

The Web of Tradition, Violence and Women: A Critical Appraisal of Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

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Abstract

Though the Indian constitution gives equal status to both men and women, the societal structure of the nation is patriarchal, patrilocal [relating to a pattern of marriage in which the couple settles in the husband's home or community], and patrilineal. The position and status of women differ greatly from one region of India to another. The women of the Northeast enjoy higher status and importance than the rest of India. In actuality, however, they face discrimination due to long-held cultural norms and attitudes. In Indian society, women are marginalized but within the tribal society of Northeast India, they are double-marginalized. The present paper is based on Temsula Ao's short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. The sole aim of the paper is to explain critically the gender discrimination and violence that Northeast women bear. The paper will also look into how the web of traditions and customs evades Northeast women from sparkling.

Keywords: Northeast India, Gender, Violence, Marginalization, Women

Introduction

Northeast India is an umbrella term as it refers to eight separate states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. This part of land is absolutely detached from the heartland of India. The only means of connection is just a 22 km long corridor. The strategic geographical location makes the region one of the most ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse regions of India. As Julian Jacobs, Sarah Harrison and Anita Herle in their book *The Nagas: Hill Peoples of Northeast India* rightly admit that "... hundreds, if not thousands, of small villages seemed to be somewhat similar to each other but also very different, by no means always sharing the same customs, political system, art or even language" (Jacobs et.al 1990). "Each tribe has its own distinct history, identity, linguistic, cultural practices and life styles that are carried forward from generation to generation" (Buongpui 2013).

The Indian society is male dominated where women are regarded as subordinate to men in societal structure. The condition of women in Northeast India as compared to the other states of the country is much better. The absence of certain

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rituals and practices such as dowry, obligatory wearing of burqas (covering of one's entire body from head to toe using long garment) provide the women to enjoy much more freedom than the rest of the country. It does not mean women get absolute freedom. The real picture is harsh and pathetic. The Northeast writers through their writings assert that though discriminatory social practices apparently seem to be absent, the women in Northeast India are socially discern. They are the victims of age old tradition and customary practices. The state sponsored violence on its citizens, especially women, evade their societal progress and push them toward darkness.

The present article is primarily based on Temsula Ao's the short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. It aims to look at the gender discrimination in the tribal society, the state sponsored violence that disturbed the calm peaceful atmosphere of the land, and its people, especially women. It further points out how women are still caught in the net of traditional customs.

Social dictum and tradition

The picture of women in the tribal society is negative. The society believes in the saying that the wisdom of a woman does not extend beyond the bank of a river. Lucy Vashum in her article "Status of Tribal Women" (2003) asserts that tribal life is surrounded by various taboos. The oral traditions of most of the tribes "reflect the broad spectrum of marginalization of women in the society" (Chakraborty 2008). The patriarchal society never defines women as they are but as related to men. The male never regards women as an autonomous being but as a counterpart to them.

The story "The Pot Maker" illustrates how society framed the identity of the girls and their lot. It depicts the tradition of Ao Naga tribes that designed the art of pot making as women's work. The writer very brilliantly portrays that in a tribal society the likes and dislikes of a girl are decided by her parents. The Ao people believe that a girl's mastery over craft would bring good husband for her. In the story the protagonist Sentila is not at all interested in the craft of weaving but too much passionate for pot making. But her mother regards pot making useless. For her it is responsible for their poor condition. The Naga society is not liberal and they consider women inferior to men. That's why even the women's matters are solved by male members of the village council.

The status of women in the male dominated Naga society is comparatively

good and within the society they are compelled to cope up and accept the superiority of man. The rule bound life of women are strictly defined by the traditional beliefs which says that it is only men who can be the decision makers in important matters both in private and public affairs. Merit was never considered the deciding factor but being male was. Like the mainland, the region of Northeast India regards the institution of marriage holy and it carries much importance in the society. The tribes believe that matches are pre-destined and made in heaven under the observation of God. Relation out of marriage is considered as a serious offence and for it only the women are punished and men never face much trouble.

The story "The Night" is a burning instance of this. The central character Imlina gets pregnant and becomes mother out of wedlock. In both the cases the male partner cheats her. The Ao society termed her ill-fated but she has nothing to do with it. The tradition of the society always makes the female as the victim. The patriarchal society never stands with the helpless women rather compel her to face the trial where she has to bear humiliation, insult, bad words etc. The child without father is called 'child of the street'. The society is not liberal; it considers women below the dignity of men. Ao writes "Remember, in our society a woman must have the protection of a man even if he happens to be blind or lame. A woman alone will always be in danger." (Ao 2006)

Gender discrimination

Gender is solely a social construction that springs from the brain of man. It refers to man and woman in society respectively as "masculine and feminine" (Oakley 1972) creatures and their roles assigned in the society to play. The roles of male and female are different. Men are regarded as stronger due to their physical strength and intellectual superiority. They are encouraged to learn skills of war, fighting, wrestling to protect the society while women are compelled to make themselves expert in maintaining household affairs. In Nagaland Post, Temsula Ao writes "gender was often tagged with negative aspects of society, like gender bias, gender discrimination etc. that discloses the deep rooted mistrust and injustice against women." ((Nagaland Post, 2018)

The Naga society is dominated by the male folks and the role and freedom of women are restricted by various moral codes and conducts. These moral codes and conducts are age old and are dictated by male members. Although women in the society has played a very crucial role to mould and shape the society, patriarchy in Naga society make women believe that their contribution in nation making and progress is less. The idea is supported and legitimized by the Naga inheritance laws where a woman has no right to the property.

Temsula Ao through a number of stories in her present collection makes the readers, critics as well as the outer world familiar with the gender discrimination and women subversion that exist in the Naga society. In the story "The Pot Maker" the writer shows that the little girl is denied by her parents to pursue her aim in life to become a pot maker. As she is a girl, her parents try every possible way to impose their decision on her. For her parents, Sentila's own likes and desires carry little importance. Her parents mould her in such a way that in future she could easily get a suitor. Even after knowing Sentila's fascination for the art of pot making her mother argues "she will grow up to a useless girl and no man will want to marry her" (Ao 2006).

The history of socialization of woman in the region of Northeast India is too closely associated with the region's patriarchal culture. Socialization is classified as the "process through which people come to know about the expectations of the society" (Anderson et al., 2015). So, gender socialization is the "process of socialization which teaches children their gender roles" (Basin 2000). The gender socialization and expectations mould boys and girls respectively from their very birth. The harsh reality is that a woman maintains social tradition and custom throughout her life that moulds her life only to cope up with her family and the larger structure of the society.

The customary laws and their active application in the Northeast Indian tribal community bring gender discrimination to the forefront of the outer world. The customary laws are the signature mark of the tribal society. These are "established system of immemorial rules which evolved from the way of common knowledge, coupled with precedents applying to special cases which were retained in the memories of the chief and his counselors, their sons and their son's son, until forgotten or until they became part of the immemorial rules" (Bekker 1989).

Temsula Ao in "The Night" points out that the customary laws deny women to represent family in the village council. She also shows that there is no female member in the council. All decisions are taken and implemented by men. When Imnala is summoned by the council to justify her offence, she is accompanied by her maternal uncle. Furthermore, the council makes her alone responsible for becoming mother out of wedlock. For the male dominated village council the male partner had very minor role in the offence and thus no punishment falls upon him. The incident implies that these laws are constituted by men in their own favour. They restricted the possible ways for women to share ideas and to be a part of village council member.

Violence

Nagaland's emergence from a district to political state is full of political violence, insurgency, counter insurgency and bloodshed. The Northeast writers as a kind of responsibility depict the very theme of state sponsored violence in their writings. About it Tilottama Mishra writes "violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be 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 center of power" (Mishra 2011). For the people of Northeast India violence is the course of life as their life is full of bloodshed. Ao's stories very strongly depict this sense as well as the pathetic condition of ignorant tribes who have nothing to do with this state sponsored violence. The traces of violence affect the people's psyche. They are caught in a traumatic situation. The conflict between the head and heart is clearly visible in each and every action of their own. In the words of Ao "for the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life, their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred in mind and soul." (Ao 2007)

The collection starts with "The Jungle Major". It introduces the readers the military interference in common people's life and its ill consequences. The protagonist Punaba joins underground Naga force to make free his motherland from military domination.

The story "Soaba" in the collection shows how state-sponsored violence takes the life of the commoners through the unfortunate death of the simple boy Soaba. It again draws attention regarding state's tremendous effort to suppress the collective voice of resistance and protest. There is not an iota of freedom of women even if she is the wife of the boss of military commander. The wife of boss Imlina faces much trouble to cope up with his husband's behavior and luxurious life style. The story portrays the trouble time of Naga insurgency and military raj and its consequences on commoners. It was time when in the tribal populated Naga territory "words like convoy, grouping, curfew and 'situation' began to acquire sinister dimensions as a result of the conflict taking place between the government and underground armies" (Ao 2007) Ao as a writer from the Northeast region depicts the darker side of military domination as a kind of protest to the state's policy. She writes "The word 'grouping' had a much more sinister implication; it meant that whole village would be dislodged from their ancestral sides and herded into new ones, making it more convenient for the security forces to guard them day and night. The harrowing tales of people who experienced such forced migrations are not fully known and some of the accounts have died with the unfortunate ones who did not survive the intense physical and mental torture meted out to them...Curfew, a word

that did not exist in the people's vocabulary, became dreaded fact of life for people living in the towns. A word like 'situation' is a perfectly innocent one, but in the context of the underground movement, it acquired a single meaning: it referred only to the fall out of the struggle between the two opposing forces." (Ao 2007)

The story "The Last Song" traces the violence on common people at its extreme form. Ao very minutely points out the role of the military role to ruin the life of people. The story shows how a young girl named Apenyo and her mother were brutally raped by the armed forces amidst the time of chaos and confusion only to frighten the ignorant villagers. During the attack at new church on the new church's foundation day the Army captain "grabbed Apenyo by the hair and with a bemused look on his face dragged her away from the crowd towards the old church building" (Ao 2007). The brutal murder of both mother and her daughter implies that the imposition of military is not the way towards peace rather it led the turmoil condition of Northeast from worse to worst.

The jungle life of the common Naga people and their transformation from being ignorant to become experienced in the underground troops is summed by Ao in "An Old Man Remembers." The story of Sashi and Imli provide an idea regarding how situations and circumstances forced to chose the only way of violence to survive. Ao's narration shows the conflicting situation, chaos, violence of Nagaland during the time of insurgency and counter insurgency of Naga underground force and state-sponsored armed forces.

Concluding Remarks

Temsula Ao being a daughter of India's Northeast understands the struggle of women to survive amidst male dominance and gun powder. Through her stories, analyzed above, she very truly mirrors the everyday reality of the social scenario of Nagaland. In spite of the active participation and economic contribution in the family women still struggle to get equal social status here. Gender inequality and subordination prevail as men hold the authoritative position in political, social and cultural institutions. "In the name of preserving traditional customs and tribal identities, very often individual and gender choices get foreclosed and women are relegated to the lower status" (Boungpui 2013).

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