward movement. Instead, Ao presents a vision of history as a series of interconnected cycles, where past events continuously influence the present. As she writes in *Laburnum for My Head*, "Time is not a line. It is a spiral, where the past returns to haunt the present" (Ao, 2012). This cyclical perspective allows Ao to reimagine Naga history in a way that emphasizes resilience and continuity, rather than rupture and loss.

For Ao, the mythic past is not something to be left behind but something to be re-engaged with in order to navigate the complexities of postcolonial identity. Her use of folklore and myth allows her to resist Western historiographical models that seek to fragment and isolate indigenous cultures. In reimagining Naga history through mythic storytelling, Ao presents a vision of the past that is both liberating and empowering, offering a counter-narrative to the colonial and postcolonial impositions that have shaped Naga identity.

Conclusion

Temsüla Ao's integration of folklore and myth into her literary works serves as a powerful tool for re-imagining Naga history and culture. Through the lens of these traditional narratives, Ao critiques the colonial and postcolonial forces that have sought to marginalize indigenous identities and cultures. Her works present a dynamic, cyclical understanding of history that challenges the linear, progress-oriented narratives imposed by colonial powers. Ao's use of folklore is not just a means of preserving cultural heritage but also a subversive act of resistance. It allows her to reclaim the Naga past and offer a re-imagined future, where indigenous knowledge systems are celebrated and preserved. Ao's work is a testament to the resilience of folklore, a force that not only survives but thrives in the face of colonial domination. Through her engagement with myth and oral traditions, Ao provides a model for how folklore and myth can shape postcolonial literary discourse, offering a pathway to cultural reclamation and identity reformation.

Her work, as a creative act of reclaiming Naga culture and identity, not only contributes to literature but also offers a counter-history that subverts the colonial and postcolonial narratives

that have historically sought to obscure Indigenous voices. As the Naga proverb goes, “The hills remember those who walk their paths,” Ao’s writing ensures that the memory of her people’s struggles, resistance, and resilience will endure for future generations. Through folklore and myth, Ao reaffirms the power of narrative in shaping and preserving the cultural integrity of the Ao-Nagas.

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