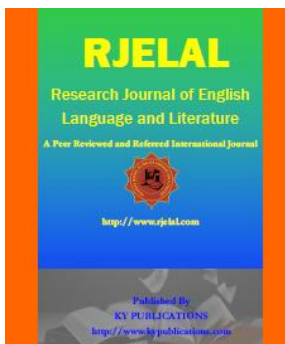




REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE IN TEMSULA AO'S *THESE HILLS CALLED HOME: STORIES FROM A WAR ZONE*

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ABSTRACT

Violence is one of the dominant themes in the emerging literature of North-East India. The writers often highlight or question the violence caused by insurgency and counter insurgency that has ravaged their home state. Temsula Ao's stories take us to the heart of a trouble-torn land. Ao portrays a way of life which is under constant threat of violence. She describes how ordinary people cope with violence perpetuated by various militant outfits and the armed force as well. The stories capture the voices of common Naga people who are trapped and wounded in the tussle between the State and Naga ethnic insurgency groups. Ao registers her protest against such atrocities through her stories. This paper is an attempt to foreground and highlight the underlying theme of violence in Temsula Ao's short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*.

KEYWORDS: North-East India, insurgency, violence, militant outfits

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The socio-political history of North East India is marked by a period which witnessed the rise of insurgency that started with the vision of attaining sovereignty but gradually led the states towards violence and devastation. The North-East of India has proved to be extremely vulnerable to insurgency due to its international borders, availability of arms and training camps, demographic imbalance created by immigrants, nexus (tie) between politicians and insurgent groups, and huge economic underdevelopment. Its isolated standing from mainland India has kindled the sense of "ethno-nationalism, political isolation and psychological alienation" (Goswami and Das, 2008: 271). The uniform command of military, police and para-military forces pressurize the insurgents to negotiate settlement, however, it has rather resulted in chaos and turmoil in the region.

Insurgency and counter-insurgencies has made a heavy toll in the North-East. At the popular level, conflict is endemic to the region. In the light of such history and troubled political climate, literature from North-East India abounds in tales of violence experienced in the past or encountered in everyday life. The writers often highlight or question the violence that has ravaged their home state caused by struggle between the militant groups and the State armed forces.

Violence is a way of life. This is what Temsula Ao writes about in her volume of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Ao's stories take us to the heart of a trouble-torn land which is historically and politically located. She describes how ordinary people cope with violence perpetuated by various militant outfits as well as the armed force. Temsula Ao's stories echoes

her protest against such atrocities. This paper is an attempt to foreground and highlight the underlying theme of violence in the short stories of Tamsula Ao. In the introduction to her book *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, Tamsula Ao comments that "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". (Ao x) Referring to the violence inflicted on the people she says "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." (Ao x) Most of the stories in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* deal with the everyday life of the Naga people who went through "decades of strife, guerrilla warfare, plundering and killing". It speaks of a time when many were "dispossessed of their land and belongings, countless young men were killed and women ravished. (Philip, 2006)

In Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, "Soaba" is a powerful story which brings to light how the state exerts its power to inflict violence on the Naga people through the sad and unfortunate death of the protagonist Soaba. In this story Ao narrates the events of the period when the wave of dissidence and open rebellion moved across the land. The story portrays how the government suppresses the dissident voice and what kind of situation they can create for the purpose of normalization and institutionalization. Some plain words like 'grouping', 'curfew', 'ransacked', 'intelligent report', 'search operation', etc have acquired a different colour and conveyed the sufferings of the Naga people. Ao has added an explanatory note to each of these words highlighting the darker side and cruel mentality of the army:

The word 'grouping' had a much more sinister implication; it meant that whole village would be dislodged from their ancestral sides and herded into new ones, making it more convenient for the security forces to guard them day and night. The harrowing tales of people who experienced such forced migrations are not fully known

and some of the accounts have died with the unfortunate ones who did not survive the intense physical and mental torture meted out to them ... Curfew, a word that did not exist in the people's vocabulary, became a dreaded fact of life for people living in the towns. A word like 'situation' is a perfectly innocent one, but in the context of the underground movement, it acquired a single meaning: it referred only to the fall-out of the struggle between the two opposing forces." (Ao 11)

"Soaba" illustrates how during the troubled times of the Naga people, different political groups were formed, especially the one known as the "flying squad" where rebels were outfitted with vehicles and guns and given "free rations of rum to boot" (Ao 12). Under the illusion of his 'glorious' image, Imlichuba, popularly known as "Boss", harasses the general masses and eventually invites his own downfall by taking away the life of an idiot of the village named Soaba for no reason. The death of Soaba explicates how innocent Naga people succumbed to the state-sponsored violence.

"The Last Song" narrates the extreme form of brutality inflicted by the Indian army. In the name of curbing insurgency, the Indian force indulged in all kinds of savage and barbaric actions. The Indian army who are expected to be the guardian and protector of the people in fact played the role of tormentor and predator thereby adding to the agony and suffering of the people. The poor people of the village are trapped in the tussle between the State and Naga ethnic insurgent groups. They led a very troubled and disturbed life. The story unfolds a very tragic and agonizing fate of the people of a remote Naga village. It presents a very ironic situation where the people of the village were in a very expectant mood and preparing for the big day when the new church will be dedicated. But they were oblivious to the sinister plot hatched by the government force to teach them the consequences of helping the underground rebels. And the military also selected the particular day of the dedication of the church building for executing their plan to show to the people the dire outcomes of betraying their own government.

The further happenings presented in the story shows the violent face of the military and the extreme form of suffering meted out to the village people. The violation of human rights was a common scene. The gang rape and brutal murder thereafter of Apenyo and her mother Libeni strongly highlight this violation and the beast-like actions of the army. One can clearly imagine and experience the devastation and the dreadful situation created by the military in the following description:

He then ordered them to take positions around the church and at his signal they emptied their guns into the building. 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. In the distance too, similar atrocities were taking place. But the savagery was not over yet. Seeing that it would be a waste of time and bullets to kill of all the witnesses inside the church, the order was given to set it on fire ... (Ao 29)

In "An Old Man Remembers", the old man Sashi gives an account of the troubled times of Naga history. The Independence movement was in full swing and even the remotest villages were not spared. For the village people it was a very troubled period because they were willy-nilly involved in the conflict between the overground and underground forces. And the Indian army did not show any kind of mercy or understanding and created more and more trouble for the villagers and made their life miserable; a life of constant fear and pain. And the time they selected to torment the helpless people brings into light the cruelty and violent face of the Indian army: "At that time of the day, as you know, the only people left in the village are children, nursing mothers, old people who can no longer go to the fields and a few village sentries. It was these helpless ones that the gun-toting soldiers were picking out easily and shooting like animals running away from a forest fire." (Ao 98)

Written against the backdrop of a turbulent period of Naga history, Ao's collection of stories speak about the poignant and bewildering experiences of people caught in a web of violence.

Temsula Ao depicts an incredibly realistic picture of the Naga history while showing the upheaval, turmoil and violence in the era of insurgency and counter-insurgency. She nicely demonstrates how the general mass has to undergo suffering and loss, how government rule and activity become a mockery of sustaining peace and curbing violence. Her storytelling delineates a horrible picture of the menace and turmoil experienced by the ordinary people. The stories echo in a very sensitive manner the terror-stricken lives of the Naga people and the turmoil and mayhem that have ravaged the land.

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