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Postcolonial Identities and the Politics of Resistance in Temsula Ao's These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone

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Abstract:

Temsula Ao's These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone is based upon the Naga separatist battle for autonomy which started since the end of the British domain in India in 1947. Seeking a separate identity of their own, the Naga people started an underground rebellion to establish themselves as a separate kingdom, free from the Indian touch. Describing how ordinary people cope up with violence, how they negotiate power and force and how amidst violence and terror they find secured spaces and time for enjoyment, Ao describes a way of life under threat from the forces of modernization and war. Violence spares none-the young, the old, the rebels, the lay men, everyone comes under its iron grip. Ao's book documents not just the state of affairs in conflict torn Nagaland but it is also a significant manner in which the peripheries talk to the centre in the modern nation state. These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone may just be read at one level as the typical Postcolonial narrative of resistance. This paper seeks to understand the crisis of identity faced by the Naga people in their homeland and also how politics and the instrument of violence used for domination effected the lives of the people who underwent various atrocities powered by the Indian army and also the underground rebels in many instances.

Keywords: Identity, postcolonial state, politics of resistance, violence

1. Introduction

Post independence, the Northeast of India has sadly enough, acquired the notoriety of being a hotbed for insurgent activities and has come to be regarded as a politically disturbed area with instances of frequent violence, communal clashes and identity issues. Be it Assam, Manipur or Nagaland, militancy has been the burning issue and to some extent the only reason for being in the limelight of the national media. Hardcore militant groups like ULFA, NSCN (I-M), NSCN(K), have been the trouble shooters and have taken the upper hand in igniting the minds of the Eastern youths towards secession. The 'step-motherly' attitudes of the Indian government towards the Northeastern states have acted as the catalyst in igniting the fire.

As Sanjoy Hazarika puts it: "India's Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometers wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken's Neck. The region has been the battle ground for generations of subnational identities confronting intensive nation states and their bureaucracies as well as internecine strife. It is a battle that continues, of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions of power, bitterness and compassion".-(Hazarika, xvi)

After the transfer of power in 1947, the Nagas, along with several frontier groups refused to join

India and launched a resistance movement, continuing a broad South Asian tradition of anti-colonial retaliations against the British in the 19th century. "Such conflicts between the 'natives' and a new post-colonial state resulted in a continuance of the colonial projects: Sequestering, pacifying and subjugating the Nagas. The colonial state saw the Nagas as subjects, and the Indian state was unwilling to see them differently, as its national leaders were engaged in the process of nation building through citizenship and territorializing India's inherited frontiers. With their demand for a sovereign nation, the Nagas therefore appeared as reluctant citizens who were not attuned with the 'great modern desires' to forge a new post-colonial Indian nation"(Kikon,85)

The Nagas, under the umbrella of the Nationalist Social Council of Nagalim (NSCN), the erstwhile Naga National Council (NNC), one of the longest operating Insurgent groups in South Asia, have been waging War against the Burmese regime as well as the Indian government. Udayan Misra points out that the Naga movement was not, as perceived by the government machinery, being led by a handful of westernized Naga Christians but was actually very home grown and "drawn from the traditional village councils" - (Mishra,44)

The rumblings of guns in those hills and the harsh grating of Mortar shell are no cause for panic for these tribes who have learnt to live by the sound of gunfire. The politics before and after India's independence with regard to the business of incorporating Nagaland into the Indian Union had evidently carved out the peculiar trajectory of Nagas nationalism and one that directly affected every Naga whether in India, Myanmar or elsewhere. – (Kalita,17)

Set in the initial turbulent decades of the Naga insurgency, Temsula Ao's *THESE HILLS CALLED HOME: STORIES FROM A WAR ZONE* depicts the lives of the Naga people struggling to come to terms with their identity. The stories are inextricably fraught with the historicity of the Naga separatist question and the strategies of domination issued by the government to dominate the uprising.. In Ao's narrative of how ordinary people cope with violence, how they negotiate power and force, how the commoners seek and find safe spaces and enjoyment in the midst of terror, the author details a way of life under threat from the forces of modernization and war. The young, the old, the rebel, the ordinary house wife – every one has been touched by violence.

2. Objectives

Temsula Ao's '*THESE HILLS CALLED HOME: STORIES FROM A WAR ZONE*' is fraught with the various issues related to the Naga freedom struggle. The Nagas' quest for a separate 'identity' and the resultant subjugation of the rebellion by the Indian Army led to various atrocities, which resulted in the suffering of the common people. My paper seeks to understand the crisis of identity faced by the Naga people in their homeland and also how politics and the instrument of violence used for domination, affected the lives of the people who were caught in the crossfire between the Indian army and the rebels.

3. Hypothesis

In this paper, I will argue how Temsula Ao, along with a host of new and emerging writers of Northeast India, maps the narratives of conflict arising from domination and the quest for identity. In recent times, there is a prolific amount of fiction and other writing in English which have been written in the hinterlands. These are written from borderlands and the periphery of the nation state. Temsula Ao's book depicts contemporary conflict in the state of Nagaland resulting in consequent suffering and trauma that common people have been subjected to. In this reading of Temsula Ao's book, I will demonstrate a strong and vocal resistance to the present political and social unrest, against which these voices have gradually but firmly emerged as an alternative history of the post-colonial state.

As the views aired by an eminent civil society member, the narratives in Temsula Ao's book are evidence of the increasing participation and involvement of Naga civil society. They are sure signs of the emergence of the voices of dissent through a new breed of writers, artists and activists in Nagaland have long drawn history of conflict of sub-nationalism.

4. Research Methodology

In this paper, I have planned to use literary interpretations, cultural memory, oral and folk history and post-colonial questions of nation and identity to interrogate and explore the possibilities of reading Temsula Ao's work as a narrative of resistance.

To put forward and exemplify my views, I will take the help of three stories by Temsula Ao , which are incorporated in '*THESE HILLS CALLED HOME : STORIES FROM A WAR ZONE*'.

5. Analysis

In Temsula Ao's '*THESE HILLS CALLED HOME : STORIES FROM A WAR ZONE*', Soaba is one of the powerful stories which brings to the fore how the state exerts its 'right' to inflict violence or disciplinary measures on the Naga people through the predicament of the protagonist, Soaba. The literal meaning of the word is 'idiot' and the story depicts how the protagonist gradually cloths himself with the new identity made available by the state to him.

The story pictures the notorious 'grouping system' wherein villages were uprooted from their traditional location and bunched together like herds, so that the security forces could keep an easier eye on them. These camps were later given the name 'concentration camps'. Conditions in these camps were not as appalling as the Nazi concentration camps, still the camps were quite horrible. According to Ao, "'grouping' remains the greatest insult to Naga self-respect; the strategy de-identified the Naga people by depriving them of their village homes, the emotional and spiritual cradle of their existence. In an earlier published article Ao wrote:

'Within the tribe a Naga's identity is deeply rooted in the village of his birth and residence. Being a citizen of a particular village is the most important aspect of a Naga's existence because this *identity* is marked with a specific ethnic and linguistic space. The identity affiliated to a village draws attention to a clan affinity, possession of ancestral and other properties in the form of land holdings, and underline one's responsibility to the community in the form of participating in community rituals, celebrations, and in the governance of village polity. A Naga who is banished from his ancestral village for political, social or criminal offences is like a person without a country. There can be no greater humiliation for a Naga than this fate that strips him of his symbolic identity and he is thus disaffiliated from his origin and tradition"- (Borgohain and Borgohain, 133-134)

So, by grouping the Naga people as insurgents the state prepares the ground for legitimizing the Naga identity through paradigms of power-relations.

Temsula Ao' contextualizes her story in such a time when the Naga people considered Indian forces as 'foreigners' and the Naga extremists as 'patriots'. 'Young people spoke of the exploits of their peer encounters with government forces and eager to join the new band of patriotic warriors to liberate their homeland from 'foreign rule'.

As, illustrated by Temsula Ao, the Naga people considered Nagaland as their separate 'nation' or 'homeland' and hence projected the Indian forces as 'foreigners'. However, the state had taken it for granted that Nagaland is within its territory and so they exercised military force over its citizens to dominate their rebellion. However the need of the hour was to rehabilitate the displaced Naga people and institutionalize the identity of the Naga people through political measures. It is evident from the happenings that for the state 'Government of men' is more vital and important than the 'Government of territory'. The means to ensure the 'Government of men' resulted to the loss of identity and humanitarian crisis.

In the story *The Curfew Man* Temsula Ao' describes how innocent villagers are caught in the hostility between two warring armies; the overground, labeling the other as rebels fighting against the state- and the other, operating from their underground hide-outs and calling the Indian army illegal occupiers of the sovereign Naga territories. Caught between the two forces was 'Satemba', the protagonist of the story – his identity at stake.

"..... The night curfew was the worst for people living in small towns because soon after dark all social activities ceased."-(Ao,34)

While the normal activities came to a standstill after dark, there were some whose real work started only during darkness. They were informers who were paid to gather information about people related to the underground.

"In order to detect and arrest the relatives of 'rebels' and their sympathizers, the government began to enlist recruits from the ranks of the bad elements in the towns and villages by paying them handsomely and sometimes even by threatening to reopen old criminal cases if they do not co-operate with them. These were the people who operated in the grey area between the government forces and the so-called 'freedom fighters', some by choice and others by compulsion."-(Ao,35)

Satemba's case was one of compulsion. He had to take up the profession of a spy because his wife's job in the residence of the Sub-Divisional Officer was somehow related to his taking up the job of a spy. "It was certainly not the kind of job that he had ever imagined doing, but he was compelled to take it because he was discreetly reminded that his wife's job was somehow connected with the offer"-(Ao, 37)

Satemba is the "Curfew Man" who goes around the town beyond the curfew hours, so that he can spy on his Naga brothers and sisters on behalf of his employers. He was forced to take up the profession of a spy, at the same time he could not betray the Naga endeavour for freedom; this is the crisis of Naga 'identity'. Satemba was torn between his love for his fellow Naga brothers and his enforced duty. In the words of Temsula Ao, "The real trouble was in his heart. For the first time in two and half years, he was beginning to question himself and his so-called 'job'. -(Ao,40-41) Satemba couldn't sustain his 'job' because of the sense of betrayal to his ethnic community, but Ao observes. "A new curfew man would be in place by evening and the man with two smashed knee-caps had already become history"-(Ao, 43)

In her story *A New Chapter*, Ao alludes to the first assembly election held in Nagaland in the 1960's. The much coveted assembly election did not just imply that Nagaland is an integral part of India but more significantly it brought Naga identity into the mainstream political scenario of the country.

"Nagaland had become a state of the Indian union, the first Legislative Assembly was in place and it became apparent that Nagaland was now working its way to become a part of the much-vaunted 'mainstream' politics of the country."(Ao , 134)

The title of the story suggests that the Naga's were gradually adjusting themselves to the new situations in their life. Changes were taking place gradually, some of which were 'self-created' and some being imposed upon them. The protagonist Nungsang was a 'new player' who worked as an army contractor. The life of each and every Naga individual from Nungsang to the pumpkin grower Merenla and also the underground leaders were mediated and controlled by the state mechanism.

"It was the mid-sixties in Nagaland and an uneasy surface calm prevailed. People were beginning to take stock of what had so suddenly overturned their quite lives and changed every single man or woman in the land forever. Slowly and painfully Nagas were beginning to look at themselves through new prisms, some self-created and some thrust upon them. Those who survived learnt to adapt to the new trends and new life styles. Old loyalties became suspect as new players emerged and forged makeshift alliances in unfamiliar political spaces"(Ao, 122)

Surviving the initial ups and downs in his business and after being guided by unscrupulous people like Bhandari, Nungsang learnt how to make money through contracts. He gradually rose from his earlier position to a much feared business man. But he was not someone who's satisfied so easily. He wanted a bigger identity of his own, he dreamt big.

" He began to dream of a better future : he decide that haggling with dry fish dealers and fruit vendors and going to the appalling livestock 'mahals' to buy twice-monthly rations of 'meat –on –hoof' was not going to be his permanent vocation in life. Bhandari and his kind could keep all such contracts for all he cared. But for Nungsang the son of a prestigious family, there had to be something much higher than his work, which he increasingly thought as demeaning and much below his status" (Ao, 133)

The assembly elections paved his way to achieve his aim of a more powerful identity. After winning the elections, he became the local M.L.A, thus achieving a new identity of his own - of being the most powerful person of his area.

“Thus ended a chapter in the life of the man, who in search of an identity, had gone into business because it was the only course left to a person with his credentials. This new venture, too, was undertaken with the same purpose.”(Ao, 142).

In the story, Nungsang’s ups and downs in his career graph was related to the identity crisis of his distant cousin Merenla or ‘Pumpkin Merenla’ as she was popularly known because she cultivated only pumpkins after she entered into an agreement with Nungsang for supplying him as many pumpkins she could grow.

“Simple village folk have a unique and singular way of using language, therefore calling the widow ‘pumpkin Merenla’ was their way of adding a new dimension to her identity during the period of her association with Nungsang, the contractor”(Ao, 146)

Things were good for Merenla until Nungsang won the elections and Bhandari took over his business dealings. Bhandari didn’t procure pumpkins from Merenla and she suffered heavy losses. She was in deep distress and was not able to cope with her present predicament. Her identity as ‘pumpkin Merenla’ was at stake.

“Far greater than the financial loss was the ‘loss of face’ suffered by the widow in her community because of her cousin’s heartlessness and it was this which hurt her the most” (Ao,144)

She was fed up of her old identity and she took up the task of ‘cleansing’. She soon got rid of all her pumpkins, thus conveying a message to her village people that she was no longer the old ‘pumpkin Merenla’.

“But now under the altered circumstance, the villagers recognised the message that she conveyed to them through her vociferous and public rejection of this identity on the day that she had ‘cleansed’ her house and herself of something that had ‘wounded’ her both in the material and psychological sense.”(Ao. 147)

6. Conclusion

Temsula Ao’s writings that unapologetically are subtitled as ‘Stories from a War zone’ indeed draw attention to narratives that are scripted from the hinterland, from a space that is technically peripheral and in spirit etched out from the nation-state’s borderlands. In the protagonists that Ao boldly and lyrically reframes within the larger but spiritually remote Indian mindscape, she is able to present an alternative voice that springs out of everyday life to suggest issues that are close to these people pushed into a geopolitics of trauma, struggle and survival hit by strife and conflict for long decades. While Temsula Ao is careful to present a nation within a nation it is implicit that the revolutionary ideals of an aspired and utopian Naga nation is often pitted more realistically against the conundrum of the postcolonial who is relentlessly renewing and readjusting her equations with the mainland and centers of power. Politics and love, ideals and reality, innocence and guile: these form interesting patterns of dichotomous life within the framework of a sub nationalist history of one of northeast India’s most fascinating and fomenting spaces of postcolonial existence. The colonial legacies that shape the postcolonial and the pulls of the past that militate against the perils of the present indicate sharply the themes of nostalgia and renewal, of suffering and survival that are voiced in these three stories that I have sought to illustrate Ao’s amazing historical and imaginative evocation of the ordinary Naga trapped in the complex apparatuses of state, security, conflict and counterinsurgency.

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