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Nature and Socio-Cultural Values in the Select
Poems of T. Senka Ao's *Süngti Berem (The Still
Pearl)*

Abstract: *In a society that is basically tradition-oriented, most of the indigenous writers from Nagaland have employed literature to explore the experiences of their world using the medium of their rich cultural heritage. The current paper will be an analysis of T. Senka Ao's latest poetry collection entitled Sungti Berem (The Still Pearl) published in 2018. This collection of poetry forays into varied themes dealing with nature, memories especially reminiscences of childhood, the concept of religion dealing with sin and grace, myths and tradition, preoccupation with mortality, death and others. This collection of poetry has a universal appeal and is thought-provoking presenting a gamut of human emotions but yet rooted in tradition. Since no critical research has yet been done on this particular book, this paper will be helpful to future researchers on this subject.*

Keywords: belief, myth, culture, nature, heritage.

Nature and Socio-Cultural Values in the Select Poems of T. Senka Ao's *Süngti Berem (The Still Pearl)*

Dr. I. Talisenla Imsong¹

Introduction

A Litterateur and educationist, T. Senka Ao (born 1945) is a veteran journalist who was the Editor-in-Chief of the 'Ao Milen' the first newspaper in the Ao language in Nagaland. He is the creator of the character Alokba, a witty commentary on social and current issues featured in the Ao daily vernacular newspaper. He has authored 14 books, and 107 short stories in Ao, has several articles to his name, and his books are included in the ICSE and ISC Board New Delhi. He is also the examiner of the Arrangtet Examination-which awards the highest Ao language degree. Apart from being a reputed author, he is also a social activist who was a Member of the Peace Committee in the 1981 ethnic clash between the Aos and the Sumis and also a member of the Peace Committee in 1985 during the strife between Assam and Nagaland. A recipient of the Nagaland Governor's Award in Literature in 2016, the Government of India conferred the Padma Shri award in 2022 for his distinguished service in the field of literature and education. The award is in recognition of his service as a "Tribal Ao Author, Teacher and Journalist-preserving Nagaland's Ao language through his writings over decades." His book selected for the current paper is entitled *Süngti Berem (The Still Pearl)* which was published in 2018 and is a collection of 112 poems. The paper does not apply any school of theory but is a thematic analysis of select poems from this collection.

Literature is a reflection of a society or its milieu and poetry being an aspect of it, is the carrier of culture. Poetry is one of the oldest and most common forms of genre whereby poets play an important role in disseminating such values to their readers. In Ao literature, it is a fact that the verse form existed as the main source of expression besides songs and they have been the repository of cultural values. The troubled political climate, the beautiful landscape, the confluence of various ethnic groups etc have been sources of inspiration for most poets and T. Senka's poems are replete with varied themes such as the beauty of nature, God and religion, reminiscences of childhood, myth and tradition, preoccupation with mortality, death and others. This poetry collection has a universal appeal and is thought-provoking presenting a gamut of human emotions, and yet rooted in tradition.

Nagaland is surrounded by thick flora and fauna where the life of the people depends on the graciousness of nature which provides the basic needs of the community. People are blessed with fertile soil to till and grow food of various kinds and nature bestows them with fresh air, water and food. Apart

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from satiating the bodily needs of the people, nature provides them with tools for work and hunting, timber for making houses, wood for burning and cooking, and many other things. Nature is viewed as sacred and absolute for both spiritual development and physical need. Thus, many poems treat nature as their sole object or source of inspiration and at times viewed as a divine force capable of sustenance and pleasure. Nature has always been a source of inspiration and motivation for most writers and can even be seen as an instrument in concretely portraying or representing abstract ideas. Nature and humanity are connected souls which cannot co-exist without each other especially for the latter. These two inseparable souls suffer when detached from each other and are healed when brought back together. This is undeniably evident in writers like the Romantic poets of the 18th century who glorified Nature, took her in as its mentor and dwelled in all her bodily forms for its pleasure. Dwelling on this subject of 'basic' needs and the transcendental intimacy between Man and Nature, the 'rural' life or the countryside has been typically categorized as the ideal place or form for the healing process. Keeping in mind that the study is based on the tribal people what they were like, what they are like and what they will be like, this brings to the table the importance of Nature for the tribal people and also the blueprint of how people perceived it. There is an underlying understanding that Nature was by default a huge benefactor for the tribal people prompting Nature to enhance herself with various faces and figures which made way for culture in itself to evolve and be affected. To deal with these two issues, Nature was literally worshipped; for the providence, for all the signs in which science was not present and much more. The Nagas, in general, are awestruck by the beauty and bounty of Nature. Nature is seen as beauty to be beheld and majesty to be adored. In the words of Imsong:

The Nagas maintain that the land is their mother and call their land "mother land". The "Mother Earth" from whom people have emanated retains a personal relationship with them. It is the land from which the Naga people trace their origin. Earth is their mother, who gave birth to humanity and gave shelter and providence with her innate power to creativity, fertility and procreation (199).

Nature and Socio-Cultural Values in Senka Ao's Poetry

Nature is perceived as a source of healing to the body and soul. It revives the soul of the one who takes delight in it, appreciating it for every good thing it offers to humanity. The poems entitled "Anepongi Anütsüng" (Morning Sunrise) and "Tongnügen" (Rainbow) are poems celebrating the serene and tranquil nature that abounds us. In "Anepongi Anütsüng" the poet is in awe of the tuneful songs of the birds he describes as peaceful, calm and serene. Dewdrops on flower petals described as "Kotaker sentinükjang" (*Singti Berem* 1) glitter like gold delighting the onlookers. The personified sun quickens its pace to knock on every door and its rays pierce through every crack and light up the houses. "Tongnügen" brings to the readers a wonderful array of colours in the form of a beautiful rainbow

amidst the clouds; the poet describes it as a wonderful tapestry of colours. When the rainbow disappears, it saddens the poet and he invites the rainbow to come and stay at his place and to rest throughout the night. What is appealing in these two poems is the poet's attention to detail, his observant recognition of the unobserved, and the joy that abounds when he is in the laps of nature. Of late however, depletion of nature is rampant and Senka Ao being a poet of the soil with indigenous roots, nature has not merely been the means of sustenance but also an important agent from which he draws inspiration for his poetic outpourings. What can be discerned from his nature poems is not just reverence and appreciation for nature in its varied forms, but a deeper and global concern for ecology and the threats faced by the onslaught of technological advancement in the modern world.

Through all ages and across all societies love is considered as the core basis for all moral activities; it is the existential basis of the moral order. Love is not just one moral virtue but the form of all moral virtues. In the same manner, love is not just one moral precept but it is the form of all of them. As such, the next theme of interest in this book deals with parental love; this love according to the poet is of the highest order. "Kinüwasalang" (Childhood's Abode) glorifies a mother's love; every child is raised in one's mother's lap. This is the first source of security for a child and from such a platform have raised warriors, leaders and cultured men. A mother according to the poet is the root of the child's language of love, courage and temerity. "Ojalai yutsüba" (Mother's Inheritance) is a poignant poem about the death of a beloved mother. The poet is bitter about his mother's demise but is comforted when in his dreams she reminds him that he is more privileged than others who never had the opportunity to experience a mother's love. In "Tebu ka nungi rongsen," (Treasures from a Father) the poet celebrates a father who has worked tirelessly to provide for his family. But more than material wealth, the poet reminds the readers that it is the time spent with his father in conversation that is far greater than wealth. A father's words of wisdom and love are akin to a guiding lamp, a supporting cane on rocky and perilous roads. They are sheltered from the stormy weather, shelter from all life's calamities, problems and difficulties. A father's words of wisdom are an oar and he concludes the poem by stating that:

Lanuwa pei rebuke den (Childhood days spent with one's father)

Mapang agiba temeten, (This is timeless)

Rongsen agi malizüktet, (Money cannot buy such a treasure)

Mapang agi malangzüktet (*Süngti Berem*117), reiterating that moments spent with fathers is precious that cannot be bought by wealth or time. Generally, the father is considered to be the head of the family and in this poem, fathers have been symbolized as oars; just as a boat needs oars to reach its destination, fathers are looked up to for guidance and direction.

T. Senka's poetic dimensions again subtly reveal the social and moral preoccupation in his poetry, and in the poems dealing with this theme, he is most ironical. These are poems that remind us about the values which define one's identity and the essence of a human being, i.e., to be humane,

generous, respectful towards nature and realize one's worth by contributing to society. "Moral goodness," according to Aristotle, "is the result of habit, from which it has actually got its name, being a slight modification of the word ethos" (Aristotle 31). Moral consciousness is an integral part of human development that is intimately connected with the progressive development of human consciousness. It would be right to say that moral consciousness has been present throughout the existence of human beings from cavemen to modern human beings. These poems reflect the vices and degraded moral standards of people in contemporary society wherein the poet brings in the moral principles deemed ideal. In "Mesüktepba," (Similarity) the poet decries hypocrisy and warns readers to be wary of falsehood. There is just a thin line that separates truth from lies and he employs the imagery of the 'pongen' fruit in the jungle which deceives people into believing it as a mango. In the poem he has used this fruit as a symbol to denote hypocrisy; the poet has not overtly portrayed it but this symbol can be associated especially with politicians who give empty and false promises. He again likens it to a weed that grows among the rice paddy referred to as 'sangremer tsük' (*Süngti Berem* 17). This weed is very similar to a paddy that people harvest along with the rice. In life too, one comes across deceitful people and the poet wants us to be wary of such people. In "Temiem aneti odi," (Hunting for Love) the poet again criticizes the hypocrisy and frugality of rich people who despite their wealth donate mere rags and leftovers to orphans and other needy people. He states:

Nai tajungtiba agüjang, (Give your best)

Ibaji temeim süngjang (*Süngti Berem* 18). (That is the real fruit of love)

Such charity is not prompted by love and the real fruit of love is when people give their best.

"Ashioktsür" (Trickery) is a poem where the poet is critical of people who belittle themselves by lying. According to the poet, the irony is that a person who lies ends up fooling himself:

Nai ne mulung ashioktsür. (You trick your own heart)

Nai na tama ashioktsür (You end up fooling yourself) (*Süngti Berem* 25).

He concludes that lying is illusory and there's no antidote to lying; in fact, lying consumes an entire personality. Everyone is endowed with the faculty of reasoning and a moral sense of ethics, and the decision to be morally upright rests with the individual himself. "Terizüngdak" (Safekeeping) is another poem that contains an invaluable message for the readers focusing on the importance of love for fellow human beings. The heart is our guiding force in life and at the end of life, God judges us by what we hoard and amass in our hearts. From morning till evening, whoever stores love will grow in God's love which will be stored in heaven and the afterlife, God will clothe each individual accordingly. In the poem entitled "Temeim sentsüh," (Debt of Love) the poet talks about altruistic and unconditional love. The speaker in the poem returns everything to him the riceball, shawl and medicine which was given to him in his time of need. But love according to the poet, is not to be returned to one who practices it, but shared with the needy. To quote:

Ne temeim sentsüh, (Your debt of love)
Ne dang meimer nem masü, (Should be given not to those who love you)
Piangpi timtemer nem, (But those in need)
Mulung bena agüjang (This love should be given willingly and in abundance). (*Süngti Berem 56*)

The poem “Kong senso ka asür” (Birth of a Citizen) is a reminder to everyone about shouldering responsibilities and tasks assigned to us. This is particularly true for working professionals who do not perform their assigned tasks diligently. The poet opines that the first error, a sin and a failure is when one takes light of one’s profession and doesn’t contribute anything towards society. Abandoning one’s profession is the second error; procrastination is the third error; indifference towards one’s profession is the fourth failure; and giving false testimony for failing in one’s job is the fifth failure. This failure is far-reaching and affects not just the individual but a whole generation. The poet reminds us that our profession is our sole responsibility and states- “Wadangji ne temeten” (One’s Profession is one’s own responsibility) (*Süngti Berem 69*). For a society to progress, every individual should work tirelessly and inculcate work ethics. “Na koda noktaker” (How You Stand) enforces the significance of a life lived, and the temerity of facing failures in life. The poet likens our journey in life to that of one ascending a mountain where the path is narrow and slippery and that of a journey across a narrow bridge surrounded by thorny bushes. One may fall, get hurt and cry, or one may be scarred by the thorns, but this experience is not confined to one alone:

Saka koma noktaker (But how one rises up from the fall)
Alimai asüngdanger (Is the question that the world raises). (*Süngti Berem78*)

This poem reiterates that in life’s journey, everybody falters at one point or the other and the strength of a character is proven by how we redeem ourselves after the fall. As a social critic, the poet has employed all the above-mentioned imageries and symbols in his poems to convey certain moral truths to his readers.

Conclusion

Süngti Berem (The Still Pearl) abounds in its thematic concerns and there are many more themes that the researcher has been unable to analyze at length which is one of the limitations of this paper. However, from what has been discussed above, it can be ascertained that this collection of poetry is a result of T. Senka Ao’s poetic vision of unceasing fluidity. Poetry, like music, food or smell, has a lasting memory on the readers that can frequently recur and reciprocate once it is perused. Some of the poems analyzed are sublime on their own evoking nostalgic feelings while others bring forth certain issues pertaining to our society. His nature poems have moments of grace making them extraordinary and one can detect a mode of dialectic between contraries and binary opposites especially in the poems

dealing with social evils where the poet emphatically lays bare his soul and mind. His creativity is steeped in an awareness of social issues thwarting the progress of society, yet his irony is not aimed at moralizing. His poetry abounds with nature but it is not the romantic idealization of nature of the 19th Century. He does not discern spirits behind every nature like Wordsworth; values nature as a force of change like Shelley, nor does he long to escape into the world of nature like Keats. It cannot be denied that before the Nagas embraced Christianity, their forefathers worshipped nature in different forms such as stones and trees and the Aos in particular trace their origin to “Lungterok” which translates as “Six Stones.” As such, to date, some Nagas still retain this thin strain of spiritual and cultural relationship with nature. However, for Senka Ao, though nature has inspired him to compose poetry, his appreciation is mostly for its universal aesthetic appeal.

This collection of poetry can again be stated to be the poet’s apparent vision to celebrate, promote and preserve his rich heritage, especially the Ao language. Empowering mother tongue is his creative identification and his literary legacy for the younger generation. T. Senka Ao has truly enriched Ao literature through his literary outputs at a time when the Ao language is almost on the verge of being extinct. It is also true that in all indigenous societies prior to the written language, oral tradition has been the main agent of transmitting knowledge about folk culture and tradition. Oral tradition has indeed been the repository of different forms of literature such as folk songs, proverbs, myths, legends and others. Belonging to the indigenous Ao tribe of Nagaland, T. Senka Ao’s poetry is again a testament to the continuation of this oral tradition which is evident by his recurrent motifs, symbols and myths that are distinct and unique to the Ao tribe.

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