

Nagaland as the Home for Existential Dread: A Critical Study on the Select Stories of Temsula Ao

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Abstract

The North Eastern states of India are known for their myths, cultural tradition, folklores and nature which found their expression in many forms of literature. Though this region is gifted by Mother Nature with abundant resources and unblemished beauty it also witnesses bloodshed, violence, turmoil and conflicts in the names of ethnicity, race and national identity. People of this region suffer from various forms of oppression and they are not in a position to find solutions to the problems they face. Their helplessness and lack of political power or support make them vulnerable to oppression and violence. Temsula Ao, the emerging English writer from the Naga community brings out the sufferings and pain of this region through her writings. Violence, which has become the part of their day to day life, is the primary theme of her works and she portrays the significant impact of violence on the people of Nagaland which deprives peace, harmony and other fundamental requirements of coexistence. People are forced to give up their socio-ethnic practices, food habits and culture. The trauma, humiliation, exclusion and discrimination experienced by the marginalized tribes of this region remain the primary cause for the youth joining the armed rebel groups. People are caught up between the nation state and the rebel groups and suffer because of both the elements. This paper focuses to analyse the affliction, disillusionment and trauma experienced by the ordinary people in the conflict zones of Nagaland through the select stories of Temsula Ao.

Keywords: Power Conflict, Violence, Trauma, North East India, Temsula Ao

Introduction

Literature acts as a tool to record all that happen in a society, and it varies according to the landscapes and region. Mother India is well known for such varied cultural heritage. To explore about the native culture or about the particular society it is mandatory to study about their native literature. Among all other North Eastern states of India which were known for their indigenous culture. Nagaland is known for its political turmoil and bloodshed that is depicted in the writings of Temsula Ao. She was awarded Padma Shri and Sahitya Akademi for her literary works which truthfully pictures the social milieu of

the state. Her literary works describe the significant political and social changes that disturbed the harmony of Nagaland. Indigenous people's quest for identity and their desire for an independent state are the primary concerns in her stories. Conflicting ideologies of nationhood, patriotism and cultural identity have led to violence and conflict in the state where nobody is spared. All these themes were elaborately discussed in one of her collection of short stories titled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*.

Nagaland: The Conflict state

Since Nagaland became a state of India in 1963, the territorial disputes, struggles for separate nationhood and insurgency of armed militants have become inseparable from the state. In order to put things under control the government imposed Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958 (AFSPA) which resulted in "excruciating tribulation and untold miseries to the Nagas" (82). Daikho in her article states that "it would be a lie, if a Naga failed to speak about the immense atrocities meted on a daily basis" (81). Militant insurgency and armed conflicts remain inseparably intertwined with the lives of the people of Nagaland. Temsula Ao, begins the book with a dedication to the people of her land stating,

I hear the land cry,
Over and over again
'Let all the dead awaken
And teach the living
How not to die'

The land witnesses continuous gun battles and bloodshed which results in the traumatic lives of the people of the state. This paper attempts to analyse how the common people suffer from violence in their everyday life and how the youth were attracted towards extremism in the names of ethnicity and nationality. When the struggle for their identity violates the constitutional entities it paves way for reaction from the nation-state. The prolonged armed conflict between the extremists and the armed forces of the Government contributed to trauma and hopelessness.

Nationhood Verses Lost Youth

National identity is an ideological factor experienced by every individual. When it is portrayed in negative light it leads to huge chaos or even the loss of their identity. This scenario is clearly visible in the lives of the people of Nagaland where the younger generations were misguided in the wrong direction in the name of national and ethnic identity which results in conflicts. In the first story titled "The Jungle Major" the author projects the thought processes of people as how the entire village is affected by the new wave of patriotic fervour which "swept the imagination of the people and plunged them into a struggle which many did not even understand. This particular village also became a part of the network, which kept the underground outfit supplied with information, food and occasional arms (2, 3). Young people of the village actively and eagerly involved in the extremist activities and in their gatherings the subject of independence turns out to be an open talk and their activities became more aggressive against the government forces. The author portrays the scenario as, "young people spoke of the exploits of their peers in encounters with government forces and were eager to join the new band of 'patriotic' warriors to liberate their homeland from 'foreign land' rule" (3). These lines express how the adolescent people were attracted towards extremist activities. In this story, Punaba is the young married man who sacrificed his youth for the nationalist struggle and left his wife alone. He hardly visited her as there was a possibility being caught by the security forces at any time. Also, Temsula has not failed to highlight the misuse of power by the security forces. The women who refused to provide information about the

extremist groups were ill-treated and “sometimes they would be hung upside down and subjected to unspeakable tortures like chilli powder being rammed into their extremities” (3).

In the next story “Soaba” the situation during late fifties is explained where youngsters began to think as they were the new generations responsible to bring freedom to their land. They were caught with the idea of the dissidence and open rebellion that seemed to be their motto for which “they abandoned family, school careers and even permanent jobs to join the band of nationalists to liberate the homeland from forces, which they believed, were inimical to their aspirations to be counted among the free nations of the world” (10). Many rural adults abandoned their family and fieldwork and were inducted into the extremist groups as ‘freedom fighters’. And it was at that time the specialised vocabularies like convoy, grouping, curfew and situation become common ones. All these were the symbolic representation of the conflict that took place between the government and the extremist rebels.

“Shadows” is another story about Imli the young educated Naga youth who wished to create his identity as freedom fighter like his father but was betrayed by his own leader named Hoito. In order to take revenge of Imli’s father he targeted Imli and murdered him in a well planned ambush. Roko and Lovishe found his dead body were extremely disturbed as the never experienced such merciless murder in their life time. Knowing all these struggles to survive in jungle Imli’s father was adamant not to send his son to join the underground army. As he occupied the top rank he realised the life of a rebell will never suit his son but without his father’s knowledge he joined the army. He said to his mother that, “he had left studies for good and that he wanted to follow his father into the jungle” (71).

The story of “An Old Man Remembers” is about the old man who shares with much hesitation about his spoiled youth to his grandson. He never wished to share their sufferings, because he felt that it may affect the present generation both physically and mentally. But later he realised that he was wrong and what his friend Imli said was correct. He “often told him that the young had a right to know about the people’s history and that they should not grow up ignorant about the unspeakable atrocities that they, the older generation had witnessed” (93). Keeping this in his mind he shares all their sufferings. They experienced when they were associated with extremist activities. Joining the rebel group was not their choice but circumstances forced them to indulge in such activities which in turn altered the course of their lives forever. Imli states, “we too, were young and carefree like you once, but all of a sudden our youth was snatched away from us, and instead of school books we were carrying guns and other weapons of destruction and living in the jungle like wild creatures” (98). This reveals that the youngsters join the rebel groups not out of their willingness but because of the external influences. Once they joined the group they should sacrifice everything and should learn the art of living in the jungles. This is to safeguard themselves from the government forces. These lines clearly convey that they had no other choice to choose, “we were not yet sixteen when we became such ruthless killers” (108) and “Our youth was claimed by the turbulence, which transformed boys, like Imli and me into killers” (111). Even though they were not part of the insurgent groups they have to live that life because they had no other option for survival.

The above incidents narrated in the stories portray that in the name of national identity many youths have lost their life. Most of them were misguided in name of freedom and nationhood and were forced to sacrifice everything for no success.

Impact of Violence and Traumatic Experience

Violence never brings any solution; it is the way to destroy everything. It is more evident that the conflict zones with bloodshed and violence are extending as a frightening factor and there will be no signs of peace making. One such place is the North East part of India where the threats of

institutionalized fear and insurgency is seeded in the minds of common people. Swathi Krishnan states that, “the trauma experience by North East people is not something natural” (521). This shows the struggles they have undergone to lead their routine life.

The story “Soaba” is about the little boy who lost his life for no reason. The literal meaning of Soaba is ‘idiot’ which is also the name of little boy of Naga community. Imlichuba, who was given highest rank in government, leads an abundant life with music and drinks. His job is to collect the information about the militants and to pass it to the Army. Because of his powerful position he will be always surrounded by a group which made his wife to feel intolerable and was not able to find peace for her and their children at home. The brutal action took place once when Imlichuba was unconscious and drunk. With no enquiry about Soaba, Imlichuba enters the home shoots the little boy. The poor innocent little boy lost his life for no reason as he was assumed to be a traitor. Once Imtila the wife of Imli heard the sound of gunfire she “rushed to the body of the fallen idiot crying over and over again, ‘Oh my poor boy, were you born for this? Why did I let you come into this evil place?’” (19). Here the misuse of power by the authorities is portrayed by the narrator.

In another story “The Last Song” the beautiful young girl named Apenyo was fond of music like her father, and she became the leading singer of choir in the village church. While the villagers were preparing for Sunday prayer there was a sudden intervention of the army. The villagers could hear “the sound of gunfire in the distance; it was an ominous sound which meant that the army would certainly disrupt the festival” (27). They marched in just to teach a lesson for the entire village who constantly supporting the insurgent groups by paying taxes to them. Apenyo kept on singing and that attracted the attention of Army men and as a result she lost her life becoming prey for them. Also her mother who came to save her was assaulted and put to death. Villagers who came forward to hold their bodies were also threatened by the chief of the troop, he ordered his soldiers “to open fire on the people who were now lifting up the bodies of the two women” (29). Here the narrator highlights the atrocities done by the Army, instead of safeguarding the people they themselves turned out to be a curse for those people.

The story “The Curfew Man” narrates the story of a ‘tale carrier’ Satemba, who works at night to gather information about the Naga insurgents and their upcoming plans. He formerly worked as a constable in the Assam police department. Because of his permanent physical disability he could not continue his service. Later he was appointed as spy by the Sub Divisional Officer to have a eye on the activities of the underground rebels. In the beginning he was loyal to his profession and he never preferred “to think about the rightness or wrongness” (40). But later he realised the seriousness of his job and questioned himself about his motives. Later he felt uneasy about the activities of Armed forces and stayed in his home blaming his knee that troubles him a lot but “the real trouble was in his heart” (40).

“The Old Man Remembers” is another story where Sashi and Imli’s lost youth is discussed in detail. On one fine night Sashi shares his grandson how they lost their youth in the name of nationhood and where their history “was written not only with the blood and tears of countless innocents but also how youngsters like Imli and him were transformed into what they became in the jungle” (96). He also shared that they never felt happy with their job and it had given them “nothing but pain all these years” (97). While Imli and Sashi were in school attending classes, all of sudden they heard a great roar of children and women crying and running towards the jungle to escape from the fire balls. Even the school children were targeted and they were directed to forest to safeguard their lives. Sashi never shared these incidents with anyone. Whenever he was asked by his wife about the reason for his sadness he refuses to say and utters “Woman, you do not know what you are asking me to do” (94). This projects the traumatic experience he has undergone in his life time.

Nadim Almoshmosh, in his article titled “The role of war trauma survivors in managing their own mental conditions, Syria civil war as an example” states that, “war trauma leads to a wide range of psychological consequences and disorders that can be quite disabling to individuals and their family” (54). This is quite often experienced by the people of Nagaland who struggle between the power conflict of Armed forces and the underground rebels. Every story touches the troublesome experiences due to loss of home, identity and ideologies by the leaders and the fear-ridden life of Naga people.

Conclusion

The detachment of government and rebel groups from the real life scenario is very much visible through Temsula’s narration. Most of her stories expose the socio political conditions and brutality which affects common people both physically and mentally. Any war will lead to the conflict and affects the society as whole. It is also to be noted that the trauma can alter any person’s world upside down and cause disorder in all aspects of their life. The conflict between armed forces and rebels very rarely result in finding solution to the problems. Temsula also highlighted it in the preface that,

What the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. 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 the survivors scarred both in mind and soul (x).

Army justifies its acts of suppression as to control the acts of insurgency and to maintain peace and harmony within the country. They say that their target was only those who join and support the underground rebels. According to Army they were the separatists who disturb the harmony of the state. The narrator highlights a few instances where the surrendered insurgents were offered with Government jobs, “to rehabilitate the ‘surrendered’ cadres of the underground army, and though he did not possess a regular certificate, Punaba was given a job in the State Transport Department as a mechanic and was posted at Mokokchung” (8). For instance, Punaba in “The Jungle Major” offered with a government job who was once a major of rebel group. The young adults were also given contract based works to keep them away “from joining the underground outfits” (47).

Max Weber’s response towards Marx’s theory states that, “the state and economy together set up conditions for conflict” (web), which is reflective in the context of Nagaland where lack of financial and political support to the people is clearly visible. People who feel marginalised think that they were excluded from the mainstream life of the state and their voices not heard. This is also discussed by Temsula in her last story titled, “A new Chapter” where a Naga man is elected as Member of Legislative assembly. The author through her stories clearly registers the fact that though the extremist insurgency has been put under control, there was not much development visible in the state.

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