**Ars Artium: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Studies and Culture**
**ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889 • ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423**
**Vol. 9, January 2021**
**Pp. 18-27**
**https://www.arsartium.org**

# Beckoning of Lost Eden: Use of Myth in A. D. Hope and Temsula Ao

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## Abstract

Myth has been used in literature both as archetype as well as structure so as to create a cultural contemporaneity of human experience by situating man in a larger continuum of time and space. Australian poet A. D. Hope who admittedly aligns himself with European creative tradition, also employs myths while interrogating some of the most puzzling of human questions. His incorporation of myths and legends as if pleads for a re-interpretation, re-structuring and re-moulding of the 'deadened present' to provide appropriate symbols for expressing a meaningful impression with the suggestion of a system of surviving values. For example, in the poem "Australia", Hope's lament for lost cultural roots brings into consciousness the urge for some cataclysmic regeneration of the nation as implied in the mythic images such as the 'sphinx' and the 'stone lion.' Likewise, the overall tenor of the poetry of North East India also articulates an urge for reclaiming the lost identity, the lost Elysium of peace amidst the cacophony of traumatic experience of exile, terror and migration. For Temsula Ao, storytelling is a powerful weapon of subversion, of protest, representing the power of man in shaping reality through language. In the poem "The Old Story Teller", the agency of storytelling with fables and tales pertaining to mystic rivers and magic mountains, gestures to a possibility of change with a simultaneous conviction of a writer's 'racial responsibility' in the urge for 'perpetuating the existential history and essential tradition' in the posterity and thus providing the world of readers a rich storehouse of North-East Indian folk-lore. This paper deals with the poetry of these two poets who belong to different countries and yet negotiate more or less similar kinds of crises facing the artistic urge for self-definition.

**Keywords:** Lost Elysium, Cultural roots, Mystic rivers, Magic mountains, Essential traditions

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Too well I see and rue the dire event,
That with sad overthrow and foul defeat
Hath lost us heaven, and all this mighty host
In horrible destruction laid thus low…
Though all our glory extinct, and happy state
Here swallowed up in endless misery (Lines 134-137 & 141-142).

This excerpt from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Book 1) sounds to be very much emblematic (though in an oblique way owing to the implicit difference between the role of the speaker here and that of colonized others), of the experience of any writer or creative artist who represents a nation that entails a history of colonization. As a palliative for the trauma of an ignoble present, the poet or the artist resorts to storytelling that as an agency, seeks to rejuvenate the fossilized past to provide appropriate symbols for expressing a meaningful impression with the suggestion of a system of surviving values. In this literary project of creating self-image, myth has been used both as archetype as well as symbol and the writer seeks to show him/herself located at a wider space beyond the disturbing present. My paper deals with two poets who belong to different countries and yet negotiate more or less similar kinds of crises facing the artistic urge for self-definition.

Australian poet A. D. Hope who admittedly aligns himself with European creative tradition, employs myths while interrogating some of the most puzzling of human questions. As a modern poet yet with a strong penchant for tradition, A. D. Hope firmly believed that myth should be reinterpreted according to poetic needs, and should be fully justified according to the current social and political circumstances. In his use of myth one further detects an engaging conjunction of psychology and literature. The major aspects of Hope's poetry include the 'man-woman relationship' with an overt celebration of primitive vitality and, though he has used a wide range of myths such as Greek, Roman and Indian to mention a few, the general tone of erotic mysticism in Hope's poetics often leads a critic like Paul Kene to dub Hope as "a poet of Edenic Myth" (Kane: 1996: 148). Yet for a careful reader, the poetic insinuation of a vision wider than the physical is too obvious to be missed. For example "Imperial Adam", one of the classical poems of A. D. Hope, shows under the façade of male-dominance in sex, the poetic advocacy for the true and ideal sort of companionship between man and woman. In the ending part, the persona seems to have looked askance at the bestial pleasure of orgasm in the name of sex and implies the seed of destruction (in the image of 'the first murderer') in the act of procreation: "And saw its water break, and saw, in fear / Its quaking muscles in the act of birth, / Between her legs a pigmy face appear, / And the first murderer lay upon the earth. ("Imperial Adam" 41-44).

Another masterpiece "The Return of Persephone" subtly expresses 'the renewal and growth' of 'love' (instead of that of the 'grain' as traditionally held) which is yet another very important aspect of human life in Hope's poetics and through this

myth, the poet seems to disapprove the destructive impulses of men unleashed in the form of universal violence and urge women to retain their natural sexuality and Love (Eros) in order to drag their strayed partners back from this pursuit of violence.

In the poem titled "What the Serpent Really Said", once again the readers come across Hope's erotic mysticism through an ironic rehearse of another mythic proposition. Here in a seductive speech to Eve, Satan (in the guise of a serpent) tempts the latter to taste 'the first fruit of a new immortality' – i.e. by tasting physical death herself, she would deliver a never-ending generation of men and women and thus transmute herself as an immortal fount of life. The serpent cajoles the sentiment of the fairer sex by describing her as capable of a higher plane of sexual mysticism in so far as, in her, the speaker foresees a triumph of femininity and its transcendence over the gist of mortal knowledge, of good and evil as experienced by Adam who is just another 'naked animal hid in human dress' ("What the Serpent Really Said" 22).

The poet's exaltation of love as the life-force behind all creativity and the surveillance of spring in the lives of poets and artists since antiquity nowhere receive a better exposition as in the poem "Pervigilium Veneris". Being gifted with mercurial gifts of Apollo, (the God associated more with Light and Intellect and less with the physicality or Earthly pleasures), the sensuality and passion of Aphrodite (the goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, passion and procreation), artists such as Pushkin, Byron, Goethe and Ronsard find their ablest expression in the highest form of beauty and authenticity symbolized by Zeus as the 'avatar' or incarnation in Greek pantheon. "Neither of their divine gifts was denied: / Assured by the rule that holds in love and war, / Apollo their source, Aphrodite their guide, / And Zeus their avatar." ("Pervigilium Veneris" 21-24) The co-existence of both Classical and Christian myth in the poems discussed so far no doubt conforms to some primordial secularity of Hope's poetics which very much like that of Yeats, seems to have chosen Homer as the idol in search of poetic truth.

Nevertheless, the function of myth in literature continues to engage critical speculations with regard to a basic question – does it peremptorily tend to valorize the past only or reserve some teleological import for the present and future as well? Hope's blatant treatment of the erotic, his comic-ironic stance to experience and his biting satire (that often seems to jolt readers out of a sense of literary security), no doubt serves to add distinction to Hope's use of myth. In fact, Hope's treatment of myth in his poetry seems to validate to a certain extent, chiefly, the Sociological and also the Pedagogical aspects of myth as propounded by American mythologist Joseph Campbell and critic Mridusmita Mahanta has aptly mentioned the four basic functions of myth as per Campbell –

> … the Mystical Function – experiencing the awe of the universe; the Cosmological Function – explaining the shape of the universe; the Sociological Function – supporting and validating a certain social order; and the Pedagogical function – how to live a human life-time under any

> circumstances. […]. Campbell's sociological function considers the role of myth as a 'personal mentor,' in that its stories provide a psychological road map for the finding oneself in the labyrinth of complex modern world. (Mahanta 2011: 36)

One has to reckon with the fact that myth has an intangible omnipresence with a tendency of manifesting itself tangible in man's everyday life in the form of rituals, dreams, customs, religious beliefs etc. In *The Function of Myth in Sickness and Health*, Thomas Mann thus righteously opines that the myth is an eternal truth in contrast to an empirical truth. He avers: "It does not matter in the slightest whether a man named Adam ever actually existed; the myth about him in the book of Genesis presents a picture of the birth and development of human moral consciousness, which is true for all people of all ages and religions."[1] In addition to these arguments, the reader gets confronted with many more authentic aspects of deliberation such as - in the nature of Adam and Eve, the whole humanity is represented both in its original goodness and later corruption.

Hope's use of myth gestures to the poet's discourse on the ambivalent nature of social values in the modern society. The simultaneous existence of good and evil in the society of man is implied in Hope's treatment of two characters – 'Cain' and 'Abel' - and critic Jalalul Haq, has aptly observed in this context: ".... they are equally sharing in whatever cultural development is taking place here in - with the difference, however, that one is striving to do it for betterment of it, to save it, the other for the deterioration of it, to destroy it." (Haq 1964: 224)

A similar kind of dialectic is found in the poem "The Sacred Way" where the persona negotiates the contrary pulls between the traditional, heroic past occupying his youth ("The world I grew up in now belongs to the past" 5) and the unedifying present of the modern world the self-immolating proclivity of which (as per the poet's vision), threatens the nuclear innocence in the progeny so as to deter its search for the cultural roots or heritage or, so to say, the 'sacred way' of life to follow: "We have lost that world. How shall my son go on / To form his archetypal image of man? / Frankenstein? Faust? Dracula? Don Juan?/ O Absolom, my son!" (13-16). The Biblical parallel of David-Absalom no doubt adds poignancy to Hope's use of myth in diagnosing the malaise of the present.

His incorporation of myths and legends pleads for a re-interpretation, re-structuring and re-moulding of the baffling experience of 'deadened present' to provide appropriate symbols for expressing a meaningful impression with the suggestion of a system of surviving values. For example in the poem "Australia", Hope's lament for lost cultural roots brings into consciousness the urge for some cataclysmic regeneration of the nation as implied in the mythic images such as the 'sphinx' and the 'stone lion' that seems to subscribe much to the Hindu religious myth of 'Narasinghavtar,' a demonic incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The symbolic affinity between the Sphinx and Vishnu; Zeus and Indra, the king of gods in Hindu pantheon (as suggested by the term 'avatar' in the poem "Pervigilium Veneris"),

unmistakably points to some Indic influence in Hope's poetry manifested in his correlating of the harrowing present with a halcyon past. Amodini Sreedharan has made a pertinent comment on the transcendent element in Hope's poetic treatment of mythology: "He is a citizen not merely of the world but of the earth" (Sreedharan 2006: 267).

The overall tenor of the poetry of North East also articulates an urge for reclaiming the lost identity, the lost Elysium of peace amidst the cacophony of traumatic experience of exile, terror and migration. A recurrent telescoping of the happy past and a tensed present beckons the haze of an uncertain future where the perception of a vague fear in the form of apparitions and ghosts often plague the poet as in the piece entitled "Volcano You Cannot Erupt" by Manipuri poet Thangjam Ibopishak: "… Volcano… you cannot erupt / Volcano, stay asleep… / Lava remain slumbering…" (1-5).

When Temsula Ao speaks lyrically in her poem "Stone-People From Lungterok", the past as history appears in a state of animated suspension or suspended animation:

> Lungterok,
> The six stones
> Where the progenitors
> And forebears
> Of the stone-people
> Were born
> Out of the womb
> Of the earth. (1-8)

According to the Aos, their forefathers emerged out of the earth from a place named Lungterok, comprising of six people – three men and three women. The poet explicates a wonderful image of her ancestors as individuals who were gifted with not only special skills for survival, but also some rare qualities such as – an insight into the mystique of nature; in the conjunction of the natural and the supernatural perceived in the scenario of all living forms; and most of all, they possessed a prophetic urge to communicate the gist of their experiences for illumining the lives of their progeny. In the poet's vision, their lives testify to a happy synthesis of antinomies such as the 'the savage and the sage', 'the poetic and the politic' and 'the barbaric and the balladic.' The transcendent knowledge inbred in the ancestors (recognized as 'Greater bards'), is acknowledged in the following excerpt from Ao's another poem "Songs Dedicatory" which states that the song of the poet is the articulation of those primordial feelings and emotions perceived and transmitted through generations: "… now vibrate / for a kindred heart / who knew and understood / long before I knew them." (32-35)

The poetic allegiance to indigenous cultural roots can also be traced in poems like "History and Heritage." The former seeks to reconstitute the saga of evolution

of a community ("the lore / Of our essential core" 12-13) through the re-evaluation of folklores in the form of songs which with a life of their own like seeds, germinate into blossoms in the form of winged words, i.e. poetry. In the latter, the poet hurls a dig at the modern commoditisation and fetishisation of indigenous art and culture forms, the biased urge for 'representation' of which repudiates the original artistic authenticity of experiences behind such creations: "They languish, these uprooted / treasures of my heritage / caged within imposing structures / in designated spaces." ("Heritage" 1-4) [*Shankhyan* para 10]

A similar kind of sentiment is rehearsed in another poem "Prayer of a Monolith" which in the form of soliloquy of a stone beautifully articulates the trauma of being weaned from its natural habitat including the separation from a soul-mate ("My beloved of the laughing dimple/Standing by my side" 5-6) for the purpose of man's commoditisation of culture for his self-interest: "As I stood in my shame / For someone else's fame. /Thus I stand now at the village gate / In mockery of my former state." (43-46) But the glimpse of the past often leads to an epiphany of a beatific space of ideal existence without the least stint of sufferings in the form of 'sorrow' or 'blood.' The following excerpt from Robin Ngangom'spoem "Hill" is relevant in this context:

> You have been carved by time as I am.
> From your forests grow flutes oracular drums and nymphs.
> The ancient ones still speak of the time
> when the gods, tired of the heavens
> descended to earth,…. . (5-10).

A gnawing concern for contemporary ecocide breeds social and political tensions of North East with mainstream society. For Temsula Ao, storytelling is a powerful weapon of subversion, of protest, representing the power of man in shaping reality through language. In the poem "The Old Story Teller", the agency of storytelling offers the possibility of change with an acknowledgement of 'racial responsibility' in the urge for 'perpetuating the existential history and essential tradition' in the posterity and thus providing the world of readers a rich storehouse of North-Eastern folk-lore.

> So I told stories
> As my racial responsibility
> To instill in the young
> The art of perpetuating
> Existential history and essential tradition
> To be passed on to the next generation. (33-38)

Language becomes a metaphor for potential change. Stories within the fabric of northeastern folklore provide the theoretical framework of their writing. A note appended to the poem explains the origin of the Oral Tradition of the Ao-Naga

community. It maintains that in ancient times, the tribe possessed a script which was displayed on a hide for everyone to read and learn. However, a dog one day accidently swallowed the hide and so the script was lost forever. Since then, the people have retained every aspect of their lives through the Oral Tradition.

Narasingaram Jayashree has rightly pointed out that Ao's poetry or the poetry of North-east in general is rich in Ecocriticism, a term which as the name suggests, prioritises nature- centric concerns in poets and artists over the human-centric, or anthropocentric norms of values and in the critical praxis attached to the poetry of the North-east, nature or ecosphere as a Being, is valorized as the preserver, as the procrustean bed of all living organisms. The following extract from the poem "The Old Storyteller" vents the speaker's pride that her grandparents were in perfect harmony, tranquility and coherence with nature: "…. the various animals / Who were once our brothers / Until we invented human language / And began calling them savage." (23-26) Ao aptly charts out the rustic professions of these stone people- they were potters, weavers, planters, growers, hunters, carvers and made merry by rendering songs.

The poem makes reference to the traditional myths about creation of the tribe and commonality of humans and animals. However, the tone turns apprehensive toward the end of the poem as the poet laments the new generation's disbelief in the cultural history of the tribe: "The rejection from my own / Has stemmed the flow / And the stories seem to regress / Into unreachable recesses." (47-50)

However, despite the despair of witnessing her tradition fade, the poet perseveres in resurrecting her legacy through her poetry. The poem itself becomes a culture – text in the persona's search for a rooted identity and validates, as pointed out by Neeraj Sakhyan et al., the critical comment of Jorn Rusen: "Identity is a matter of culture. Culture is the entire achievement of the human mind in interpreting and understanding the given world including oneself as living in this world and being a part of it" (Reusen 2004: 144).

The agony for the lost Elysium in a time lacerated by the culture of dominance receives a fine evocation in the poem "My Hills" where the poet laments the loss of peace and verdure in her region. She reflects upon a sense of alienation that haunts her in the present and breeds a longing for the bygone days. The poet draws on natural imagery to depict the once paradise-like state that prevailed in the region marked by lines such as - "and happy gurgling brooks" (6), "the seasons playing magic / On their many-splendored sheen" (11- 12) and "the hills echoed / with the wistful whispers / Of autumnal leaves." (14-16). However, the last three paragraphs bemoan the plight of this region, which having lost the serenity of the yesteryears, has become synonymous with political turmoil and social unrest. The trauma of experiencing how the familiar world dwindles into a haze of some uncouth fear and uncertainty is tellingly captured in the following excerpt:

But to-day
I no longer know my hills,
The birdsong is gone,
Replaced by the staccato
Of sophisticated weaponry. ("My Hills" 19-23)

Subir Bhaumik has diagnosed with much justification, the nature of violence in North-East India: "The North East has been seen as the problem child since the very inception of the Indian Republic. It has also been South Asia's most enduring theatre of separatist guerrilla war, a region where armed action has usually been the first, rather than the last, option of political protest." (Bhaumik 2009: xiv)

In her short story collection *These Hills Called Home*, Temsula Ao offers a moving scenario of the human drama that unfolds on the turbulent terrains of Nagaland which as a space, is racked with political disharmony rather than being a locale of solitary or insular incidents. In a poignant story titled "The Last Song", the nature of violence and atrocities perpetrated against women is studied in a claustrophobic state of law and order in Nagaland and the issue gets further manipulated by changes in both private and public aspects, the personal and the political aspects of the gendered question – viz, the subservient status designated to the women folk in the community and the much controversial amulet provided to the Indian army in the name of AFSPA. The poet's ambivalent attitude to the issue of Naga militancy problematises the question of nationalism and in the imbroglio of such active and divergent forces, the status of women testifies to a fall from primeaval peace and their predicament rather corresponds to the mythical state of *Trishanku*[2], which means a space somewhere stranded in between heaven and earth thus gesturing to some 'nowhereness' of belonging. Similarly in the works of poets like Chandrakanta Mura Singh, one comes across discourses on dream visions and primitive vitality in the form of love overcast by a strong mythical suggestiveness as offered in the expressions such as "golden deer" and a "broken heart" ("The Stone Speaks in the Forest").

In short, the poets of the North East like Temsula Ao assume a problematic stance to disquieting experiences in the form of an ambivalence in attitude and a love for nature which with its paraphernalia of mythic rivers and magic hills with their ravines and deep gorges, permeates the poetic heart with a peace that manages to transmute the chaotic into a curative deliberation that seeks to fuse all disparate strands of experience such as the private and the public, hope and despair into an organic whole of lyrical utterance. Taken overall, the conscious use of myth as a literary strategy by Indian English writers lends an added dimension and depth to human experience and in a way, subscribes to the emancipatory character of artistic search that corresponds much to Alex Aronson's transcendental opinion of Indian civilization: "In any case, in a world of perpetual motion, India remains a perpetual becoming, a vast and protean sea of human improvisations on the great dance of time."[3]

In this way, it is through the practice of oral storytelling, myths have ever been used in literature both as archetype as well as structure so as to create a cultural contemporaneity of human experience by situating man in a larger continuum of time and space. If for Hope, it is the Christian myth or the Classical and Indian myth that provides, in an overt or oblique way, the stereotypes for modern day experience, in the case of a writer like Ao, it is mainly nature myth (reminiscent much of the Wordsworthian water-wraith) that permeates the mystic scenario which comprising hills, rivers and gorges, collectively suggest a recuperative, mythopoeic influence upon the real life experience of fear and violence.

Speaking generally, a subterranean perception of myth as a formative influence on the artistic psyche has motivated the representational urge for literary production over the ages and the distinctive voices of writers located across the barriers of time and topography, such as A. D. Hope of Australia or Temsula Ao of North East India, only sound as tonal variations of expressions telling how the present gets radiated into a wider spectrum by the livid flames of a remote past. What seems to be important is to adjust the angle of vision for a glimpse of the twinkling stars of last night buried in the depth of the glaring daylight, to imagine sweet and sour!

## Notes:

1. Cited in Witenberg, *Interpersonal Explorations in Psychoanalysis,* p. 335.
2. The story of Trishanku is told in the "Bala Kanda" portion of the *Valmiki Ramayana*. Trishanku, the son of Prithu was a king in the Solar Dynasty, the dynasty of the great Hindu God Rama. Trishanku wished to ascend to heaven in his mortal body and after many intriguing schemes among the Rishis (sages), he was accommodated in a new, make-shift beatific space like the heaven with his head upside down. Theoretically speaking, the term denotes in postcolonial literary parlance, the sense of rootlessness in one's search for identity.
3. Quoted in K. C. Baral, "Imaging India: Nation and Narration" (p. 80).

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