



Representation of Women in Temsula Ao's *These Hills called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

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Abstract :

The representation of women in literary and cultural narratives has been on the line of either reinforcement or subversion of the essentialized notion of women as weak, docile and submissive. Temsula Ao's collection of stories *These Hills called Home* is one such narrative which highlights and at the same time contests the images of women in popular discourse. In this fictional work, Temsula Ao focuses on the plight of women in a patriarchal set-up. Set in the backdrop of Naga struggle for independence, most of the stories are about the changes brought about by the struggle to the lives of the ordinary Naga people, especially to women. The objective of the paper is to do a feminist reading of the text. It will aim at examining the issue of representation of women in the stories. The paper will argue that when there is an armed rebellion, women suffer the ultimate brunt. It will also argue that women can challenge status quo and reclaim agency from their limited space.

Key Words: *Patriarchy, Women, Agency.*

Introduction :

Temsula Ao is a well known figure in literature from Northeast India. She is a poet, short story writer and an ethnographer. She has to her credit a good number of poetic works and two short story collections namely, *These Hills called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). Her collection of short stories, *These Hills called Home* are set in the backdrop of Naga struggle for independence from Indian State. As Temsula Ao states in the preface, *Lest We Forget*, "many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the

history of the Nagas from the early fifties of the last century, and their demand for independence from the Indian State." (Ao x). The Naga struggle has its genesis in the early 50s when the process of nation building was gaining ground. After India became free from the colonial rule in 1947, it became expedient for the regime to initiate the process of political integration by bringing disparate regions and their people under the rule and control of Indian State. The idea of "one nation" that was developed flattening out regional, ethnic and cultural differences however didn't find favour with the northeastern tribes. They expressed their unwillingness to become a



part of the Indian nation-state. Independent by nature and governed by village democracy, these people were not ready to shift allegiance to a new regime, a new political dispensation. Moreover their secluded state from the mainland India never gave them the opportunity to participate in the freedom struggle and thus develop pan-Indian nationalism. They rebelled against the process of political integration by the Indian state. The Nagas were the most recalcitrant of these groups who refused to submit to the hegemony of the Indian government. To dominate the Nagas, the Indian State sent forces, who unleashed a reign of terror in the region in their attempt at quelling the rebellion. The Indian forces inflicted the most inhuman torture on them; they maimed and killed innocent people in a brazen display of their barbarity. They struck at the root of Naga socio-economic and political system and brought enormous changes in their traditional way of life.

The changes triggered in the lives of the ordinary Nagas by the armed rebellion and the consequent army operation to contain it, forms the backdrop of most of the stories of Temsula Ao's *These Hills called Home*. In her fictional rendering of the turbulent period of Naga history, the writer shows how the Naga people especially the women suffered at the hands of the security forces.

Objective :

The objective of the paper is to do a feminist reading of Temsula Ao's *These Hills called Home*. It will aim at examining the issue of representation of women in the stories by asking the following few questions:

1. What is the position of women in traditional Naga society?
2. How does the writer present the women characters in the short story collection?

Methodology :

Interpretative and analytical method has been used to prepare the research paper. While using the text as the primary source, it has used as secondary sources articles, reviews etc. related to the topic. Theories of race and gender have been used to bolster the arguments of the paper.

Analysis :

As has already been told, Temsula Ao's *These Hills called Home* are about the changes caused by the rebellion to the lives of the Naga people and their traditional way of living. In the 1950s the demand for independence of Nagaland was at its peak and had its resonance among the ordinary Nagas. The patriotic fervor swept the entire region and plunged the Naga people in to a struggle, the meaning of which they didn't even understand. The struggle for an independent homeland, however didn't find any favour with the Indian government and they sent forces to crush the struggle. The Indian forces adopted some ruthless measures in their attempt at tracing out the rebels. They severely punished the villagers to whom the militants belonged. Blaming them for harbouring the rebels, their houses were ransacked, the grain in their burns was burnt, they were herded into camps away from their villagers and were kept in virtual imprisonment. This form of group incarceration called 'grouping' was the most humiliating and tormenting for the Naga people. The most horrific of all these punishments was the treatment meted out to women. The



security forces inflicted barbaric assaults on the women by molesting or raping them. As told in the story “The Jungle Major”, “numerous stories proliferated of women being molested by the security forces and the obstinate ones who refused to give information being severely beaten; not only that sometimes they would be hung upside down and subjected to unspeakable tortures like chilli powder being rammed into their genitals.”(Ao 3). The brutalization of Naga women is given a gut-wrenching account in the story “The Last Song”. It is the story of brutal rape and killing of Apenyo and her mother by the Indian army.

What the Indian army did to women was part of their strategy to terrorize the people and compel them to give information about the rebels. They used women as a tool in their fight against Naga insurgency. This shows how the Naga women were rendered utterly helpless and vulnerable by the ugly turn of events in the valley. In view of the plight of women during conflict situation it is pertinent to quote what Preeti Gill says in her introduction to the anthology of essays, *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*

To say that women have faced violence in situations of conflict is to state the obvious but what it means in terms of the short term and long term impact is something that is still being studied and analysed. Women find themselves at the receiving end of violence on three fronts; from the state, the militants and a corresponding escalation of violence within their own homes (Gill 10).

Sanjoy Hazarika in his article “In Times of Conflict the Real Victims are Women” (In Preeti Gill 2010: 54-64) argues on a similar line when

he says that the women have to suffer the worst in conflict situation. He substantiates his argument by referring to two incidents-one, the Nellie massacre in 1983, and the killing of Manorama Devi of Manipur in 2004. In the first instance, armed and organized groups of tribal villagers attacked and brutally killed the inhabitants of a cluster of villages located near the sleepy town of Nellie of Nagaon district of Assam. More than 1700 people lost their lives in that ethnic carnage. The attackers were the members of the Tiwa tribe and the victims were the Bengali-speaking Muslims, referred to as Bangladeshis, that too pejoratively in the political lexicon of the region. Hazarika takes this as symbolic of the growing divides in Assam between settlers and the indigenous, between tribals and non tribals, between those of one religious faith and another. In an eyewitness account of the barbarity unleashed on that fateful day, Hazarika states that he counted 200 dead bodies of men, women and children on one patch of land on that particular day. To highlight the plight of women during such situations, he recounts his experience of recoiling in horror at the sight of a woman whose neck had been slashed from side to side with a machete.

The second incident relates to the killing of a young woman named Manorama Devi by Assam Rifles soldiers. She was reportedly a cadre of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA), an extremist organization of Manipur. The cadre was picked up by the soldiers from her home in Imphal and shot dead as she was not giving them enough information about the leaders of the organization. The killing sparked outrage and thousands of Manipuris came out on the streets. They



demanding the repeal of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) under which the Assam Rifles conducted the operation. This Act has been in place in the Northeast for years. This is a draconian act which gives the security forces blanket powers of search, arrest and detention. Under the AFSPA there have been gross abuses of human rights in the Northeastern region. The protest especially the elderly women stripping themselves in front of the Assam Rifles garrison in Imphal rattled the then Manmohan Singh government at the centre. It formed a review committee of which Hazarika himself was a member and the committee recommended drastic measures to deal with the crisis created by the implementation of an unjust law, including the repeal of the existing legislation. However internal divisions within the government and the ranks of the army stalled the acceptance of the report.

Hazarika underlines the fact that in both the cases women were among the worst sufferers. He stresses on the need of sensitivity towards women's needs- the need of women for security in conflict-ridden areas, the need to ensure they get economic and social support to run their households and send children to school, especially if they are single mothers who have been widowed by the fighting or whose husbands or children are on the side of anti-State forces, and regrets that the State has totally failed them on these respects. Hazarika opines that to do justice to women in normal or conflict situations there should be more representation of women in peace talks that take place between the government and the insurgent groups. He refers to the Naga peace talks and says that in all the negotiations the discussants have

only been men in spite of the significant presence of organization like Naga Mothers Association in the socio-political life of Nagaland. He rues the fact that, "women have the greatest stake in peace but their presence in peace brokering is non-existent" (Hazarika, 64)." Hazarika calls upon the women groups of Northeast like Meira Paibis of Manipur and the Naga Mothers Association to be more assertive about their roles so that the many peace processes in the region can come to a sustainable conclusion.

The attitude and treatment of the soldiers towards Naga women had much to do with their frontier attitude. To the Indian government, the tribal of northeast constitute the most distant 'other', whose image in the colonial version as savage frontiersman didn't undergo substantial changes even in the postcolonial India. As told in the story "Soaba", "to the security forces the Naga tribes were a bunch of people so alien to them that for all they knew they could have come from a different planet" (Ao 13). The colonial paradigm came to stay through which the 'mainstream' India viewed the northeastern tribes. The national narrative written on the lines of privileged caste, religion and region excluded these people from its definition of 'Indians' and 'Indianness'. When these people protested against the hegemony of Indian government and claimed independence, there were attempts to quell the protest and 'indianize' them. The racial biasness against the tribes came to characterize and direct most of the policies of the government towards the rebellious Nagas. Finding them total strangers in terms of their racial features, the armed forces adopted the most oppressive measures to dominate the Nagas.



In such a situation, the condition of women can be easily imagined. The punishment of Naga women took the form of rape and torture in blatant violation of their honour and dignity. Here it is pertinent to quote what Uddipana Goswami says in her book *Conflict and Resolution*(2007)

For the Indian state the people of Northeast seem to have remained at the either end of the spectrum stretching between the noble savage and the naked brute. The exoticised, enigmatic noble savage can be tamed, but the naked brute understands only the language of violence. It is for this reason that the first response of the state towards any disturbance in the periphery has been the use of violence and coercion, the most disturbing manifestation of which has been the prolonged militarization in the Northeast. (Goswami 130-131)

It is however not the outsiders who maltreat Naga women. The Naga patriarchy is also not different in their attitude and treatment towards their women. Here it is pertinent to shed light on the position of women in the traditional Naga society. The Naga society has always been patriarchal and patrilineal with clear-cut and well-defined roles for men and women. While men play public roles, women are expected to remain confined to household activities. Structures of inequality in-built in traditional Naga society ensures that the mobility of women remains restricted to the domestic sphere. They are expected to be strong enough to take care of the household even in the absence of men. They have to be adept at one or the other traditional occupations like weaving or pot-making to economically support the family. Though expected

to be humble, obedient and subservient the Naga way of life also want its women to be strong, independent and resilient at the same time.

Temsula Ao in her article “Benevolent Subordination” (In Preeti Gill 2010: 100-107) analyses the social position of women in Naga society. She states that the Naga society is male-dominated where women have always lived in the periphery. She corroborates her statement by pointing to different power structures in Naga society which are dominated by men. She gives example of the Baptist Church. She says that though there are several women’s groups in Baptist churches their leader is not given the title of Pastor; she can be called an Associate Pastor, thereby signifying the subordination to the Pastor. The power structure within the church is an indicator of the perpetuation of male domination in Naga society in the matter of decision-making.

Temsula Ao says that such male attitudes have their origin in the state of affairs of a distant past in which men came to occupy superior status in the male-female dichotomy on practical grounds. Women accepted their subordination and this in turn, facilitated their exclusion from the decision-making seat-of-governance in society. Though the new system of governance introduced in the wake of Nagaland attaining its statehood, has facilitated the entry of women into the bastions of power, they have not been able to share equal space with their male counterparts. It is nothing but the male bias that has stood on their way. The male opposition based on the age-old prejudice about women’s inferiority and their economical positions has defeated their aspiration for equal political power. The writer says that there are women in ranks in



the present political dispensation, but here again they are playing subordinate roles, not as equals.

Temsula Ao makes a crucial observation regarding women's subordination. She says that the Naga women today are better positioned-conscious and assertive about their rights, many women are not free from male bias that is characteristic of traditional Naga society. In her words, "... Naga women no matter how well educated or highly placed in society suffer from remnants of this psychological 'trauma' of subordination, which in their grandmother's times might have seemed perfectly logical but which now appears to be a paradox within the modern, educated 'self'" (Ao 105).

Temsula Ao says that induction of women into institutions of power in minor capacities won't be empowering them in true sense of the term. To ensure their empowerment, there must be an overhauling of the system which has governed Naga society for centuries. She is of the opinion that the process must start with the women's belief in her own 'self'; to recognize that what she has been excluded from is her birth right as a Naga citizen. Only when women are equipped with such convictions, can any change in the political, economic, social status of Naga women be envisaged.

The attitude of Naga patriarchy towards women is amply illustrated through the fate of Imnala in the story, "The Night". Imnala is a simple village girl who falls prey to wily and mischievous designs of patriarchy. She becomes pregnant twice and both the times outside the wedlock-first by her suitor, who abandons her after making her pregnant and second by a married man. As the

news of Imnala getting pregnant by a married man spreads, the village folk condemns Imnala's family. The village council that tries the case holds the girl's family guilty. She is abused and censured, while the man who is equally responsible for the act is spared from any punishment by the council. This shows how the Naga justice system is tilted against women. It maintains double standard with regard to morality. When a strict moral code is enforced on women, men are allowed to take liberty with morality.

Women as helpless victims is however not the only representation of women in the collection of stories. A close reading of the stories reveals resilience and resistance of women who reclaim agency from their limited spaces. Temsula's women reflect the typical Naga spirit of not getting cowed down by hardships and remaining undaunted when faced with danger. The women may not take part in armed resistance or open protest but they do engage in subtle and seemingly innocuous resistance at an individual level. As James Scott says in his *Weapons of the weak: Everyday Acts of Peasant Resistance* (1985) resistance need not be always overt and collective struggle against power, it can be individual, disguised and everyday acts that challenge power at a micro level. We see Ao's characters challenging power structures from their own individual spaces in a subtle yet powerful manner.

In the story "The Jungle Major" we see khatila exhibiting extraordinary courage and presence of mind at the face of danger. Khatila's husband Punaba is an underground rebel who often comes to visit his wife secretly. The army gets to know about his visits and plans a secret



mission to arrest him. One morning he was staying at home with his wife. The army gets the wind of it and surrounds their house. However, Punaba escapes arrest and it became possible due to Khatila's presence of mind. Sensing danger to her husband Khatila instantly makes a plan. She talks loudly to her husband as if to her servant ordering him to fetch water and then sends him out right under the officer's nose. She puts on an unperturbed face while confronted by the army officers. As told by the narrator, "... the young captain looked somewhat surprised at her manner. Whereas he had expected to see a cowering woman, crazy with fear for her husband and herself, he was confronted by a disheveled but defiant person who displayed no agitation and seemed to be utterly oblivious to any danger." (Ao 6). Khatila's act of resistance stands in sharp contrast to images of Naga women as helpless victims in a set-up dominated by patriarchy.

In the story "The Potmaker", we find another voice of resistance in Arenla. Arenla is a pot maker. In traditional Naga society, the women are expected to learn the skill and pass it on to the next generation of women so that the tradition of pot making can be maintained. Arenla however decides against teaching her daughter the craft. It is because pottery involves a lot of pain and hard work and also because it is a low paying job. Arenla doesn't want her daughter to become a low-paid potmaker like herself. By refusing to teach her daughter the craft, Arenla dares to go against the dictates of Naga patriarchy. She protests gender division of labour in Naga society with hard and low-paying jobs like pot making allotted for women. Underscoring the insensitivity

and callousness of menfolk she says to her husband, "... you do not know how difficult it is to dig the clay from the hillside because you have never come there to help me saying that no man can be seen meddling in anything to do with pot making. It is woman's work." (Ao 58). As a woman in patriarchal Naga society Arenla has limitations that prevent her from openly voicing demands for better job or payment for women, but within her limited freedom she vociferously fights against her daughter having a similar fate as hers. Her firmness of decision is palpable when she says, "I shall not teach her this craft which has brought no joy to me and only a pittance for my troubles" (58).

Thus women characters of Ao are seen raising their voice against dominant power structures from their own limited spaces. Their acts of resistance are innocuous and through this the writer seems to be attempting a critique of the armed rebellion that ultimately results in chaos and anarchy. The Naga struggle for independence could be seen as male aggression in the male/female binary paradigm. The story "Soaba" can be referred to substantiate it. In the story we have a character called Imlichuba who is the leader of the 'flying squad', created by the government to fight against the rebels. He grows in power and position from his close association with the army and government officials. But power intoxicates him and has its deleterious effects on his character. He goes roughshod over his finer sentiments and brags about his masculine power and arrogance. He starts indulging in outrageous acts of moral aberration and this too in the presence of his wife, Imtila. It so happens that Imlichuba out of suspicion of spying against him kills Soaba, the homeless wanderer who



stays with him. He does this in a fit of passion, and after this act significant changes are seen in his behaviour. He loses his vigour and starts behaving like a mad man. This could be the result of his disillusionment with masculine ideology that advocates war and violence. That violence brings nothing but misery and suffering down upon Imlichuba and he starts losing his mental equilibrium. In this condition, Imtila offers her helping hand and care towards her husband which indicates the triumph of feminine peace over masculine violence. The disillusionment with war and its ideology is even directly stated by a character in the story "Shadows" as "When you have a gun in your hand, you cease to think like a normal human being" (85).

Conclusion :

While discussing the representation of women in the stories it is important to consider

the subject position of the author. Temsula Ao belongs to the Ao tribe of the Nagas and while depicting Naga customs and tradition, she draws mostly on the oral tradition of the Ao Nagas. Since there is a good number of Naga tribes and they have different customs and traditions, the question arises whether the writer has been able to do justice to other tribal customs and the experiences of women in those customs, while presenting a picture of Naga women. Moreover Temsula Ao is from an elitist educational background and therefore doubts are raised whether writers with such superior elitist gaze would be able to represent the plight of ordinary women. Despite this, as a woman writer Temsula Ao shows a great deal of sensitivity and understanding in the portrayal of women characters in her fictional work.

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