

ENUNCIATING THE EVERYDAY RESISTANCE OF WOMEN IN TEMSULA AO'S *THESE HILLS CALLED HOME: STORIES FROM A WAR ZONE*

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Abstract:

*Conflicts often produce highly gendered forms of violence turning women's bodies into perpetual battlegrounds thereby placing women in highly vulnerable positions. The North-Eastern states of India have been raising demands for autonomy since the last many decades. The turbulent political scenario of this region has led to massive violence against women. The root cause that promotes violence against women be it political or domestic is the patriarchal bias of the society. Of the eight states that constitute the North-East, Nagaland is marked as the "epicentre of insurgency". The Nagas have a strong warrior tradition and are basically patriarchal with clearly defined roles for men and women. Temsula Ao is one of the major literary voices in English to emerge from North-East India. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is Temsula Ao's first short story collection. Her writings expose the complexities and contradictions that inform life in the Naga Hills and the survival strategies and methods of resistance showcased by the common people. Four stories from Temsula Ao's collection are selected for study which are analysed in the light of James Scott's theory of everyday resistance to unveil women's dialogue and negotiation with power from their marginal position in a conflict zone.*

Key Words: *Vulnerable positions, massive violence, patriarchal bias, warrior tradition.*

The North-Eastern region has always been like an appendage that continues to voice demands to be severed from the geographical map of India. The evident racial and cultural disparity vindicates the mental bifurcation between India and its North-East. The eight states that constitute the North-Eastern region of India, namely Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Sikkim have more cultural similarities with the neighbouring countries like Bhutan, China, Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma, Tibet and Myanmar than with India. The mental affinity they share with India is perhaps as thin as the narrow strip of land that connects the North-East to the rest of the country. The geographical aloofness along with the racial and cultural divide explains why the North-East tends to gravitate away from Indian mainland to which they believe they have been unjustly tied. This feeling of alienation and otherness has caused the North-East to raise demands for separatism which eventually resulted in a situation of secessionist violence and decades of low intensity conflicts.

The secessionist demands of the North-Eastern states were sustained by historical memories of separate tribal kingdoms. The neighbouring nations often took advantage of the situation of unrest and fomented the political conflicts. Another significant reason that paved the way for the separatist tendency in the North-East is their non-participation in Indian nationalism. With the possible exemption of Assam the North-Eastern states had played no significant role in the Indian freedom struggle and perhaps because of this the roots of nationalism couldn't percolate deep in their lands. Since the seeds of nationalism perished in the North-Eastern soil, the seeds of regional nationalism and sub-nationalism found fertile ground. Instead of a feeling of oneness with India, a feeling of unique regional identity evolved and needless to say, this adversely affected the socio-political situation of these states. In order to handle the precarious law and order situation of the conflict-ridden region of the North-East, the government of India

conferred some special powers on the Indian army. Though AFSPA and similar Acts were implemented with the intention of protecting human rights and for establishing peace in conflict areas, in retrospect they have failed to serve their purpose of promulgation and the army with its absolute powers turned into a draconian force that could indulge in any atrocities behind the shield of the anti-militancy acts and go scot free. Since the Indian army was immune to the powers of the prosecution the misuse of power was rampant. The AFSPA and similar Acts freeze the fundamental rights of the people and violation of human rights becomes a routine happening. With numerous instances of the atrocities committed by the Indian army in the name of anti-militancy, the situation in the North-East is unfathomable for the people residing in the other parts of democratic India.

Of the eight states that constitutes the North-East, Nagaland is the one with largest diversity of languages and tribes and is marked as the "epicentre of insurgency". It was one of the earliest to form a political organization namely the Naga National Council (NNC) as early as the 1940s under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo. The NNC actively championed for the cause of Nagaland's separation from India and the formation of a separate Naga state. The Nagas have a strong warrior tradition and even the meaning of the term "Naga" is claimed to mean "warrior". Before the Christianization of the state, the Nagas even had headhunting tribes. Ursula Graham Bower, an English anthropologist who intensively studied the Naga Hills described it as the "paradise of headhunters". Bringing back the severed head of the opponent was the mark of bravery for Naga men. While there are few tribes like the Khasis and Garos predominantly in Meghalaya that follow matrilineal tradition, the Nagas have always been patriarchal and patrilineal with clear-cut and well defined roles for men and women. The Naga society required the men to be courageous, well-built and trained in the use of weapons and women were also required to be strong enough to take care of the household even in the absence of men which was very often the case. Naga women had to be adept at one or the other traditional occupations like weaving or pot making to economically support the family. Though expected to be humble, obedient and subservient the Naga way of life also required its women to be strong, independent and resilient at the same time. Though traditionally the Naga women had no role in governance and decision making, in the recent decades there has been a growing clamour for social and cultural change. The Naga Mother's Association (NMA) is one such organization that raises demands to improve the lot of Naga women. However, the fact that the NMA's demand for the implementation of 33% reservation for women clause has not only been vociferously opposed by the Naga political bodies but the NMA was asked to disband itself, validates the fact that the inherent patriarchal insecurity that fears equal participation of women survives despite all claims of modernisation. Temsula Ao delineates in her article "Benevolent Subordination : Social Status of Naga Women" how even after years of modernisation the status of women has been one of 'benevolent subordination', "...Naga women, no matter how well educated or highly placed in society, suffer from remnants of this psychological 'trauma' of subordination, which in their grandmother's times might have seemed perfectly logical but which now appears to be a paradox within the 'modern', 'educated' self" (Gill 130).

Since the last decade there has been an increasing interest in the literature of the North-East and within the field of North-Eastern literature, Naga literature enjoys a place of prominence. Temsula Ao is one of the major literary voices in English to emerge from North-East India. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is Temsula Ao's first short story collection. The stories are situated in the war torn villages in Nagaland. As Temsula Ao states in the Preface, "Lest we Forget", "Many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of the Nagas from the early fifties of the last century, and their demand for independence from the Indian state" (Ao x). Temsula's stories try to capture the lives of the common village folk whose lives are caught in the turbulence of war. Women as in most war narratives occupy marginal spaces. In majority of works that discuss war, women are represented as passive victims devoid of identity or agency. It is indeed true that women and children are the worst victims of war. During war women are abducted and kept captives for

the purpose of sexual slavery. Preeti Gill in the introduction to her anthology of essays describes the situation of women in the North-East:

To say that women have faced violence in situations of conflict is to state the obvious but what it means in terms of the short term and long term impact is something that is still being studied and analysed. Women find themselves at the receiving end of violence on three fronts; from the state, the militants and a corresponding escalation of violence within their own homes. The effects of violent acts like rape, sexual abuse and physical assault and abuse has led to psychological and emotional trauma and a very high incidence of what is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (10).

Sexual violence is another face of political violence. Regarding rape during war, Susan Brownmiller says, "War provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women (32). It is even more distressing when the incidents of rape and similar assault against women during war are hushed up and swept under the carpet. At the face of collective violence, individual instances of gendered violence are often normalized. However, women of the North-East have not always remained as passive victims, they have played active role in protests. Even while reflecting the pathetic picture of women who are relegated to the periphery Temsula Ao's characters do not remain doomed victims. An analysis of her stories reveals resilience and everyday resistance of women who from their marginal spaces reclaim their agency. Temsula's women reflect the typical Naga spirit of not getting cowed by hardships and remaining undaunted when faced with danger. The women may not take part in armed resistance or open protest but they do engage in subtle and seemingly innocuous resistance at an individual level. As James C. Scott says in his *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Acts of Peasant Resistance*, resistance need not be always overt and collective struggle against power, it can also be individual, disguised and everyday acts that challenge power at a micro level. As Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson elucidate in their article "Everyday Resistance : Exploration of a Concept and its Theories", "Everyday resistance suggests that resistance is integrated into social life and is part of normality; not as dramatic or strange as assumed." James Scott's conceptualization of everyday resistance had a substantial impact on the whole discourse of power and resistance and opened the possibility for a more inclusive perception of resistance that considered the daily lives of the subalterns as part of political affairs. Expounding the relative advantage of everyday resistance, Scott says, "Everyday techniques are 'small scale, relatively safe, promise vital material gains and require little or no formal coordination" (Scott 35).

The first story in the collection "The Jungle Mayor" is the story of Punaba and Katila. Punaba is described as a man who is short and ugly but his bad looks doesn't prevent him from getting one of the most beautiful and accomplished women as his wife. Punaba soon joins the underground army and often comes to meet his wife secretly. The news of his routine visits gets to the Indian army and they plan a secret mission to arrest him. On one morning when Punaba was at home with his wife the army surrounds his house and Punaba escapes arrest only because of Katila's presence of mind. Katila who was aware of the army outside the house talks to Punaba as if to her servant ordering him to fetch water. She puts on an unperturbed face even when confronted by the officers. She sends Punaba (now disguised as a servant) to fetch water right under the officer's nose. "...the young Captain looked somewhat surprised at her manner. Whereas he had expected to see a cowering woman, crazy with fear for her husband and herself, he was confronted by a dishevelled but defiant person who displayed no agitation and seemed to be utterly oblivious to any danger" (Ao 6). Despite the pain, confusion and fear she experienced Katila refused to be intimidated and resisted power using lies, disguise and a put on behaviour of normalcy. The spontaneous and tactical resistance adopted by Katila was no less effective than a planned and collective protest which underlines the significance of the comparatively less visible and inconspicuous forms of resistance.

The second story "The Last Song" is the tale of a girl called Apenyo who is the lead singer in the

church choir. The story narrates a planned massacre led by the Indian army against the villagers for 'supporting' the rebel cause by paying 'taxes'. The massacre happens on a certain December Sunday when the villagers were celebrating the inauguration of the new Church building. Apenyo, as usual was the lead singer. Even when the soldiers marched into the church Apenyo kept singing unfazed which was seen as an act of open defiance. Even when the soldiers dragged her out of the church she continued singing which incensed the army even more. Apenyo and her mother were both brutally raped and killed by the army. Her resistance couldn't save her from atrocities but she had indeed voiced her resistance from her powerless and marginal position. According to Scott, success is not counted as a criterion to consider an act as resistance because if it were even failed revolutions wouldn't count as resistance. Therefore, even while Apenyo's act was limited and individual it was articulate in more than one sense.

In the story "The Night" Imnala becomes pregnant twice outside marriage. The first man who had seduced her had promised to marry her but fails to honour the promise when he joins the underground and goes away for training in China. The man had not only betrayed but had also humiliated her by refusing to accept fatherhood of their child. Four years after her first child she becomes pregnant with Alemba's child who was her father's business partner and a married man. Imnala's moral character is now irredeemably besmirched. In a society where the 'stigma' of illegitimate pregnancy is a woman's alone, a woman who has not once but twice lost honour has no excuse. When the Village Council calls a meeting to discuss Imnala's debauchery, Imnala faces the Council, calmly with her head held high. Unheeded of the stigma labelled on her she wears her best clothes to the council meeting. Even when she is torn inside Imnala's mother too puts on a mask of normalcy and keeps up the usual chatter with the village women on her way to work. Both the women adopt an outward show of normalcy and nonchalance to protect themselves from derisive remarks as the society hits those people most who are vulnerable and weak. Imnala and her mother mask their vulnerability in their effort to resist the scorn of the society. According to James Scott any act with a conscious intent to subvert power can be counted as resistance. In this light, Imnala's refusal to don the shamed victim image and her mother's mask of normalcy can be seen as their conscious efforts to evade the censure of the society whose balance of justice is tilted against women.

The story "The Pot Maker" is about Sentila's ardent desire to learn pot making and her mother's refusal to teach her the skill. Arenla's decision to not let her daughter learn the art of pot making can be seen as her symbolic resistance against engaging women in low paying labour. Since Naga men are often away at the battlefield women are forced to financially support the family, but the job options available for the women are limited to certain traditional low paid jobs. Arenla does not want her daughter to become a low paid pot maker like herself. As a woman in the patriarchal Naga society Arenla has limitations that prevent her from openly voicing demands for better job or payment for women, but within her limited freedom she vociferously fights against her daughter having a similar fate as hers. Seeing Sentila's interest in pot making when her father suggests Arenla to train her she says, "I shall not teach her this craft which has brought no joy to me and only a pittance for my troubles" (Ao 58). By the end of the story Arenla is forced to relent by the command of the Village Council, but Arenla dies heartbroken and it is only her spirit that guides her daughter.

The stories in Temsula Ao's collection reveal how militarism and patriarchy join hands in subjugating women. Her writings represent the anguish, pain and suppressed fears of women in conflict zones where the everyday reality of life is shaped by war and where the lives of people are torn between militarism and militancy. The individual and private acts of resistance discussed here do not affect any dramatic change in the state of affairs but it gives the resister a psychological satisfaction of doing something to evade power which helps them survive in the midst of violence and trauma. Judith Herman in her *Trauma and Recovery* (1997) expounds that it is the women who remain passive at the face of assault who are more likely to be traumatised than the women who at the least attempt to put forth a struggle. A close reading of Temsula Ao in the light of James Scott's theory of everyday resistance reveals that women

are not mere passive and hapless victims of patriarchy and militarism, on the other hand they are active resisters engaged in perpetual though often innocuous acts of resistance.

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