

Echoes of Nagaland: Exploring Themes in Naga Poetry in English

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Abstract

Naga poetry in English is a vibrant and evolving body of work that reflects the unique experiences, culture, and socio-political landscape of Nagaland, a state in Northeast India. This study examines the representation of violence in Naga poetry written in English, focusing on how poets articulate the enduring impact of historical and ongoing conflicts on individual and collective Naga identity. Through close readings of selected works by prominent Naga poet, Temsula Ao, this paper tries to analyze the poetic strategies employed to depict the multifaceted nature of violence – from physical brutality and displacement to the more insidious forms of trauma and cultural disruption. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to understand how these poems serve as a crucial space for mourning, resistance, and the articulation of a complex and often fractured Naga experience shaped by violence. The primary method employed in this study will be close reading, involving detailed analysis of the poetic language, imagery, and symbolism. The poems act as powerful testaments, bearing witness to the historical and ongoing violence that has shaped the Naga experience. This paper aims to investigate and highlight these social issues in Temsula Ao's poems “Blood of other Days” and “New Terror.”

Keywords: Naga Poetry, Violence, Identity, Memory

One of the Indian subcontinent's most culturally diverse areas is northeastern India. This area is a synthesis of individuals from many communities, ethnic groups, cultures, and religions. However, the northeast, a region of India has frequently made headlines because to its unstable political climate, which includes racial and communal disputes, insurgency, rape, Violence, carnage, fear, war, and corruption have permeated every aspect of people's daily lives in this region. Through their poetry, poets from this area express their profound concerns. Poets from this area, on the one hand, honor ethereal beauty, perplexing diversity, on the other hand writes about the political upheaval of the region.

The relatively recent but significant rise of Naga poetry in English, mainly in the state of Nagaland, is a notable aspect of its history. The extensive use of English as a language of instruction and the impact of missionaries have resulted in a flowering of Naga literature in English, despite the Naga people's rich oral literary history and variety of regional dialects. A significant turning point in the literary history of the area was reached in 1982 when Easterine Kire wrote

“Kelhoukevira,” the first Naga poetry in English. The development of Naga literary expression in English was greatly influenced by Christian missionaries’ introduction of English education and the founding of English-medium institutions.

The development of Naga English writing has been aided by authors such as Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, who frequently drew inspiration from their native culture and the distinctive history of Nagaland. The Naga Themes of cultural identity, political conflicts, and the effects of industrialization on traditional lifestyles are frequently explored in English poetry. Because they appreciate how important the rich oral literary traditions of their communities are to understanding Naga history and culture, many Naga writers in English work to preserve and chronicle these traditions. The history of English-language Naga poetry tells the tale of how a colonial-influenced language evolved into a means of communicating a rich and varied cultural legacy, providing important insights into the intricacies of Naga culture and its own literary traditions.

It is common to refer to their poetry as “Poetry in a Time of Terror” or “Poetry in the Troubled Zone.” Because of the long-standing persecution by “both the Temples: the gun of the state and the gun of revolution,” Northeast Indian poets often use their poetry to depict people’s need for individuality and self-assertion.

According to a statement by French philosopher Louise Gabriel Ambroise, literature is an expression of society in the same way that words are a reflection of people. The literature from the northeastern region of India, which is frequently and regrettably characterized with terms like horror, violence, fear, loss, “soaked in blood” (Misra xxiv), etc., makes this particularly significant. This is mostly because of the violence committed by militant groups fighting for their “freedom” of their territory from the Indian government and the latter’s counter-insurgency efforts.

Temsula Ao, a renowned author from the state of Nagaland in Northeast India, is a poet, short-story writer, novelist, and ethnographer. Her poems *Blood of other Days* and *New terror* gives the picturesque of the history of colonialism and post colonialism situation of Nagaland. through her poetry she gives voices to the unheard melodies of Nagaland and its turbulent situation under British colonisation, Indian militancy and the underground army operations which made the common people life havoc. They squeezed among these and nobody has ever listened the voices of the common people. Their suffering were visibly invisible to the mainland India. Literature is a reflections of those unheard memories and trauma, writers like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire and many other Naga writers uses this platform to reflect the region which is full of terror, not only they bring out the terror of the land but also about the vibrant culture of that region.

Indigenous Naga culture is robust and vibrant. But the quest of separate nation which made the region full of terror. The Naga National club which is started to with the motive to liberate from Indian subcontinent and to create separate Naga nation leads the political havoc in that region. The society has an elaborate method of settling disputes at every level in order to bring peace to the community. J.P Mills, British anthropologist and administrator observed:

Of the mistakes made by the (Christian) mission, the gravest, point is that the mission not studied the Naga customs deeply, but nearly they were eager to uproot what they neither understand nor sympathize with and to substitute it for a superficial civilization. (The Ao Nagas, 1926, reprinted 1973:9)

Even so, Christianity has been the greatest agent of change for the Nagas. It brought formal education and liberated them from superstitious and the practice of head hunting. Temsula Ao a Naga woman-poet seeking tradition, and poems are songs in oral cultures. Temsula Ao sings about her land. She laments the harm done to her people, their sense of exodus, and their suffering. The persistent conflict and violence have also deteriorated any semblance of peace, of living in harmony with the land to which people belong, in a place that belongs to you, since the Christian

missionaries of the colonial past had alienated her people from their history, customs, and ways of life. Temsula Ao in the following lines depicted the British Missionaries entry into the Nagaland and their promises to the people:

Then Came a Tribe of Strangers/Into our Primordial Territories

Armed with only a Book and/Promises of a land called Heaven. (Blood of Other Days)

Temsula Ao in her poem Blood Of Other Days talks about the hypocrisy of colonization and Imperialism, the result is hybridization of culture. She writes “We borrowed their minds/Aped their manners/Adopted their gods/And became perfect mimics.”

Even though there is an influence of Christianity over the people but the language used in the poem is powerful and express how the native people still practices the age old traditions and their resistance and quest for identity is expressed in the poem. She writes:

But a mere century of negation
Proved inadequate to erase
The imprints of intrinsic identities
Stamped on minds sin.

Traditional Naga Society provides for rituals of friendship between communities, as well as of reconciliation when friendship has broken. For instance, there is a feast practicing the cordial relation between two clans and Angami word for this festival is called KeKinyi (senu, 234).

The vision of Nagas regaining their independence from the British originated in the formation of the Naga club in 1918. The Nagas who served in the World War I, on their return, formed from Indian the Naga Club out of their experience. It became the nucleus of Naga nationalism. As the departure of the British drew closer, Nagas demand for their independence, they met mahatma Gandhi on July 19, 1947 and said about their plan, Gandhiji respected their opinion he said “If you do not wish to join the Union of India Nobody will force you to do that (Phizo, 30). But with death of Gandhi the promises also dead and Nagas struggle to get independence is still a political issue. The result is terror in the Nagaland the common people were still squeezed between the insurgency and counter insurgency.

The old ruler sits forlorn
On his mouldly throne,
Before him lies his mate
Lifeless and long gone
Her blood and entrails oozing,
Darkening the earth with new colour. (New terror)

In this poem New Terror, Temsula Ao speaks about loss of homeland and the common people lives in fear, terror, anger, pain and silence. Thus, the poet describes a vanished motherland where ordinary people spend their daily lives in quiet, dread, rage, and agony. They go through death and their loved ones’ suffering. Here, the elderly man experiences excruciating pain and shock.

because of his wife’s tragic and premature demise. Similar to the elderly man, even when their loved ones are slaughtered, the populace or the entire area watch in silence. As a result, the entire Northeastern region of India is covered in darkness with its new hue.

A few of young voices with an urging attitude later develop the poetry. Even though they have no leader, they are anxious to seek revenge. In this disturbing setting, they “wait for new assurance.” However, the elderly man is completely submerged in the suffering from his partner’s unexpected death. Even though he was once the village’s youth leader, he is unaware of all of these things. When confronted with government soldiers, he taught them “how to prowl and prey, dodge the spears, and sidestep.”

Temsula Ao in the poem “New Terror” writes though the old and new generation people were courageous still they need wisdom to encounter the new terror which is riding like “streaked lightning” in the region. The poet records in the lines of the poem, “New Terror”:

To counter
The new terror riding
On streaked lightning.

The poet depicts in great detail how both younger and older generations have given in to the insurgents. The average person is crippled and unable to return to their native place. They are now strangers. People’s severe pain and They are now miserable figures as a result of agony. The new tribal social structure takes the place of the previous one in the middle of this terrible environment. Men, women, children, the elderly, and young people are all victims of numerous cruel acts committed by different militant organizations. They suffer from severe trauma. The poem “New Terror” depicts this agonizing state in the words that follow:

The old regime has given way
And a new order
Has overtaken the habitat
Grinning on children’s faces
Painted with psychopathic stripes.

A terrifying account of how the entire area has been turned into a battlefield is presented in the poem’s final line. To all militia this land becomes a free space where abduction, smuggling, gunfire, corruption are common incidents to the local people. As the poet writes in this poem:

The new denizens dressed like trees
Now infest the terrain

The concluding lines of the poem talks about the hard reality of the region and compares the insurgency and counter insurgency is a beast activity which has taken so many innocent lives. The poet writes there is no difference between man and beast, man lost the humanity and behaving like a beast, on one side the militancy that is existed in the region tries to uproot the underground army which goes against the integrity of nation on the other side the underground army wants a separate nation they think that its their human rights. The animosity of mankind is expressed in the couplet, the poet writes:

A new terror wastes the land
Preying alike on beast and man.

Temsula Ao in this poem New Terror has used the various images of violence that existed in the region, the reason of violence is breaking of promise, the political conflict. The words like “*Painted with psychopathic stripes,*” *kills at will*, dresses like trees, representation of trauma of the common people.

In both the poem Blood of others and New terror Temsula Ao writes about the reason for the violence that existed in the Northeast India, the intention is to tell the darkside of the humanity which created so much havoc in common people lives. According to Temsula Ao poetry is “an expression of inner songs that are born within poets mind”

As a result, the poems reflect the harsh reality that individuals must endure. People cannot sleep soundly in such a troubled environment, and there is no calm in this area. Only in this area do the military and rebels tread. People are unable to think and speak freely. “Nightmares” end up being their only companion. In light of the current dire situation involving extreme forms of violence and bloodshed, the poem poses numerous questions about human existence and rights.

Nevertheless, despite all, her poetry “is the voice of humanity”; each poem captures “a human moment.” A silent but certain renewal of awareness follows an unfathomable moment of ecstasy

and anguish. Additionally, while having roots in her history, myth and legends, her poetry appeals to all readers with its global message.

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