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Naga Literature as ‘Terror Lore’: A Discourse on Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*.

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Abstract

This paper delves into the realm of Naga literature, specifically focusing on Temsula Ao's compelling work, "These Hills Called Home," to explore the concept of 'Terror Lore.' Through an examination of Ao's narratives, it unravels the unspoken tales etched within the turbulent history of Nagaland, characterized by colonial legacies, political upheaval, and socio-cultural transformations. This paper highlights the power of literature to document, reflect, and heal. It invites readers to engage with the profound impact of violence on the human psyche, to empathize with silenced voices, and to work collectively toward a future where tales of suffering and resilience become echoes of the past, paving the way for a brighter and more just tomorrow.

Key Words: Naga Literature, turbulent times, literature, colonial legacy, terror lore.

Introduction

Naga literature is a poignant testament to the resilience of a people who have endured decades of turmoil, conflict, and upheaval. The turbulent years in Naga history, which include armed conflicts, political negotiations, and social transformations, have left indelible scars on the collective consciousness of the Naga people. Naga literature serves as a mirror reflecting these scars, allowing readers to explore the trauma, the courage, and the human spirit's resilience in the midst of adversity. According to Kharmawphlang (2003), (as cited in Kezo, 2017) the literature produced in a land plagued by years of terror and violence can be termed as terror lore. Naga literature, in many ways, can be aptly described as "terror lore," for it records and reflects upon the haunting experiences of the Naga people during the turbulent years of their history. The term "terror lore" encapsulates the essence of Naga literature remarkably well as it goes beyond mere descriptions of fear and anxiety; it delves into the narratives and legends that have emerged from a region marked by armed conflict, political turmoil, and the resilience of a people who refuse to be silenced. It is a body of work that goes beyond storytelling; it serves as a repository of the unspoken tales, the unwritten histories, and the collective memory of a community that has navigated the treacherous waters of political unrest and strife. Through literature Naga writers have etched the emotional toll of conflict onto the pages of their works. These tales are the unspoken, whispered stories of individuals and communities who have suffered, endured, and, in some cases, triumphed in the face of unimaginable challenges. It is in the works of Naga authors like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and others that we find these unspoken tales painstakingly recorded. Their writings are a testament to the power of literature as a means of healing, understanding, and bearing witness to history. Naga literature has transcended the limitations of

a written record; it has become a living testament to the enduring spirit of a people who have faced terror, but who refuse to be defined by it.

In the light of the above, this paper seeks to present a discourse on Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a war zone* as an example of how Naga Literature presents the colonial legacies of the State. This paper analyzes how Ao's narratives portray the profound struggles and resilience of Naga individuals and communities amidst the backdrop of the turmoil. In essence, this paper serves as an exploration of the intricate fabric of Naga literature and its portrayal of "terror lore," as exemplified by the profound and evocative narratives found in Temsula Ao's *"These Hills Called Home."* It is a journey into the heart of the Naga experience, where themes of terror and identity intersect to create a powerful narrative tapestry that demands our attention and contemplation.

The Historical Context: The Naga issue

The Naga issue is a longstanding and multifaceted challenge that has shaped the State for decades. At its core, it revolves around the Naga people's struggle for greater autonomy, recognition of their unique identity, and their historical claim to a separate homeland. This issue has been marked by complex layers of history, politics, and aspirations, making it one of India's most intricate and protracted conflicts. The roots of the Naga issue trace back to the pre-independence period when the Nagas were not part of British India. They maintained a distinct cultural and political identity in the Naga Hills. However, with the departure of the British and the subsequent partition of India in 1947, the Naga Hills became embroiled in a larger political struggle.

On August 14, 1947, just a day before India's independence, Angami Zapu Phizo, a charismatic Naga leader, declared Naga independence, challenging India's claim over the region. This declaration marked the beginning of a conflict that would last for decades. Subsequently, the first general election in 1952 provided yet another opportunity to challenge the prevailing idea of Indian democracy. Under the leadership of Phizo, the Nagas decided to boycott the election. These challenges were viewed by the government as deviations and breaches of Indian unity and consciousness. Consequently, Prime Minister Nehru's central government opted to quell these challenges through the use of military forces. This led to a period marked by forced displacement, search operations, curfews, and torture, which became the unfortunate norm in the lives of the Naga people. (Ray, 2016)

Over the years, multiple efforts were made to address the Naga issue through negotiations and accords, but a lasting resolution remained elusive. While progress has been made in recent years, the Naga issue remains a challenging and evolving chapter in India's history, one that demands sustained efforts towards a comprehensive and inclusive solution that respects the aspirations and identities of the Naga people while upholding the integrity of the Indian state.

Introduction to Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a war zone*

Temsula Ao stands as an illustrious contemporary writer hailing from Nagaland, undoubtedly making her mark in the Northeastern literary landscape. Her body of work encompasses five volumes of poetry: *"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). In addition to her poetic endeavors, she has ventured into the realm of short stories with two collections: *"These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone"* (2006) and *"Laburnum For My Head"* (2009). In recognition of her commendable creative endeavors, Temsula Ao has received notable accolades, including the prestigious Padma Shri, Sahitya Akademi awards, and the Governor's Gold Medal from the state of Meghalaya. What renders Temsula Ao's literary contributions particularly significant is her unflinching willingness to encapsulate the social and political convulsions that have marked Nagaland within the pages of her literary creations. She unfailingly ventures into the terrain of upheaval, recreating the palpable atmosphere of Nagaland's tumultuous history within her literary world. (Devi & Laishram, 2016).

Pou (2015) provides a comprehensive overview of Temsula Ao's collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006). Set in the early years of fervent Naga Nationalism, the short story collection sheds light on the troubled relationship between Nagas and India. The stories provide an account of the atrocities that the Indian army meted out on the Naga villagers. The unexpected raids, the story of Apenyo who has brutally raped by the army, the old man who narrates how his innocence was lost at a young age and other stories shed light on the lived experiences of the Nagas during the conflict years. Within her work, "These Hills Called Home; Stories from a war zone" serves as a testament to her ability to record the unspoken tales of Naga life during the turbulent years. In these stories, Temsula Ao masterfully navigates the complex terrain of Naga identity, the impact of conflict, and the enduring human spirit. Through her narratives, she brings to life the haunting experiences of Naga individuals and communities—experiences marked by displacement, violence, and loss. Yet, her writing is not merely a chronicle of suffering; it also celebrates the indomitable spirit of the Naga people as they navigate the trials and tribulations of their history.

This collection delves into the intricate fabric of Naga insurgency and its far-reaching consequences. Throughout its pages, readers encounter the harsh realities faced by the Nagas, often subjected to the brutality of armed forces and ensnared by militancy. Her storytelling captures the relentless political strife and turmoil that define the region. Driven by an innate need to bear witness to the experiences of her people, she has harnessed the power of memory to channel the stark realities of the Naga populace during the insurgency era into her creative works. In doing so, Temsula Ao not only adds to the literary tapestry of the Northeast but also serves as a chronicler of a region's indomitable spirit and relentless quest for peace and self-identity. Her work provides a rare glimpse into the emotional and psychological landscape of individuals caught in the crossfire of conflict, individuals whose stories often remain untold amidst the broader political discourse. Her writings serve as a bridge, connecting readers with the unspoken tales, the emotional nuances, and the cultural intricacies of a community that has endured, evolved, and continued to find its voice amidst the turbulent years of the Naga issue.

Analysis of Select Stories

The Jungle Major

The opening story within this collection is "The Jungle Major," which intricately unfolds the life and struggles of a man named Punaba. The narrative paints a vivid picture of Punaba's journey as he becomes entangled in the ranks of Naga underground militants, navigating through immense hardships and the perilous terrain of insurgency. He finds himself engaged in activities that force him to elude Indian soldiers, further deepening his involvement in the clandestine world of rebellion. Crucially, it is Punaba's remarkable wife, Khatila, who emerges as a beacon of intelligence and resourcefulness within the story. Khatila's quick thinking and presence of mind prove instrumental in orchestrating her husband's daring escape from the clutches of Indian soldiers. Her actions not only secure Punaba's freedom but also avert catastrophic consequences for the entire village.

The narrative of "The Jungle Major" serves as a poignant exploration of the proliferation of militancy and its far-reaching repercussions. Post-marriage, Punaba's descent into underground activities becomes a defining trajectory of his life. Their meetings as a couple become sporadic, as Punaba is compelled to inhabit the dense jungles due to his involvement with the underground group. Khatila, confronted with the harsh reality of potential encounters with the army, chooses a path of silence over confrontation. This poignant choice reflects the perilous nature of interactions during the insurgency period, where any encounter with army personnel carried the risk of innocent lives and dignity being compromised.

The story vividly illustrates the dire consequences that befell the villagers, many of whom shared ties with the underground leaders.

Some villagers, to which the underground leaders belonged, were severely punished. The houses were ransacked by the security forces, the grain in their barns was burnt and the people themselves were herded into camps away from the village and kept in virtual imprisonment inside areas fenced in by bamboo stockades. This form of group incarceration was the infamous "grouping" of villages which the Nagas hated and dreaded even more than bullets. Numerous stories proliferated of women being molested by the security forces and the obstinate ones who refused to give information being severely beaten; not only that, sometimes they would be hung upside down subjected to unspeakable tortures like chilli powder being rammed into their extremities. (Ao, p.3)

Soaba

The narrative of "Soaba" unveils the tragic fate of a young boy who lost his life under inexplicable circumstances. The word "Soaba" itself carries a poignant dual meaning, signifying both "idiot" and the name given to a young boy within the Naga community. At the heart of this story is Imlichuba, a man of considerable stature within the government, enjoying a life filled with music and indulgence in alcoholic drinks. His role revolves around gathering intelligence about militant activities and relaying this information to the Army. Due to the power he wields, Imlichuba is perpetually surrounded by a retinue of individuals, a situation that makes his wife's life unbearable, leaving her and their children in a state of perpetual unrest at home.

The brutal incident transpires during a moment when Imlichuba is incapacitated and inebriated. With no inquiry or regard for Soaba's innocence, Imlichuba brazenly enters the boy's home and opens fire, tragically ending the life of the young, unsuspecting child. The boy's demise is tragically unjust, as he is unjustly deemed a traitor without cause. The aftermath of this senseless act witnesses the heart-wrenching response of Imtila, Imli's wife, who rushes to the lifeless body of the fallen boy, her lamentations echoing, "Oh my poor boy, were you born for this? Why did I let you come into this evil place?"(p.19). Through "Soaba," the narrator starkly portrays the abuse of authority by those in positions of power, shedding light on the tragic consequences that can arise when unchecked power and prejudice converge.

During this traumatic period, the Indian army formed units referred to as 'flying squads,' equipping their members with weapons and vehicles to facilitate expeditions to remote areas in pursuit of Naga insurgent groups. Imlichuba emerged as the leader of one such group, and he wielded his authority to subject the ordinary populace to acts of harassment and violence. It was during this period that specialized terminologies like "convoy," "grouping," "curfew," and "situation" gained currency among the populace. These terms symbolized the ongoing conflict between the government and the insurgent rebels, encapsulating the fraught and tumultuous nature of the times.

An Old Man Remembers

In the late 1950s, there was a time when the younger generation in Nagaland began to perceive themselves as the torchbearers of freedom for their land. They became gripped by the idea of dissent and open rebellion, seeing it as their mission to liberate their homeland from what they believed to be oppressive forces. This fervor led many young adults to forsake their families, abandon their educational pursuits, and even relinquish stable employment in favor of joining the ranks of nationalist movements dedicated to securing their land's independence.

The narrative of "An Old Man Remembers" centers on an elderly man who, with initial hesitation, gradually opens up to his grandson about his tumultuous youth. He had long refrained from sharing the hardships he endured during that period, fearing that such revelations might have a detrimental impact on the present generation, both physically and mentally. However, a pivotal realization dawns upon him as a result of the wise counsel of his friend Imli, who had consistently advocated for the importance of imparting knowledge about the people's history to the younger generation. He believed that they had a rightful claim to understand the unspeakable atrocities witnessed by the older generation. This conviction led the elderly man to overcome his initial reluctance, prompting him to candidly recount the tribulations he and others experienced when they were entangled in extremist activities.

Their involvement in the rebel group was not a matter of choice; rather, it was circumstances beyond their control that compelled them into such activities. These circumstances irrevocably altered the course of their lives. As Imli aptly states, they too were once carefree youngsters, but an abrupt turn of events stripped them of their youth, replacing schoolbooks with guns and other instruments of destruction. Their existence was confined to the unforgiving jungles, akin to wild creatures.

This narrative highlights a poignant reality: the youth who joined these rebel groups did so not out of their own volition but due to external influences and coercions. Once they became part of these groups, they were compelled to make immense sacrifices and acquire the skills necessary for survival in the harsh jungle environment, shielding themselves from government forces. The lines underscore the harsh truth that they had no alternative choices, as evidenced by phrases such as "we were not yet sixteen when we became such ruthless killers" and "Our youth was claimed by the turbulence, which transformed boys, like Imli and me into killers."

Even though they were not active insurgents themselves, they were thrust into a life they had not chosen, dictated by the dire need for survival. The episodes narrated in these stories poignantly depict how, in the name of national identity, many young individuals lost their lives. Often, these youths were led astray in the guise of pursuing freedom and nationhood, forced to sacrifice everything for a cause that ultimately yielded no meaningful success.

The Last Song

In *The Last Song*, Ao tells the tragic and harrowing tale of a young singing genius Apenyo and her mother Libeni. Apenyo as a little baby girl began to show signs of her extraordinary gift of singing. She grew up to be a beautiful young girl with a beautiful singing voice which earned her the position of the lead singer in the church choir. On the fateful day, the villagers were exceptionally jubilant as it was the day when the new church building was to be inaugurated. The Indian army had also chosen the same day to punish the village for paying taxes to the underground army which led to the unexpected and horrific turn of events. The pastor and the gaonburas were arrested while Apenyo was brutally raped. Her mother Libeni who rushed in to save her daughter also met the same fate, The mother-duo became helpless victims in the hands of the merciless soldiers who were blinded by their murderous lust. They then killed the villagers who witnessed the act and the church building in which many terrified villagers were taking refuge was set to flame. This heart-wrenching story unveils the depths of human anguish with an understated narrative tone that, upon closer examination, reveals a trenchant critique of the inherently male-centric foundation of India's counterinsurgency efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tamsula Ao's literary endeavor serves as a poignant channel through which she communicates the turbulent history of Nagaland. She introduces readers to the lives of ordinary individuals who have borne the brunt of violence and atrocities that came as a result of the political unrest, marked by the looming presence of militancy and armed forces. With only a handful of exceptions, the majority of her stories lay bare the ruthless devastation wrought by these forces upon the lives of ordinary citizens. This destruction has left an indelible mark, precipitating rapid changes across the social, political, economic, and even cultural fabric of the region.

In her preface, "Lest We Forget," Ao poignantly asserts, "...what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims, and the trauma extends beyond the realm of physical maiming and loss of life. Their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves survivors scarred in mind and soul" (Ao x).

Through her literary prowess, Tamsula Ao becomes a voice for those whose stories might otherwise remain untold, casting a spotlight on the enduring pain and resilience of those who have navigated the turbulent waters of Nagaland's history. In doing so, she invites readers to grapple with the profound impact of violence on the human spirit and to acknowledge the enduring scars that persist in both mind and soul, long after the physical wounds have healed.

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