

## Women Contesting Terror and Violence: An Analysis of the Women Characters in 'Soaba', 'The Last Song' and 'The Curfew Man'

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### ABSTRACT

*Temsula Ao is one of the powerful writers of the NorthEast ,who in her book of short stories, These Hills Called Home :Stories From A War Zone describes how ordinary people cope with violence ,how they negotiate power and force, and how they seek and find safe spaces and enjoyment in the midst of terror .Four women characters--- Imtila,Libeni,Apenyo and Jemtila from three of her stories will be analysed to show how Ao expounds the sufferings and exploitations women undergo under the patriarchal hegemony and despotisms and how the patriarchal hegemonic inclinations represented by the Naga patriarchal society and the Indian Military Force have set up an impediment in the progress as well as empowerment of the female members of the Naga society. All the stories are uncomplacate Temsula Ao is one of the powerful writers of the Northeast who in her book of short stories ,These Hills Called d and simple but they show a candid image of Naga ways of life.*

The issues of nation, regionalism, identity , terrorism and violence have become subjects of writings in most of the writers from the North Eastern region. Economical backwardness, negligence from the centre and subalternity are often identified by those writers as the backdrop of terror and violence in the region. Temsula Ao is one among the many writers of the Northeast who in her book of short stories *These Hills Called Home :Stories From A War Zone* describes how ordinary people cope with violence ,how they negotiate power and force,and how they seek and find safe spaces and enjoyment in the midst of terror. She also upholds her individualized concerns regarding the predicaments of women in the Naga society. Her feminist narrative is constructed round the major issue of how violence and terror touched everyone, specially women of all social standards-the ordinary housewife,the willing partner or the young beauty who sings even as she is being raped. This paper will focus on Temsula Ao's representation of women coping with violence in the Naga society based on her three major short stories "Soaba", "The Last Song" and "The Curfew Man". Through the character of Libeni, Apenyo, Imtila, and Jemtila she expounds the sufferings and exploitations women undergo under the patriarchal hegemony and despotisms and how the patriarchal hegemonic inclinations represented by the Naga patriarchal society and the Indian Military Force have set up an impediment in the progress as well as empowerment of the female members of the Naga society.

'Soaba' is the story of a village idiot, a young mentally challenged boy, Soaba whose tragic life and death ironically highlight the impact of war and conflict on innocent common villagers. Soaba happens to work as a domestic help in the house of one powerful government agent Imlichuba

(The Boss). Drunk on the money, booze and weapons showered on him by the government officials, 'The Boss' brings a reign of terror on the villagers. Power corrupts his life and his home, causing immense trauma to his gentle, upright and selfless wife Imtila. Imtila ,in the story is not just represented as a wounded humanity but also as a redeemer of humanity-

"a heart-wounded woman who was desperately trying to cling on to humanity amidst the chaos that had engulfed her world" (p.22)

The character of Imtila in the story "Soaba" represents women's role in the Naga society during the time of rebellion. Imtila is the only character in the story who believes in humanity. Though silent, she rebels against the treacherous and evil world of her husband in her own way. Although her husband bought her expensive clothes and jewellery and imported her a new status definition, she was never happy with them. She wanted her womanhood to be honoured Her estrangement from her husband is a form of quite protest against the misery that husband brought her. The coming of the little boy Soaba to their home therefore provided her an escape from her miserable life with her husband. This helpless and poor woman is bold enough to go away from the frame of her marital relationship and create a space for herself where her husband has no place at all. Temsula Ao projects Imtila as a very strong women who never gives herself away even when all her aspirations get shattered. Her strength is proved when she tried to help her husband in his depressed condition after the death of Soaba. She proved herself wise enough to notice the behavioural changes in her husband and she "quietly moved back into their

old bedroom and began to make overtures of reconciliation to this man who seemed to have diminished from his former evil self into a whimpering helpless child." She tried to pick up the broken pieces of their former life and create a new order from the pathetic remains. Here, Imtila represents the inner strength and bravery of the female class in general.

The callous attitude of the patriarchal society is represented in the character of The Boss, Imtila's husband. He ordered women to be brought to the house for his physical pleasure "out of a perverse sense of proving his manhood. When he discovered that he lost all physical desire and energy to make love to any women, he adopted every means to retain his masculinity by torturing these women. The women "who went away tamely were rewarded but the bolder and experienced ones who tried either to talk lightly of middle-aged men and impotency or tried to revive his flagging organ were mercilessly beaten and dumped outside the gate by his guards". This shows how the males are placed at a superior position of the society and cannot bear anything that hurt their male ego. Boss, gaining sadistic pleasures by torturing these innocent women, reveals his perverted and chauvinistic patriarchal status. On the other hand, Imtila's "deep sympathy for the unfortunate women" rather than jealousy reflects the issue of female relationship and bonding between females in a society dominated by male interests. Soaba's death remains a painful memory with Imtila for her whole life. She could associate her own helpless self with Soaba's forlorn status for which she took every possible means to make him comfortable by taking proper care of him. She gave him shelter, enquired whether he was given meals or not, ordered her servants to give him proper bath and bring him new clothes and a 'new cot'. Imtila's pathetic weeping over Soaba's fallen dead body can be understood as a result of her realization that her feeble attempt to restore human feelings and emotions in this callous world has come to an end with Soaba's death which was brought on by her own husband. She wanted to negotiate with this painful memory by removing "all signs of Soaba's existence from the compound. The cot, piled high with his old clothes, was taken to a far corner of the garden and burnt". Although Imtila's efforts to be in her own self away from the domain of her husband became a null she never gave up instead tried to obliterate Soaba as "a painful chapter of her own life." On the contrary it is the Boss who falls weak in the face of Soaba's accidental death in his own hand and suffered a change in his behaviour that was even noticeable to the villagers.

The story "The Last Song" realistically captures the atrocities and arbitrariness of the Indian Army during the chaos and confusion period in Nagaland. It depicts the horrible detail of the gang rape of the beautiful young girl Apenyo and her mother by the Army in a poignant manner. This story incorporates both aspects of feminine vigour and victimized womanhood through the characters of the young widow, Libeni and her beautiful daughter Apenyo. The story reveals female maturity and resourcefulness in the character of

Libeni as she single-handedly raises her daughter Apenyo without listening to her relatives who urged her to marry again so as to have a man to protect and look after them. The courageous spirit of a young Naga girl is unfolded as Libeni slowly builds up a future for herself and her daughter with whatever was grown in the field and also with her skill as a weaver. Apenyo grows up to be a 'star pupil' in the school who is also a gifted singer with an exquisite singing voice. Both the mother and the daughter are able to place themselves in a respectable position in their peace loving society; Libeni as a reputed weaver and Apenyo as the 'singing beauty'.

The story also reflects on how women are imposed upon stereotypical roles in the male-dominated society whose existence is not accepted without male assistance or protection. In such a situation a woman needs to struggle a lot to set up an individualised voice for herself. In this context, Libeni holds a good example by becoming economically independent. Apenyo moves one step further as far as her boldness is concerned. She has grown up under the nurturing of a free independent woman, her mother and perhaps this is the reason why she continues her singing even when she is confronted by the menacing, arrogant Indian Army on that Sunday when the Naga people are about to dedicate the new church building. She perhaps had never any idea of such perverse and brutal attitude of humans.

During the operation, Apenyo became a victim of an immense dehumanized physical exploitation by the Army captain and "he grabbed Apenyo by the hair and with a bemused look on his face dragged her away from the crowd towards the old church building." Ao further sings of the totalitarian acts of the armed forces in the story as: "the young captain was raping Apenyo while a few soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn." Libeni's vain efforts to rescue her daughter from the grasp of the rapists are not just the attempts of a mother but they also indicate the daring spirit of a woman in spite of her physical incompatibility with the soldiers Ao thus narrates how women fall prey to the armed force's brutality during the insurgency and counter-insurgency period and the traumatic phase undergone by the women remains as a mental stigma throughout their lives. Tlemsula in her story "The Last Song" narrates the nature of violence and crime done against females in a place of tension and how violence shatters peace and innocence.

In 'The Curfew Man' Tlemsula Ao projects another woman who is a symbol of the feminine resilience, courage, deep practical wisdom and moral righteousness.. She is Jemtila, the wife of Satemba, formerly a police constable who had to seek voluntary retirement owing to his permanent physical disability, that made him useless in his job. Throughout the story Jemtila emerges out to be a strong woman who cannot be destroyed and depressed by adverse circumstances. When her husband's unexpected physical disability became a genuine problem for all instead of losing

hope she tried to find a way out and suggested her husband to seek voluntary retirement and return to their village and take up farming. Her unconventional attitude towards the role of woman in their society is reflected in her decision to do “odd jobs” in people’s houses “because the families normally employed people from other tribes or even ex-labourers from tea gardens for such menial jobs.”(p .36).Jemtila’s hard work and practical wisdom appears to be the driving force behind the economic upliftment that both she and her husband craved for. On the other hand, Satemba ,Jemtila’s husband is shaped by patriarchal beliefs and notions.

The fact that Jemtila has been the earning member of the family since his accident he was already beginning to feel ‘uneasy’about. In spite of his reservations ,he accepted the complicated offer of gathering information about ‘certain people’ to the S.D.O only in order to satisfy his ‘male pride’. In spite of his knowledge that his job of an informer, may someday lead to trouble he continued it in fear of that his wife may get discontinued from her service or becoming suspects in the eyes of the government. But Jemtila’s suggestions to Satemba provens a more powerful stance than that of her husband. She is witty enough to see the implications of the injuries which lead to a life of freedom. This freedom is more important to them than the problem of poverty, sickness and discomfort. She is practical and understands that it is a huge responsibility and even seems a kind of burden to run the family with a totally disable husband. But she is determined

and ready to start a new life with all such problems. She is even happy at the safety of her husband from the sinister work and tries to settle her life to normalcy as per her point of view. She feels unusually lighthearted and free when both of Satemba’s knees are damaged because he would no longer be able to work for the S.D.O. Satemba tragically comes in to a bed stricken condition full of pain and agony. But there is irony of a silver lining because the injury makes him unfit for the dreadful job of a spy and gives him a relief of freedom from such a sinister bondage.“ The officer was struck not so much by the implications ... but by the animated tone in which the woman conveyed the information about it.”(p.42) Jemtila becomes happy in spite of her husband's paralyzed condition because at least he is safe at home. She cares and loves her husband. As if her prayer is granted by God ,though in an ironical and pathetic way.

Women experience war and conflict in different ways than men do. But the Naga women are known for their courage and resilience. Though they have suffered immeasurably, they have not lost their vitality and fighting spirit. Temsula Ao in many of her stories attempt to portray this valiance and commendable side of Naga women who have faced the crisis bravely and stood up to keep their life and community functional and dynamic. Imtila, Jemtila, Libeni and Apenyo are a few examples of Naga women showing fortitude and courage despite their loss of life or the trauma that they had to undergo.

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