



Women's Body as the Site of Violence: A Critical Reading of Temsula Ao's Short Story "The Last Song."

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Abstract :

The Northeastern part of India is often perceived as conflict-afflicted with various insurgency and counter-insurgency movements. Indeed the region has witnessed many such conflicts in its long history that have left the civilians to live life amidst terror and disputes. However, the case of women has been different from men in this region. Under the same circumstances, the experience of women has been different from men. They are often subjected to gender-based violence which made them vulnerable both physically and psychologically. Women not only became victims but are also used as weapons at the time of conflict. Their bodies are targeted to afflict terror amidst the civilians. Temsula Ao's writings often limn the terrors that have ruptured the lives of ordinary people particularly women. This paper is an attempt to see how the armed conflict in Nagaland took a patriarchal image in their misogynistic treatment of women with special reference to Temsula Ao's short story "The Last Song" from the collection *These Hills Called Home*.

Keywords : *Northeast, Conflict, Violence, Women's body, Rape.*

Introduction :

The vulnerability of women and children transpires at the time of war and conflict. Owing to the rights and status of women in society, their access to the means of production, and their entry into education and employment, they are the ones who are placed at the receiving end. Though women's bodies become the site of violence that endure various kinds of physical and sexual abuse, its impact remain confined not only to the surface but pierces deep down the psychological sphere causing trauma often referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Gill 215). The harsh brutality of

the conflict-ridden states subjected them to triple jeopardy, that from the state, the militant, and within their homes. Preeti Gill in her acclaimed article "Women in the Time of Conflict: The case of Nagaland" states:

In situations of armed conflict, or what has come to be called 'low-intensity warfare', it is the vulnerability of the women that is multiplied hundred fold- each day becomes a struggle for survival against the tremendous odds. (213)

The northeast corner of India is often seen as a conflict-affected region and indeed the place witnessed conflict in various forms- armed conflict,



insurgency and counter-insurgency, colonial and post-colonial conflict, communal conflict, etc. A common belief among the people of the northeastern states, particularly Nagaland and Tripura, is how these states are different and thus distant and ignored by mainland India. Nagaland was a self-sufficient state and very loyal to their tribe until the foreign intrusion took place which gradually pushed and transformed the place into a space of power play. Nagaland, unlike the other northeastern states, has abstained itself from any kind of trading and economic activity and thus remained away from assimilating with mainland India. The sense of deep deprivation and exploitation by the center has induced in them a sense of being colonized by their people that finally gave birth to various secessionist movements. These movements brought the Indian Armed Forces into the scene to counter the insurgents. The birth of a strong notion of regionalism against the nationalistic attitude can be seen pervading these northeastern states. Moreover, the frequent occurrence of conflicts and its effects on civilians has prevented the region from developing to its full potential.

With conflict and war came the violence inflicted upon the vulnerable civilians including women and children. The rights of women and children are exposed to risk at the time of conflict because of their gender and age. With different roles came different challenges that the women have to overcome in a war zone region. At the time of conflict or war, the women who lost their husbands have to bear singlehandedly the upbringing of their children and the sole responsibility to feed the other vulnerable members of the family with liminal access to the

means of production. Outside the domestic sphere, some women even contributed leadership in their struggle for freedom but owing to gender biases they often end up becoming victims of rape and other physical and psychological abuses. The psychological trauma comes not only from the physical abuses but from the loss of family and children they incur from the conflicts that leave them with an open scar. Temsula Ao in her Preface to her collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home* writes:

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 both in mind and soul. (10)

From time immemorial women are used as symbols to signify cultures, nations, and even religions. Moreover, the honour of the tribe, clan, and family falls upon the conduct of their character. Thus attacking a woman indirectly means attacking the particular culture, religion, tribe, or family. Emphasis is mainly put on such extended relations to define a woman and the state of mind of the woman is ignored completely. The identity of a person undoubtedly stems from the societal relations one shares, but the inner self has equal contribution in forming one's identity and no person under any circumstance can be taken for granted because of their extended relationship with the outside world. When brutal hostilities are afflicted on a woman's body, it not only ruins the honour of that particular family, or clan, or village but equally ruptures the self.

Mamang Dai has rightly observed that Northeast is writing and is written about. The



whole conflict scenario has been sincerely dealt with by the writers of the northeast region. Through their writings, they try to find possible ways of reconciliation and attempt at improving the condition of women. Eminent writers like Dr. Homen Borgohain, Indira Goswami, Sanjoy Hazarika, Mitra Phukon, Tamsula Ao, and many more writers have dedicated their efforts to depict the realities of this region along with other problems like migration and nation-building. These glaring issues taken by them did not remain confined within the pages of their writings but they have come out in-person to work and study the Northeast region along with attempts to empower the women. Ms. Preeti Gill, editor of Zubaan, and the author of *Troubled Zones: Women's Voices From the North East of India* and *The Memsahib's Logbook: Stories from the Tea Plantations of Assam and North Bengal* is one such writer dealing with the issues of women in conflict-ridden states of Nagaland and Tripura. Tamsula Ao, another eminent writer who wrote poems, articles, and short stories on oral myth with a modern tone and the ill effects of war and conflict on the civilians particularly women, also came forward to paint the lives of the ordinary people that got entangled with the state's disputes. Her collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone* portrays how the hill people and the whole region exist on the periphery with frequent conflicts ravishing the land and how the lives of the ordinary people caught in the web of fear and trauma during the 1960s and 1970s when the various secessionist movements were emerging with the strong sense of separation from the mainland India. Tamsula Ao has written in the Preface "Lest

we forget" to *These Hills Called Home*, how at the time of conflict "there are no winners, only victims and the result can be measured only in human terms" (10). Unlike some writers, Tamsula Ao wrote without any anger or rage towards anybody. She did not take any side and solely focused on the common village people that resulted in her unprejudiced writing. Her narratives gave alternate histories which would provide counter-narratives to the larger historical canvas. The importance of her writings rest in her dealing with the psyche of the people in a conflict-ridden state. While some of her stories reflect the predominant engagement with the violent history of the region, her other stories echo the harmonious man-land relationship and the traditional way of life of the Naga people that try to capture and retrieve the memories in a fast-changing world.

There are some significant stories in the collection of ten stories book *These Hills Called Home* that place a different kind of focus on the female characters. These stories despite being placed at the backdrop of violence have a certain kind of humanness projected through the characters and their concern for the wellbeing of the others. Apart from this, a certain kind of ordinariness and normalcy is also worked upon by the author amidst the turbulence that transcends the violent narratives of the region. The characters are ordinary people living decent lives in the rural environment. This paper shall deal with one of her poignant tales "The Last Song." It is a story of a lonely widow Libeni and her beautiful daughter Apenyo. Through them, she presents the social reality, the plight of a widow, and how they suffer at a time of conflict and atrocities. Libeni did everything from working in



the field to weaving clothes to sustain their lives and to give her daughter better education. Life for Libeni became a lonely struggle for she had to earn her living and at the same time look after her small daughter. Her relatives occasionally helped her and encouraged her for second marriage but she chose to remain single and devoted herself to the well-being of her daughter. Being a single mother she suffered a lot but her daughter's goodness and achievement both in singing and education remained the source of joy and comfort for her. Libeni is a progressive woman and a mother who values her daughter's education and wisdom above everything else. Somehow they managed to bring their lives out of that hardship when a dreadful event shattered their lives for good. Till this time their vulnerability as women failed to consume them. They were strong enough to handle their lives amidst violence occurring at the backdrop. It was only on that particular day when the brutal hostility occurred at the church that revealed how vulnerable they were as women and having a body that becomes the site of rage, anger, and revenge.

The barbaric incident that took place on that congregation day described how the lives of the common village people get entangled and they are the ones on the receiving ends in a region pulled apart by the government forces and underground military groups. The dedication Sunday was ruptured by the government armed forces who doubted the village people's involvement with the underground groups and wanted to teach them a lesson. The armed forces here acted as the agents of patriarchy exercising their power on the women's bodies. After the soldiers surrounded the congregation the people were terrified. But Apenyo

stood where she was and started the solo song which the other followed. For the soldiers "it was an act of open defiance and proper retaliation has to be made" (Ao 27). Soon the congregation scattered to save their lives. But Apenyo, ignorant of the intensity of such hostilities, stayed still and sang her song wholeheartedly without any fear. But her mother who knew such occurrences called her to stop the song. But she was singing her heart out. Temsula Ao writes "She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence as guiding her." (27). The soldiers unable to stop her finally grabbed and raped her. Unable to silence her, the soldiers use rape as a tactic to silence the women whose act of singing the song threatened their phallic selves. When Libeni tried to rescue her she too was caught by a soldier and was raped. The other villagers were kicked, clubbed, and shot at by the soldiers. To ensure there would be no witnesses to their diabolic crime, the church along with its dead or dying was set on fire. The tragedy of Apenyo and Libeni represented susceptibility in times of conflict. A woman who is seen as a symbolic upholder of culture, tradition, and identity became the prime target to humiliate, terrorize and dishonor communities. Though Ao in this story has depicted the condition of small Naga village this can be taken as a replica of many other villages and parts of Naga home.

Rape committed by the armed forces left its mark in almost all the corners of the world. The sexual psychology or the orientation of the soldiers during chaos and conflict thus need to be taken into consideration. Though various factors are generally held responsible for rape, like social and cultural influences, the fundamental one is the



male libido that finally determines the main execution of that act. Various theories have been put forward by the thinkers to describe the factors responsible for wartime rape. Jonathan Gottschall, substantiating Susan Brownmiller's ideas about rape, has discussed one such influential theory which is called the strategic rape theory. According to this theory, the military soldiers to accomplish their larger objectives, use rape as a tactic; a tactic to suppress and dominate women (131). In the story, it is observed that the soldiers were planning a strategy to teach the village people a lesson as to what happens when they support the underground rebel force. The author writes: Unknown to them, a sinister plan was being hatched by the forces to demonstrate to the entire Naga people what happens when you 'betray' your own government. (Ao 26)

The villagers unaware of such plotting were busy doing their activities to celebrate the dedication of the new church building on Sunday. And when the day came and the time to just start the ceremony the soldier surrounded the crowd inside the church and started assaulting the people. Libeni and Apenyo were raped by the captain first and the soldiers later took their turn until Libeni was dead. The strategic rape theory however fails to explain the reason behind raping the victim repeatedly to death. This hints at the biological side of rape apart from the sociocultural factors. The biosocial theorists' views regarding wartime rape are based on their genetic functioning: "Man's structural capacity to rape and woman's corresponding structural vulnerability are as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself (Brownmiller 13). It mainly brings

forth the biological functioning of the gender and is often identified with another theory known as the pressure cooker theory. The pressure cooker theory was also used by the feminist group to explain wartime rape that mainly focuses on biological drives. They believe that during war and conflict the soldiers get the scope to take out their irresistible libido directed by their misogynistic thought process because men have been conditioned to dominate women. This theory very well explains the soldiers raping the mother and daughter taking their turn. The soldiers at first planned to arrest the villagers for their support towards the underground forces but the act of defiance instigated the conditioning of the male sexual psychology to dominate and oppress women from time immemorial that can be considered as a systematic conspiracy to inflict violence on women. Jonathan Gottschall in his article "Explaining Wartime Rape" writes "rape in war is deemed a result of a conspiracy, not necessarily conscious but still systematic, of men to dominate and oppress women" (134). Another aspect put forward by this theory is how the young women who are at the peak of their physical attractiveness are mainly targeted. In this story, the captain first takes hold of Apenyo, the eighteenth-year-old girl. Her mother was raped when she tried to rescue her. Ao describes Apenyo as "Along with her singing voice, her beauty also blossomed as 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" (29). The psychology behind rape is a combination of different factors- an act driven by the male libido, socio-cultural factor, anger, and rage, etc.,- and therefore a single theory cannot



solely explain the motive behind this vicious act. Thus lies the ambivalence of the soldiers who gets blurry in their reaction after the crime committed. In this story, the captain tried to erase the witness as he considered it a crime. The plan started strategically which was later followed by anger and rage and finally ended with the realization that it was a mistake and crime. The story mentions that the life of the captain after that incident changed. His life ended in an insanity asylum. The author writes: The captain happened to look back and seeing that there were witnesses to their despicable act, turned to his soldiers and ordered them to open fire on the people who were now lifting up the bodies of the two women. (Ao 29)

The simple plan of the soldiers to arrest the villagers turned into the vilest act when confronted with the slightest hint of protest and defiance. Post rape-murder again has multiple reasons. In this story, it seems the captain wanted to hide the crime and thus destroyed the witnesses. The barbarism involved killing of the innocent people who witnessed the heinous crime.

Another kind of conflict observed in the story is the conflict embedded in the transitional phase of the Naga village due to the intrusion and interaction with the foreign culture. In the story, the church played an important role in restructuring the village's social life. The church acted as the promoter of gender equality and the beholder of women's rights by giving women leadership positions based on their capacity, skill, and competency. In the story, we observe how the villagers are celebrating the dedication of a new church building that clearly shows how well the church has blended with the culture of this Naga

village. Moreover, the church as a religious institution has helped in binding the people together. Each one of the members came together contributing to the common fund of the church to re-construct the new church building. Re-construction of the church building from bamboo and thatch to tin and wood itself becomes symbolic of how it has consolidated its roots in the Naga village. The church was the sole conveyor of the changes sweeping the other parts of the world that includes thriving for gender equality. And these changes can be seen in Libeni who gave importance to her daughter's education at a time when a girl child was not encouraged to go to school. Their place was mainly in the agricultural field. Libeni tried to follow the middle path at the time of transition by inculcating in her daughter the best of both traditional and foreign culture. Libeni not only encouraged the education of her daughter but equally taught her traditional art and craft. And indeed Apenyo grows into an excellent weaver, sharp intellectually with an exquisite singing voice.

The vulnerability of women because of biological reasons often made them victims during conflict or no conflict circumstances both in the public and the private sphere. This tends to continue even after the death. In the story, the dead bodies of Apenyo and Libeni became a matter of debate as to whether they should be buried according to Christian norms or traditional Naga norms. Nagaland was in a state of transition and the conflict between rootedness and openness was still acting dividing the old and the new generation into two groups. The old traditional people, who, even though embraced Christianity, were still holding onto their traditional values that did not allow rape victims



to be buried in the village graveyard. Rape, as the cause of their death, was considered unnatural. To this, the young ones protested saying “How can you say that? They were members of our church and sang in the choir” (Ao 30). However, a compromise was reached after much debate that allowed the dead bodies to be buried just outside the village graveyard but without any headstone. Headstone signifies a lasting memorial of the family and history which has been denied to Apenyo and Libeni. Apenyo’s bravery remained unnoticed because of her loss of honour that continued even after their death. It’s an irony in the case of a woman who carries the burden of honour of one’s family, tribe, nation and gets thrown away by her very own people and community once she loses her honour. Thus the experience of women becomes very different from men. Apenyo, the eighteenth years

old girl who alone stood her ground exhibited bravery which remained unnoticed but the emphasis was rather put on their losing the honor for which they were denied the headstone after death.

But the purpose of the headstone was fulfilled by the storyteller who remembered the lost voice and memory of the brave girl and passed it to generations that followed. Temsula Ao and other northeast writers’ quintessential feature is their attempt to carry on these oral stories that captured the ethos of the traditional Naga village. By documenting the oral story of Apenyo and Libeni, along with other such stories, Ao has symbolically offered the headstone denied to them. She has given Apenyo’s last song a space to survive in her writings that will be remembered for years to come along with the brutalities the Naga people particularly women faced at the time of conflict.

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