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The Cultural Identity of the Naga Community from *Laburnum for My Head*

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Abstract:

In this research paper, the tribal community plays a significant role. *Laburnum For My Head* is an eight-story collection by Temsula Ao, and it is about the tribal people of Nagaland, India. Naga people's identity is continuously deteriorating in a changing world. Cultural identity comes out of traditional practice and belief in it. This paper explains the cultural values, customs, traditions, and societal structures of the Naga community. In *Laburnum for My Head*, the Naga community of India is portrayed as a cultural phenomenon. India has a rich diversity of cultures and communities, making the differentiation between one culture and another challenging. Due to British rule in India, there are noticeable influences of British culture on Indian traditions. Temsula Ao explores conflicts, ethics, and rules for life, emphasizing that communities should not only adhere to their traditions but also adapt. In any community, traditional values often coexist with influences from other cultures, highlighting the impact of British culture on indigenous people. The Naga community, in particular, maintains certain unique traditions and values. Transmission of Naga culture takes place in modern times also. The Naga community provides us with glimpses of tribal communities and their skeptical nature. The present paper examines the cultural identity of the Naga people and this paper assesses the identity and culture of the Naga tribe in India.

Keywords: - Tradition, language, ethnicity, Cultural Identity, Customs, societal structures.

**Introduction: -**

The Naga community is the indigenous community of India. In the Naga community, there are thirty different types of tribes, mainly Ao, Sumi, Angami, Chakhesang, Lotha, etc. Each tribe has its dialect and language, but these tribes have values for their culture and customs. Temsula Ao was born in 1945 and died in 2022. Temsula was an Indian short story writer, poet, fiction writer and ethnographer. She was a professor of English at North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) from where she retired in 2010. She served as the director of the North East Zone Cultural Centre between 1992 and 1997 on deputation from NEHU. She was awarded the Padma Shri award for contributing to literature and education. Her book *Laburnum for My Head* received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in the short story category. Her works have been translated into Assamese, Bengali, French, German, Hindi, and Kannada. She wrote several stories and poems describing the folklore tradition and essence of it. Every incident of the narratives has cultural symbolism and every aspect of life represents the true meaning of living. The stories are rich in symbolism and narrative technique. The cultural context of Nagaland where customs and rituals are significant for death, legacy, identity and tradition. Cultural norms and a quest for identity are explored by Temsula Ao. Culture and its identity change through adapting political, social and economic realities. Communities' essence depends on traditional practices and modern influences. The Naga community is not only about farming, rituals, and festivals but also their preservation of culture, way of life, and spirituality. The Naga community made close relationships with nature, culture, and their heritage. The long-lasting impact of any culture is left behind on the reader. Encounters with Naga culture, tradition, customs, beliefs, and heritage represent the identity of the tribal community. In the Naga community women constrain themselves to avoid misuse of culture. The Naga community and its culture depicted the nature of humans. Agencies like underground people and the Indian government make the Naga community suffer for no reason. Their struggle for existence, identity, and tradition shows their ethnicity, morality, ethics, and value for living.

Clothes, Arts, and Crafts of the Naga Community: -

They have their way of using and making handmade attires that are made from silk or cotton. Weaving techniques of clothes inherited by generation of earlier generations. There is also a difference between wearing clothes between men and women. Men prefer a wraparound cloth or loincloth and women shawls and skirts. Attire is unique in decoration with shells, beads, and other ornaments. Each design has a symbolism of the tribes' cultural identity. Clothes show



tribes' social status and condition. Like clothes and traditions of community, each and every character from the story is woven with each other. *The Letter* presents the clothes of men as shawl and dao which are famous clothes of Nagaland. The shawl is handcrafted and woven with rayon and cotton showing social status. The Naga people are known for their intricate wood carvings, which are often used in constructing and decorating morungs (men's dormitories) and making ritualistic items like totem poles and shields.

A Simple Question is a short story about the hardships of the Naga community. There is one illiterate woman who asks a question to an army officer to release her husband. The identity of the Naga people and their struggle for independence is described in the story. The sense of belonging starts to decline in the minds of the community because of modernization. The gender role of a woman is to cook and bring up children but, in this story, Imdongla saves her husband Tekaba and other elder people from Indian Soldiers. She says: -

'Look at them; aren't they like your own fathers? How would you feel if your fathers were punished for acting out of fear? Fear of you Indian soldiers and fear of the mongrels of the jungle.'

Women are considered the weaker sex, subordinate and ordinary. If a woman decides something she makes sure to end it with her power and enthusiasm. Imdongla breaks the shackles of her limitation and demolishes her identity as subordinate or other. Villagers who are caught in the fear and difficulty of handling a problem. It is an irony of mankind in which innocent people are confined and tortured by both parties. Imdongla is a submissive wife and mother.

Social Structure: -

The cultural heritage of the Naga community has ethical value even in modern times. The clan-based structure of the Naga community provides safety and security for each other. Each tribe has its unique governance system, like 'Chieftainship,' in which elders hold significant positions in decision-making. Sometimes decision-making can be done by the community collectively. The power of traditional councils plays an important role in maintaining order and law. The Naga community delves into villages where they share each other's thoughts, cooperate, and respect their elders. Naga people have had strong social connectivity throughout the ages. *Death of a Hunter* is a story where Imchanok is considered the leader of the village and maintains all kinds of relationships through his acts. He has concern for his people so he



used to feed them and feel safer with his hunting skills. The people of Imchanok's village believe in him and his deeds for them.

In *The Letter* underground extortionists demand money from poor villagers but every people have decided their spending plans. Extortion from national workers shows the indifference of the government. The helplessness of innocent people and killing for money in the process shows the critical condition of the Naga people. Even though the headman of the village could not do anything to resist this kind of act. A letter is found in the hands of a dead man revealing that his son is asking for money. Naga people or tribal people have hope for betterment for their future but the hope is demolished by underground agents.

'At home, in fields and forests, their minds were filled with resentment and anger at the injustice inflicted on them over the years by the various players in Nagaland's murky politics, plunging Naga society into anarchy.'

Laburnum for My Head is a story about the unconventional desire for a laburnum tree that is not seen in the community. It challenges the conventional notion of legacy and the ability to inspire and enchant others through trees in a woman's wish. Women face the resistance from community and family but her strong willpower and independence encourage her. The tension between individual wishes and cultural norms is represented through character.

Three Women is a story about three generations of women. Martha is a child of tea tribe parents but she is adopted by Mademla. Martha is a dark complexion and strange feature girl because her parents belonged to the Tea tribe. Medemla and lipuktula are from the Ao Naga tribe so their skin color and bodily features are different from Martha's. The history of interconnection between three women represents the epoch of each generation. Continuity in the lives of these women shows the ethnic uniqueness of Nagaland. The source of the identity of these three women is the history and connection of traditional values. In this story tradition, belief, selfhood and own roots found a linkage between ethnicity, culture and heritage of Nagaland their community. How Lipuktula is raped by Merensashi and the output of that is Medemla. Because of social constrain, she could not talk about the rape and illicit child of another man. Here in the story, the conventional mindset of every generation is described. The social fabric of society would not allow any woman or man to go against any government law. The condition of three women in each era describes the societal pressure.



Festivals, Rituals, and Food: -

Various types of rituals and events are presented by the people. People of the Naga community celebrate so many festivals to reflect happiness. Festivals, like agricultural cycles, have a special focus on rice cultivation accompanied by other types of crops such as maize, millet, vegetables, and pulses. This agricultural festival shows dependency on nature and cycles of planting and harvesting. In this contemporary age, the Naga people also use traditional methods for farming. Rice is a constant with any kind of meal, like meat, vegetables, fish, bamboo shoots, and fermented products. In the story *Death of a Hunter* Imchanok is a skilled hunter who not only hunts for a living but also, hunts for the reputation he got from other people. The government awarded him a gun for killing a rogue elephant who destroyed farmland and trampled several people to death. Imchanok was given the chance to kill that elephant in seven days and he did the assigned work. He does not take the gun which is offered as an award because he wants his freedom of choice. Long ago Imchanok killed a monkey who ate his grain while carried to barns in the village.

‘So, you wanted to destroy me by stealing my paddy, did you? Look at now. You scared and bullied my womenfolk; where are yours now? Another male will take them over while I cut you up and feed my people with your flesh.’

Tangcheta the wife of Imchanok is vegetarian and she doesn’t want to cook any kind of animal in her kitchen so she gives a special pot for cooking it. Here shows the differentiation between the eating habits of people some are vegetarian and some are non-vegetarian masses who eat for a living. When he killed a boar that made him upset and he gave up hunting after the incident. Imchanok realized that killing animals is not a solution to any problem because nature made them live. This belief in nature and natural beings is seen in this story. Imchanok’s killing animals for any kind of reason represents the hunting habit as the primary need of eating of Naga people.

The Boy Who Sold an Airfield is a story of Pokemong a Naga boy who was run away from his home. He had been doing menial jobs in households in Assam. He meets various types of people and enjoys various types of food. In Jiten's house he enjoys pulao and chicken curry and when he meets a white soldier means a foreign American soldier, he enjoys foreign food. He acknowledges the rituals and customs of other people which he met.



Religion, Beliefs, and Nature: -

Naga people are always connected to nature and religion. They respect the environment so they stick to nature. Naga people believe in spirits that they think reside in nature. Naga people practice animism, which means belief in innumerable spiritual beings concerned with human affairs. The laburnum tree from the story *Laburnum for My Head* symbolizes the connection between the Naga community and nature. The seasonal blooming of the tree represents the memories of past and happy days. Sowing a tree or desire for a tree shows a love for nature. The symbiotic relationship between humans and nature is present in the story. The pantomime of seasonal natural beauty is shown in the story. Graves for Christian beliefs but the laburnum tree for Lentina's grave presents the true natural love of the Naga people. Cultural expectations and the quest for identity show in the given story. The vibrant yellow blossom and laburnum tree is a symbol of continuity, serenity, hope, life, joy, beauty, and aspiration to leave behind lasting or memory. Laburnum's blooming is also presenting the fulfilment of desire and dreams. Perception of every visitor to the cemetery appreciate laburnum beauty and mortality of a desire is remembered. The presence of a mortal being is seen after death in the tree and blossom.

In *The Boy Who Sold an Airfield*, Pokemong a Naga boy used to live and meet people who are different in religion. Every religion has some belief system. When he encounters a white American soldier, he finds a different kind of living and belief system.

Conclusion

Temsula Ao's "*Laburnum for My Head*" offers a profound exploration of the Naga people's cultural identity, grappling with the complexities of tradition, modernity, and the enduring impact of colonialism. Through her evocative narratives, Ao demonstrates how the Naga community navigates the delicate balance between preserving their rich cultural heritage – encompassing unique traditions, social structures, and a deep connection to nature – while adapting to the changing realities of the modern world. The stories in this collection vividly portray the challenges faced by the Naga people in maintaining their cultural identity amidst external pressures and internal conflicts. The intricate interplay between tradition and modernity is evident in various aspects of Naga life, from their social structures and religious beliefs to their artistic expressions and daily practices. Ao's work serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of cultural preservation and the resilience of indigenous communities in the face of globalization and cultural homogenization. By giving voice to the Naga people, she not



only enriches the literary landscape but also contributes significantly to our understanding of cultural identity and the complexities of navigating a changing world.

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