

SENSING THE PRESENCE OF WOMAN IN THE MAN'S WORLD THROUGH TEMSULA AO'S *THESE HILLS CALLED HOME: STORIES FROM A WAR ZONE*

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ABSTRACT

*For too long the North-Eastern states of India has been the epicenter of conflicts. The massive agitations and political unrest left every native inhabitant quivering in one way or the other. Among all the eight states that frames the North-East, Nagaland is considered to be the epitome of insurgency. Canvassing the picture of her homeland Nagaland, Temsula Ao penned down ten intriguing short stories in her novel *These hills called Home: Stories from a war zone*. She is one of the prominent voices in English Literature to soar from the North East. Her stories brims with uniqueness and brings forth the looming tribulations which the characters keeps combating. The gender disparity in a Naga society is crucial as it is deeply patriarchal. Taking into consideration two short stories from her collection, this paper attempts to explore the voices of audacious women who comb at and survive toxic masculinities responsible for their subjugation in their society. Soaked in patriarchy, it leaves a very little space for the women to spore. The feminine voices are suppressed under misogynistic male dominance. The paper strives to use feminist theories to deconstruct the various facets of a woman's life. It raises questions on the standpoint of women and their tussle with the privileged men of the society. Ao consciously involves the women characters in the war and shows how meticulously they tackle power and force. The presence of a woman in a society is inevitable but her roles remain confined to the conventional structuring of a meek daughter, tolerant wife, loving mother and most importantly as the torchbearer of the societal norms. She cannot violate the fringes of social chronology and choose to become a mother first and later a wife. Undoubtedly, the women are highly respected in the Naga tradition but it comes wrapped in the bottlenecked validations of men who keeps their claws dipped in prejudices against their opposite sexes.*

KEYWORDS: *Dominance, Gender, Masculinity, Patriarchy, Woman*

INTRODUCTION

The celebrated writer Temsula Ao in her book, *These Hills Called Home-stories from a war zone* presents to its readers a Naga society during the period of emergency. The period was traumatic and left tragic imprints in the minds of the people. The violence inflicted upon people was beyond imagination. Especially, the women were the prime victims. They were raped, blamed and assaulted for their existence. According to Susan Brownmiller, "War provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women". In the stories too, the Naga women faces the wrath of the society. This study focuses on the voices of the Naga women and marks their existence in the society. It presents the experiences of the Naga women folks during war. Each story narrates the complexities of the Naga society. The everyday struggle to resist the bias society and survive marks the patience of the Naga women. The paper strives to analyse two

stories - 'The Jungle Major' and 'The Last Song'. These stories reflect the true faces of women during the emergency period. The violence inflicted upon them and how they fought back with pride.

OBJECTIVES

- To study the Naga women voices in the patriarchal society.
- To analyse the impact of the war on the women and how they combat it.
- To use literary theory to discuss the violence against women.

METHODOLOGY

The stories are examined critically and a close reading of the characters is done to further analyse their subjugation. The primary source includes the original stories and the secondary sources such as books, journals have been considered for the study.

DISCUSSION

The first story 'The Jungle Major' introduces us to Khatila and Punaba, the ugly man. But his bad looks don't prevent him from marrying the most beautiful girl. He marries Khatila, the beautiful woman. After his marriage, he joins the underground militants and stays away from his beautiful wife for a long time. Later he secretly comes to visit his wife and the news of his visit reaches the Indian army. The army plans to arrest him one day when he was staying with his wife. But Khatila's presence of mind outsmarts the army. She understands the depth of the situation and deceives the army. She makes her ugly husband disguise as a servant and sends him to fetch water. Upon being asked about her husband's whereabouts she bravely answers the officer unperturbed about the matter. The story signifies how Khatila tricks the Indian army and saves her husband's life, her own dignity as well as the lives of the innocent villagers.

During the period of emergency, the security forces were harsh on the people. The villagers were severely beaten by the army and numerous cases of molestation and rapes proliferated. Women were unsafe and subjected to various types of tortures. However, despite of knowing the risk involved Khatila meticulously saves her husband from the army. Amidst the chaotic killings and bloodshed, Khatila performs her duty and becomes an example of heroism. Ao tries to capture the lives of the common village folk whose lives were caught in the turbulence of war. Women as in the most war narratives occupy marginal spaces. In fact in majority of works that discuss war, women are represented as victims devoid of identity and agency. Mostly women are abducted and kept captives for the purpose of sexual slavery. In her essay "Benevolent Subordination" she asserts that the patriarchal structure of Naga society has women playing a subordinate role to men in almost all the crucial decision making institutions in society. The traditional power structure in Naga society exists in the village, the heart of Naga country. In such a world, a woman's well being as a member of a particular clan, her role and status is strictly defined by the tradition that allows only men to be the decision-makers in almost all important matters in private and public affairs. Women enjoy the "protection" of the men and though they may play an active role at the domestic level, in the village they are denied a voice in the decision-making bodies. Naga society, culture, its tradition and belief in the ideology of male superiority allows unequal power structure to operate which controls, subordinates and undervalues women. Women's value due to their innate physical weakness and assumed inferiority is never on par with men. Women accept their assigned lower role and perpetuate what Temsula Ao calls "benevolent Subordination".

The second story 'The Last Song' is a story of a girl named Apenyo who is the lead singer of a church choir. The story narrates a planned massacre led by the Indian army against the villagers for supporting the rebels. The mass killings happened on a December Sunday when the inauguration ceremony of a church was taking place. Apenyo was the lead singer and she kept on singing even when the army marched inside the church. The army disturbed by her act of defiance dragged her out of the church and raped her but Apenyo kept on singing continuously. She was resisting the force and as she was a female it further incensed the anger of the soldiers. Infact when Apenyo's mother, Libeni came for her rescue she was also raped brutally. Both Apenyo and her mother were killed but her voice became immortal. Her resistance was heroic. Among every men inside and outside the church Apenyo was the only one who openly challenged the soldiers. Her act of resistance became an example among the people. Kate Millet states that men have institutionalised power over women, and that this power is socially constructed as opposed to biological or innate.

In every society women are initially nurtured to accept patriarchal values so it becomes impossible to eliminate the system of oppression . The females are conditioned in a way so that they accept everything even though it is wrong. They lack the power to speak and challenge. But in both the stories the women evolves and set strong examples. This awakening was necessary for the society. Infact, when Khatila married Punaba there were speculations. Further when they didn't have children she was addressed as "barren". But Khatila's protest underlines the significance of the comparatively less visible and inconspicuous forms of resistance.

As women of the Naga patriarchal society the women has limitations but these two women brought the women of the Naga community to the centre. The Naga society required men to be strong , well built and courageous and the women were also required to be strong enough to take care of the household. Although expected to be humble and subservient, Khatila and Apenyo in their own ways paved the path of resistance. These ordinary women cope with violence. One by singing and the other by putting on an unperturbed face while getting confronted. Temsula Ao's women reflect typical Naga spirit of remaining undaunted when faced with danger. In 'The Last Song' Temsula Ao expresses her feminist concerns on Naga women, i.e., Apenyo and Libeni. Temsula Ao's story can also be discussed from the perspectives of "Social Castration" of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. "Social castration" is a particular condition in which a specific section of the society is made powerless for the sake of enjoying power by another section of people of the society. They deal with woman's lack of power in every arena of the society and this lack is represented by means of the word "Castration" as a male possession.

In 'The Last Song' the young captain grabbed Apenyo by the hair. He uses the body of Apenyo to quench the thirst of his sexual pleasure. He is very much aware of the position of women and his power being a representative of Indian military. So, he and his men cross all the limits of their instinctual drives and indulged in raping Apenyo and her mother. Apenyo was gang-raped and the soldiers raped the limp body of her mother Libeni's too. The members of patriarchy do not dare to step forward to save these women as the women always have been an object of sex to them. They have already taken it for granted that women are the objects to appease the sexual hunger of the male-members of the society. They have silently accepted what happened to Apenyo and her mother. Similarly, In her essay 'Gender and Power: Some Women-Centered Narratives from Ao-Naga Folklore', Temsula Ao states: - "The image of women is generally projected as the weaker sex in the normative hierarchy of any patriarchal system". "The power structures with the family and society among the Nagas has always rested with the male". In Khatila, Temsula Ao offers a redefinition of women which is against the male-constructed stereo typical identity of "the weaker sex" of the society. Women are considered

marginalized or inferior in the history and the origin of the civilization of the people. But Khatila's presence of mind, audacity and her clever ploy reflect the nature of power women may have possessed. In delineating such a character, Temsula Ao subtly highlights the dichotomy between the real and the mythical, the factual and the fictional in understanding women's power.

CONCLUSION

Literature has become a weapon for many feminist writers to hold their concerns over the feminism. Temsula Ao, a Northeastern Indian writer has raised many issues related to the feminist consciousness and the experimentation of an innovative feminist parole. Her writings mark the presence of the plenty of references related to feminism. A close study of her short stories especially 'The Last Song' and 'The Jungle Major' upholds numerous connotations of the feminism. The female characters like Apenyo, Libeni and Khatila represent the epitome of feminism. The lives of these ladies symbolize the hardships, exploitations, struggles, impediments, courageousness, brevity and determinations of the women of the Naga society. Naga women suffer from an unending misery under the Patriarchal power structure and the Military operations led by the Indian Armed Forces from time to time. Apenyo, Libeni and Khatila present the exploitations, hardships of life, struggle for the exploration of the self-identity, bondage life and powerlessness of the female members of the Naga society. They become compelled to lay down their power to the lust and infatuations of the men. On the other hand, Khatila represents the fighting spirits, courageousness, brevity and determinations of the women of the Naga society.

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