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Women in Texts

প্রকাশক
আজকের যোখন

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Re-Assessing the Journey of Naga Women in Temsula Ao's These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone

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ABSTRACT

Women writers from North-Eastern region of India have explored the different facets of socio-cultural identity of men and women. The paper focuses on how they encapsulate the journey of native women from powerlessness to empowerment. Temsula Ao, one of the prominent writers from North-Eastern region, tries to locate a space for the expression of many repressed voices through her literary works. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is her famous short-story collection where she has depicted a new mode of self-expression for the native Naga women. This collection of stories poignantly points out, on one hand, their humiliations and exploitations in the hand of repressive patriarchy as well as the gruesome experiences under the dark shade of long-standing political turbulence, and, the capacity to raise their own voices against all odds, on the other.

This paper attempts to analyze critically the socio-psychological conditions which the native women have to go through, in the light of the short stories of Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Though the women are represented here as 'wounded humanity,' but, at the same time, they are depicted as the 'redeemer of humanity'. Ao's women are all strong, independent and enterprising and exhibit the diligence and compassion. Furthermore, this story collection offers us various aspects of the Naga culture.

Keywords: North-East, Naga women, Empowerment

The history of Nagaland, one of the seven sister states of India, is tinged with more than half a century of bloodshed, death and trauma. While the rest of the country celebrated independence, the Nagas sought their freedom. What followed were decades of strife, guerrilla warfare, displacement and dispossession and a cycle of events that, in Ao's own words, "re-structured or even 'revolutionized' the Naga psyche." (X, The Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone). It is natural that after decades of violence, writers from this region express their sufferings, fear and terror what they had endured; the loss of faith, the bitterness, the anger, and pain of everyday life; and in spite of their hopes for a better future through their writings. They have been portraying such aspects of their life which has left an indelible impression in their mind.

Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt 'to live with it' as they are expected to do by the distant centres of power. (Misra, 2011: xix).

Literature and terror have a long and complex history in the North-Eastern part of India which is sometimes synchronized with general remark such as "literature that is too conflict ridden", "literature that depicts violence and rage". This is what Tamsula writes about in her writings. Stories, for Ao, are the only means to hold on to their history, territory, ethnicity and identity. TamsulaAo is one of the rising women writers from North East India. Her poems, short stories and fictions are set in the lush green forests and hills of North East India. Women are marginalized in every possible way but as a woman writer, Ao stands up against all these odds and takes the responsibility to let the world know about Naga culture, tradition, customs, myths and beliefs. As a representative of her motherland she tries to locate a space for the expression of many repressed voices through her literary works. She writes about her own people and their emotions in a very lucid manner. Set in the initial turbulent decades of Naga insurgency, The Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone portrays the lives of Naga people struggling to come to terms with their identity. She tries to revive the Naga tradition, culture as well as history not only for the present but also for the next generation. The book bears

with 'Lest We Forget'- a beautifully written preface by the author herself. Ao begins by explaining why she has chosen to immortalize the troubled history of Nagaland in the 1950s through her fiction:

I have endeavoured to re-visit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged" (Ao, 2006: ix).

Apart from recording the living history, Temsula Ao, in her short story, portrays in minute detail the women who, in no respect, are inferior to men. They are like all other women from any other land – 'typical' and, at the same time, 'individual'. This paper is an attempt to study the several facets of the Naga society, especially that of their culture and way of life, as represented in Ao's book in order to analyze the journey of Naga women in the contemporary Naga society.

Ao chooses the simple rural life of Nagaland. In "The Jungle Major", Ao depicts how a peaceful state changes into a rebellious one because of the suspicious and dictatorial attitude of the Nation State.

The particular village also became a part of the network which kept the underground outfit supplied with information, food and occasional arms. (Ao, 2006: 3).

Punaba, a Naga rebel leader is a 'short, dark man' (Ao, 2006:1), marries a woman named Khatila, a 'tall, fair, slim and possessed of the most charming smile' (Ao, 2006:1). Their match seems most unmatched but Khatila is happy and content in her new role as a housewife. Her husband is a mere driver who knows some mechanics and is employed by a rich man in a town named Mokokchung. Ao, here, points out a very natural picture of Khatila's household:

Khatila cultivated a small field on the outskirts of the village and grew some vegetables in her kitchen garden (Ao, 2006: 2).

But Ao also gives a realistic picture of society in a satirical manner. The couple did not have any children – it becomes a matter of discussion to the villagers. A rumour circulates that either Punaba is impotent or Khatila is barren. It shows how society intrudes in each and everybody's life. Khatila and Punaba become a prey to that.

Punaba secretly joins the underground to liberate their homeland from 'foreign' (Ao, 2006: 3). Khatila knows everything and supports her husband. She stands out for her selfless devotion to her husband. When Punaba stays far away from home, she endures separation, fear and loneliness. Khatila remains at home alone, facing all adversities, inspires her husband from behind. She is not mute and silent. Though she tries to fit in the norms and rules of the society but she has an identity of her own way. She is a housewife busy in her household but courageous and witty enough to handle a group of military people. She befools the military men making an incredible plan to help her husband to escape. She has a very strong mutual bond with her husband and remains connected with her husband's activities in the underground. When the army comes looking for Punaba, it is Khatila's extraordinary presence of mind, courage and wisdom that enables him to escape and saves the entire village from being destroyed by the Government forces.

The second story in the collection titled "Soaba" is the story of a village with a young mentally challenged boy. In this story Ao not only tells the story of Soaba but also reveals some hidden truth, the horrifying condition of Naga women. The first story "The Jungle Major" is a poignant love story of Naga rebel leader Punaba and his beautiful wife Khatila whereas this story is different from the beginning. Here Imtila (The Boss) is a powerful Government agent, a dreaded man. Imtila, the wife of Punaba, a simple woman dreams of having children and looking after her husband. But her husband's change of fortunes compelled her to set aside the dream of her domestic life. Being a powerful and authoritative man, her husband would do all the dirty, illegal things and defy all laws and civil rights in order to inform and guide Government forces against the alien Naga people.

His personal appearance too began change; he started wearing new, fashionable clothes and flashy rings on his fingers. Neighbours often saw packages and crates being delivered through the back gate after dark. It was also after that that his other visitors, the ones with dark coats or heavy blankets and with their faces and face covered by mufflers, would enter through the back gate for their business (Ao, 2006:13).

Boss tortures the people brutally. He brings suspected people from the nearby villages or town to his house for proper interrogation and then no one knows what happens to those people. All these have a deep impact on Imtila's life. She is ordered to go nowhere without a bodyguard.

Gradually she became a prisoner of husband's notoriety because her friends and relatives, sensing her discomfiture when they called on her a few times, began to stay away and even when the husband invited them on important occasions, they bluntly refused to come (Ao, 2006:15).

The eponymous character Soaba is an orphan, living on people's charity. He does different types of odd jobs like fetching water and splitting wood in various households. He has a name – Imtimoa, but people call him 'Soaba' which means in local language 'fool'. He is slow in mind and seldom speaks coherently. This boy has no place to live, he can go wherever he likes, and people are generous to give him food and shelter.

Soaba's arrival to Boss's house is like the flow of a river in the desert. Seeing Soaba dirty Imtila gives him a proper bath and new clothes. She also gives him proper care. Imtila's affection and care for Soaba changes her from within and stands as a motherly figure for a helpless child. Soaba becomes a solace to her and begins to think for herself and assess the nature of her husband's work.

When he was first inducted to the new force, she was happy, thinking that at last there was going to be some discipline and order in his life and work. But as time went by, it became clear that the opposite was happening; he was surrounded by a bunch of savages in his squad, some of whom were hardened criminals let loose by the authorities to carry out their despicable designs. Some were deserters from the underground army who had left the hard life of the jungle and, lured by easy money and booze, had joined the new outfit. These people seemed to infest her environment (Ao, 2006:15).

The home becomes a place of pain and suffering to Imtila. She becomes restless. Her husband is indifferent to her and Soaba. The alcoholic Boss tortures numerous people, and she has to remain silent and suffer everything. Her heart shrinks with writhing agony of helplessness but she is a mere puppet in the hand of her 'agent' husband.

Apart from the journey of Imtila, Ao also shows the painful journey of Naga women. In the turbulent period of Naga Freedom Movement not only the men were suspected, beaten and punished, Naga women also had to go through a horrible way. They became a prey to the rough and tough, abusive military men. Women were raped and murdered. In this story, Ao presents that kind of picture, a grim reality of the condition of women.

He soon lost all physical desire, not only for her but also for any other woman.

But out of a perverse sense of proving his manhood, he would order women to be brought to the house for his pleasure. On these occasions however, he discovered that he could not find the energy or the desire to make love to them. The ones who went away tamely were rewarded but the bolder and experienced ones who tried to talk lightly of middle-aged men and impotency or tried to revive his flagging organs were mercilessly beaten and dumped outside the gate by his guards (Ao, 2006: 16).

Women are treated as sexual objects. Boss enjoys the women but whenever doubt arises about his virility he beats the women mercilessly. Imtila shows her sympathy for those wounded women who are abused at the hand of Boss for his pleasure.

Power corrupts Boss's life and home, causing immense trauma to his gentle, upright and selfless wife Imtila. She becomes a mother to Soaba in a true sense. Once she was a devoted wife but her husband's abrupt change makes her desolate. She is extremely 'humane'. She is both wounded humanity as well as redeemer of humanity.

... a heart-wounded woman who was desperately trying to cling on to humanity amidst the chaos that had engulfed her world (Ao, 2006: 22).

"The Last Song" is a story of a young girl Apenyo who is a born singer. She sings on festival days and collects money in her piggyback. Apenyo's father Zhamben is a gifted singer who died during his teacher's training course. Her mother, Libeni, has a deep religious bent of mind. She believed in God and used to go to church every Sunday-

When Apenyo, as the little girl was called, could walk and talk a little, her mother

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would take her to church on Sundays because she could not be left alone at home (Ao, 2006:23).

Apenyo was only nine months old when her father died. Libeni brought up her daughter single handed. She had to struggle alone, trying to cultivate field to bring up the little child. Mother and daughter lived alone depending on mainly what was grown in the field. Libeni is also the best weaver of the village and her shawls are in great demand. The daughter had deep desire to help her mother. Apenyo is also interested in that art and learns the art form from her mother and becomes an excellent weaver like her. Libeni did not marry second time for her daughter and her love for her husband

Now, Apenyo becomes eighteen years old girl who has a sonorous voice and performs as a lead soprano of the local church. Apenyo is perfect blend of natural physical and singing beauty. The mother has convinced that she has inherited the exquisite voice from her father who was a gifted singer both of traditional folk songs as well as of Christian hymns at church.

Apenyo approached her eighteenth birthday. Her natural beauty seemed to be enhanced by her enchanting voice which earned her the nickname 'singing beauty' in the village (Ao, 2006:25).

Libeni feels proud of her beautiful talented daughter. The villagers are in an elated mood for an event going to take place in the village church in about six months – the dedication of the new church building.

The villagers began the preparations with great enthusiasm, after joking among themselves that this year they would have a double Christmas (Ao, 2006:25).

Then, Ao portrays the same violence, bloodshed and horror. This is also a troublesome period for Nagas. The independence movement is accelerated day by day. The government decides to nab the people for anti-national activities on the celebration day of church building and arrest all the leaders. On the day of inauguration of the new church building, while Apenyo starts her solo number and the entire choir bursts into song, the Indian armed forces surrounded the crowd and even shoot or kick the villagers.

Apenyo and her mother were raped and killed by the Indian army.

When she came upon the scene at last, what she saw turned her stomach. The young captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn (Ao, 2006:28).

Temsula Ao here shows a very natural relationship between two women- mother and daughter. They are not only mother and daughter; they are each other's friends. Mother brings up her daughter and takes all the responsibilities on her shoulders. On the other hand daughter is also very much eager to help her mother in every sphere of her life. She also takes care of their economy. The women are economically independent. They can take care of themselves. The story is later told by a woman to the new generation. Apenyo's haunting music serves as an inspiration to those who painstakingly rebuild a village that has been destroyed by the war between the state and the rebels. Apenyo is the part of the collective mythology and consciousness of her community.

Thus on a cold December night in a remote village, an old storyteller gathers the young of the land around the leaping flames of a hearth and sings on the bare earth among them on the story of that Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village was being weeping for her ravaged and ruined children (Ao, 2006: 33).

What is unique about Temsula Ao's book is that it records not only the sufferings of the army or the rebels but of the victimized women. The way she tells the story evokes the original picture of Nagaland before the eyes of the readers. Our hearts ache in pain when we go through the depiction of the sufferings of Naga people as women in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. As Namrata Mahanta puts it,

The women of the North-East... have been at the receiving end of all experiments done in the name of modernization, governance, dissent, rebellion and struggle for power. With their men joining underground rebel forces, the women have had to bear the brunt

raising the family and face the onslaughts of the interrogation squads. The constant fear of the rebel forces on one hand and of the arm forces on the other has gripped the lives of women...marginalized in every possible way, the women of these region have demonstrated an indomitable spirit and agency in coping with the multi-faceted violence that surrounds them at all times (Mahanta: 108-109).

Thus, Temsula Ao lays bare the bloody wounds of the women community of Nagaland in particular and North Eastern India in general. And even in this saga of pain, they come out to be self-assertive individuals marked by endurance, dignity and honour.

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