

Peace in the middle of Violence: A Study on Tamsula Ao's select short stories

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Abstract

The objective of the paper is to find the prototype of political violence and social realities in Northeast India state – Nagaland. The paper focuses to explore how the Naga struggle with the armed forces to engage a separate political entity and how they search their identity and peace in the middle of violence and terror prevailing over. It also attempts to give the idea that political instability and violence of the state make the human conditions pitiable. The paper makes an argument based on the short stories taken from Tamsula Ao's collection of short stories *"These Hills Called Home: Stories from a war zone"* and discuss the social realities of the state Nagaland during riots and counter riots. The stories generally depict common people who are victimized by the conflicts, violence and politics of the state. They also expose the violation of human rights by different militant organisations and security forces.

Keywords: Human rights, Instability, Political Struggle, Social Realities, Violence.

Introduction:

The study of its native literature is mandatory to understand the life of any particular society. The writings from the Northeast are slowly emerging in the recent decades to document the tribal life of various regions. The Creative writers of the Northeast have taken the role of cultural historians to provide alternate histories as manuscripts and authentic histories of the most communities in the northeast are unavailable. To restore the void, so very often than not, the fictional writings from the Northeast are being read as alternate forms of histories in different contexts. To an outsider the term 'Northeast' signifies homogeneity, and one geographical political entity. Nevertheless, it is evident that every tribe has its own indigenous culture, specific traditions and customs. Therefore, to understand the spirit of what it means to write about the Northeast or how to define and access the Northeast, an amalgamation of both the oral culture and the modern print culture are to be interpreted. Despite its magnificent landscapes, indigenous sites, confluence of various ethnic groups, and their cultures, it is very unfortunate that, for an outsider, the Northeast is commonly seen as a violently explosive, attributed with persistent terror and insurgency. The emerging writers like Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Tamsula Ao and a host of others deplored this way of representing Northeast and found different ways of presenting their ethnic sanctity and struggle for identity. In 2004 Easterine Kire (Nagaland) pointed that:

"Let media stop defining the NE (Northeast) by the conflicts going on there, let media focus on the ordinary people and their lives. Let exoticisation of the NE stop." (Easterine Kire, 2004).

In 2015 Mamang Dai, one of the well-known writers from Arunachal Pradesh of Northeast remarked that 'the Northeast is writing and being written about.' Dr. Madan Sarma in his article 'Reflections on the English Literature of the Northeast' has rightly remarked that:

“There has always been a tendency to stereotype the Northeast as a troubled and violent zone. Two broad approaches to this stereotyping are noticed: one, romantic, foregrounding its pristine nature, its landscape and its cultural richness, and the other, political, focusing on its turmoil, violence and social and political instability. Such perceptions of the Northeast are engendered by its geographical isolation, its complex ethnicity related problems and the problems arising out of state- sponsored and anti-state, often anti-people violence.”

About the writer:

As this paper is focused on the Northeast writers, it is not out of context to introduce the brief bio of the writer. Tamsula Ao, a renowned emerging writer from Nagaland, daringly projects the socio-political changes of Nagaland, through her literary works. To her credit she has penned five volumes of poems namely, *Songs That Tell* (1988), *Songs That Try To Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs from Other Life* (2007). She has also written two collections of short stories entitled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum For My Head* (2009). For her outstanding works, she was bestowed Padma Shri and Sahitya Akademi awards. In addition to her academic career as a professor, she was also the director for Northeastern Zone of culture centre. In recognition to her excellent services, the state Meghalaya rewarded her with representative's gold decoration award.

Analysis of the stories taken for study:

Tamsula Ao's '*These Hills called Home*', *stories from a war Zone*, (2006) is a collection of short stories, which give voice to the Naga community, and portrays the traditional Naga way of life. They also recollect the way; the Nagas were grabbed into various conflicts in their struggle for self-identity in early fifties. Hence, this work could be seen as a typical postcolonial narrative of resistance. Tamsula Ao, acknowledges the same in the preface:

“Many of the stories in this collection have the genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of Nagas from the early 50s of the last century, and their demand for independence from the Indian State” (pg.X). She has dedicated this book ‘For those who know What we have done To ourselves’.

Nagas constituting different tribes and speaking different language, are the inhabitants of the Naga Hills in eastern Himalayas along the Burma (Myanmar) border. Since 150 AD. the Ahom kings ruled them for 600 years. The Britishers after taking control over Assam in 1826, steadily expanded its domain over Naga Hills by 1892. During the colonial era the Nagas were isolated from social, political and pro-independence developments happening in rest of India. Unaware of the freedom struggle going on in the mainland, they revolted in fierce, against the colonial British rule. In their perplexity, the Christian missionaries, induced modern progressive ideas amongst the North eastern tribal youth. With the withdrawal of British rule, the tribals faced a huge epistemological crisis. In early 1950s, ‘The Naga National Council’, led by the A.Z. Phizo, rebelled against the integration of Naga areas with the state of Assam and India. It was the first and the most significant insurgency. In the context of Nagaland, author Dolly Kikon (2016) mentions that:

“The Indo-Naga armed conflict is the longest armed conflict in South Asia. This political tension between Naga insurgents and the Indian government “escalated in the early 1950s, especially after the Naga people voted in favour of independence from India in the plebiscite of 1951. Although the Indian government declared the plebiscite to be null and void, the subsequent decades have witnessed bloody and violent conflicts in postcolonial India (Kikon 2016, 94).

In the stories of '*These hills called home*', Tamsula Ao re-presented the turbulent Naga History, in a moving way. The fight for a separate country has kindled a wave of patriotic fervour in the entire land. From the text we learn that:

“Young people were caught, as it were, at the crossroads of Naga history. The wave of dissidence and open rebellion was heady wine for many of them and they abandoned family, school carriers 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” (pg10).

The root cause for Post independent political turmoil, violence and bloodshed, in the history of Nagaland is the diversified opinions of different groups. In the article, 'Betrayal of God', Sajal Nag stated that

"The integrationists presented themselves as a sub nationality of the prospective Indian Union while the secessionists presented the claim of separate nationhood." (pg. 5)

The conflict between the Naga rebels and Indian armed forces resulted in enormous loss of innocent lives and properties in Nagaland. The intense physical and mental torture meted out to 'errant' Naga villagers by the Indian army, alienated the Nagas further. Nagas are of the opinion that, till today they are constantly under the rule of foreigners: before independence, under Britishers and after independence, under the Indian army. With the actual struggle as a backdrop, Temsula Ao narrates how the conflicts have re-structured and revolution alised the Naga psyche. The ten stories, though not interconnected, recounts the way the Nagas were forcibly uprooted from their origin, denied to access their fields, and confined to alien environment. Temsula Ao says:

"What the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life" (x)

In 1955 the separatists declared the formation of an independent government and launched an army rebellion, to restore peace, the government of India also deployed the army in early 1956, by following a policy of suppression and non-negotiation. The power struggle between the two warring groups- army and the nationalists has shattered and traumatised the normal life of the common tribes. In the story 'Soaba', the writer realistically narrates how an innocent orphan Soaba (Supiba) was caught up in a vicious whirlwind and ruthlessly killed by his master, Imlichuba, (Boss) the commander of the Indian army squad. Little minded Soaba, obsessed with the squad vehicles, got stuck in the boss's house and was looked after by Imtila, wife of Boss. She was coerced to acquire the new life style of her husband, and be as a good hostess to the guests of late-night parties, mostly the army big wigs and senior administrative officers. Imtila became a prisoner of her husband's notoriety. The childish behaviour of Soaba, was an avocation to Imtila's loneliness. Innocent Soaba and kind hearted Imtila had to bear with the agonised screams of the suspects, that reverberate the house whole night. As the time went by, Boss's power and excessive drinking had deadened his human spirit to such an extent that he became insensitive to his inner voice. Boss's wild behaviour became intolerable to his higher authorities too, to have a check on him, they instilled fear in his mind and warned him that his life is under threat from one among his squad. Infuriated Boss, suspected Soaba, as the traitor, shot him, despite his wife's screams. The barbaric attitude of Boss has claimed countless innocent lives.

In 1960, All party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) demanded a separate state of Nagaland in the Indian union. The remotest villages were also involved, while some directly joined the underground, the others volunteered to pay taxes. The story 'The last song' is a heart wrenching narration about the atrocities of the Indian army on the supporters of the rebels. Every year before Christmas the villagers were prepared for the annual visits of tax collections by their underground brethren. The army planned to attack the village during the dedication of the new church building. The festivity turned chaotic, with the unexpected attack of the Indian soldier. To avoid the unbearable manhandling, the crowd dispersed hither thither. The singing beauty of the village 'Apenyo', (daughter of born singer Zhamben, and Libeni, the best weaver in the village), was the only one singing oblivious of the situation. Her undeterred outburst of solo song incensed the soldiers, they dragged her to the old church building and gang raped her mercilessly. The stomach-churning scene was, while the young Captain was raping her, the other soldiers stood watching and waiting for their turn. Throughout the despicable act, the girl was singing the chorus again and again. Apenyo's widowed mother, Libeni, who tried to rescue her daughter, was stabbed, knocked down, by yet another soldier and her unconscious limp body was also raped. All the witnesses were shot dead and their dead bodies were dumped and set on fire on the porch of the old church, leaving no evidences. Both the churches were burnt to ashes, even God couldn't rescue his believers. Temsula expresses that:

"The cries of the wounded and the dying inside the church proved that even the house of God could not provide them security and save them from the bullets of the crazed soldiers" (pg.29)

Savagery has no end, similar atrocities took place in several places, and it is impossible to ascertain how many lost their lives, and how many were tortured and terribly bruised beyond recognition. The missing persons were recorded as encounter deaths. Tilottama Misra, a writer, critic and translator, in her essay states that:

"Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be never-

ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt „to live with it“, as they are expected to do by the distant centres of power.” (xxi)

The government firmly opposed the secessionists' demand for independence of Naga areas. In 1960 when Assamese was made the sole official language of the state, various political parties of the hill's tribal population began to feel alienated from Assamese and Bengal residents of the plains. The tribals were afraid of losing their identity and being assimilated by the policy of assimilation in government jobs and other professions like doctors, traders etc. To protest, the secessionist's movements developed demonstrations and major agitations which resulted in constant curfews. The curfews robbed the freedom of the common people, restricting them from their routine works. The civil authorities employed 'informers', to gather information and monitor the whereabouts of the villagers who joined the underground and the sympathisers who supported the rebels as well. Some informers were recruited by compulsion and others by choice.

In the story 'The Curfew man' Tamsula Ao meticulously narrates how circumstances made innocent peace-loving couple to get involved by force, just to stay safe and alive. Satemba, an excellent football player, was given the post of constable in the Assam police, to play for his battalion, irrespective of his qualification. In one particular event his knee cap was shattered. With his disability he relocated to Mokokchung in Nagaland for better living with his wife Jemtila. Jemtila worked as a maid servant at Sub Divisional officer's residence while disabled Satemba had to stay indoors. Subsequently the officer coerced Satemba and recruited him as a 'government informer', lest his wife would be terminated.

“And so began the shady career of Satemba, who would henceforth live in the unpredictable area between trust and betrayal and would never know the difference between friend and foe” (pg.38)

Jemtila strongly contradicted her husband doing such 'hanky-panky' job. Satemba was caught between the underground forces and armed forces, he used to question his own motive of the job. As the time went by, he became an effective informer, and preferred not to think about the consequences of government's method of operations. In the midst of violence, Satemba started debating himself for his identity. Eventually, an encounter with a stranger, probably from the underground, prepared him to quit the peace less job. In serving the Assam police he lost one knee, and as an informer in Nagaland the other. However, his wife, Jemtila felt light hearted and informed the officer about his disability. For the couple 'being alive' is the greatest joy ever. Satemba's services gone unnoticed. The writer says:

“A new curfew man would be in place by evening and the man with the two smashed knee-caps had already become history.” (pg. 43)

Besides the constant insurgencies, there exist internal grudges and conflicts among the cadres. In the story 'The Shadows' TamsulaAo deftly describes how an innocent, inexperienced college boy, Imli, who joined the freedom fighters with an emotional idealism, against his father's had been murdered mercilessly by his own troop for no fault of his, by his own team mates in the shadows of a deep forest in an alien land. The underground Naga army, used to choose and send men with extraordinary courage to China, to get trained in guerrilla warfare and usage of sophisticated weaponry. The only errand, unfamiliar with the ways of jungle warfare was Imli. He was recruited into the group merely because he was the son of the second highest boss of the underground army. Everyone in the group particularly Hoito, the unit commander, considered him as a liability. He had a secret grudge on Imli, as Imli's father reprimanded him publicly during his initial days of training. The twenty-one chosen volunteers, who headed to China were prohibited to enter Burma by the Kachin rebels. The team had to halt temporarily waiting for further instructions from their high command. Hoito, executed a plan tactfully to get rid of Imli. He deliberately sent Imli alone on a particular mission, so that others should not suspect it as pre-planned murder. At the behest of Hoito, two of the team mates stalked Imli, and assaulted him. Before Imli could defend himself, they secured him firmly to the ground, concealed him with dead branches and leaves, and left him alive to the scavengers of the forest. TamsulaAo described the death as:

“Death must have come at an excruciatingly slow pace, and he must have suffered terribly even as life was oozing out of his helpless body.” (Pg. 79, 80).

Tamsula Ao remarkably tried to bring out the pain and agony in the life of the innocent youth, sandwiched between the two forces. In the preface 'Lest We Forget' the writer admits that:

“I have endeavoured to re-visit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged.... These stories however are not about 'historical facts'

nor are they about condemnation, Justice or justification of the events which raised through the land like a wild fire half a century ago” (pg. x)

The main objective of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) is to establish a sovereign state ‘Nagalim’ and develop ‘greater Nagaland’, by unifying all Naga people, inhabited in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Myanmar. In the article ‘A brief survey of ethnic violence /conflicts in the Northeast’, Woba James points out that:

“The assertion of Naga identity and its nationhood seeks to assert claims to the Naga inhabited areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur and even in Myanmar.” (woda James pg. 2)

Countless youngsters were compelled to join the Naga National army, where their prime teenage was filled with horror and tears. TemsulaAo realistically narrated the trauma of the Naga youth during the turbulent fifties, through the character Imtisashi in the story ‘An old man remembers’. Imtisashi (Sashi), the old man, elucidates his grandson Moalemba (Moa), how he and his friend Imlikokba (Imli) were compelled to lead their prime youth with endless pain and torture. Imli is of the opinion 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” (pg.93)

Sashi, the old man recollects how constant fights with marauding India army had transformed them into hard-core rebels and ruthless killers at the age of sixteen. He pondered over his lost youth as:

“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” (pg.98)

The gun-toting soldiers shattered their plans of Christmas holidays. With the sudden attack on the village, terrified Sashi and Imli had to flee to the eerie jungle for their life. They were caught and trained as soldiers by the Naga National army and were intimidated to stay there for getting their families, friends and everything related to former life. Their careers as freedom fighters transformed the young boys into notorious killers.

The security situation in the Naga hills has remained complex for a long time because of a number of militant outfits and their diverse demands. Some of the Naga leaders-initiated negotiations for a permanent settlement within the framework of the Indian constitution. But the underground leaders felt it as a betrayal of the Naga cause. Relations between number of parties differed in their objectives, strategies and capabilities, so the gun battles continued. Tumultuous lives of Imli and Sashi as underground soldiers came to a climax when Sashi was maimed. To avail proper treatment, Imli and Sashi negotiated with the reluctant commander, deposited their weapons and surrender themselves. As they fought against the government, they had to spend some time in jail. They left the jungle life forever, and joined the normal stream of life. Out of all tragic experiences they had, the most painful to bear is the constant reminder of their lost Youth. (pg. 111)

Gradually in the mid sixteens, Nagas learnt to adopt the new trends and new lifestyles that overturned their quite lives. The army seconded itself in prime locations whereas the underground forces, the native tribes, retreated in their jungle hideouts. Here and there encounters of army and rebels remained the same. To procure ‘supplies’ for the army establishments, a new class of Nagas called the ‘Army contractors’ emerged out as a third force. Some of them maintained connections with the underground and the over ground, and utilised all the privileges unscrupulously and made good fortunes. To procure funds for weapons, the underground groups had set-up a parallel government. They collected taxes from the general public, the upcoming army contractors were the new source of revenue for them. In the last story ‘The New Chapter’ TemsulaAo illustrates how Bendangnungsang, (Nungsung) a college dropout, meticulously utilised the prevailing mistrust between tribals and non-tribals, and achieved his goals through treachery and manipulations. During the negotiations, the government realised the need for re-conciliation to win the Naga people. They followed a friendly approach by encouraging the Nagas to integrate with the rest of the country in mind and spirit. Consequently, Nagaland was carved out of Assam, and granted statehood in 1963.

TemsulaAo ascertained the fact as:

“Nagaland has become a state of Indian union, the first Legislative assembly was in place and it became apparent that Nagaland was now working its way to becoming a part of the much wanted to mainstream politics of the country” (pg.134).

The protagonist Nungsung, proclaimed his identity by winning the by-election. The contractor turned business

man Nungsang, became an independent MLA. From the spoils of war, people like Nungsang, flourished not to serve but to plunder in a deceitful manner.

Conclusion:

Temsula Ao successfully articulated her inner urge to disseminate the readers about the pathetic history of Nagaland in the midst of putrefaction and fragmentation. The ten stories visualise the Naga struggle for identity, quest for freedom in varied social issues associated with, violence, and political unrest. Temsula Ao's grief towards her homeland can be well understood from the opening lines on the first page of the book:

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

Though insurgency had been brought under control, sporadic guerrilla war was launched by Naga rebels in 1964 and it continues till date without any progress towards a political settlement.

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