



# Naga Identity Through The Readings of Temsula Ao

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## Abstract

The eight states of North East India that constitute the North-East have gone through a tumultuous period in history. It can only be experienced painfully by those who sacrificed their life or lost their dear ones for the greater good of the people. The history of the region is one that not only preserves the culture and tradition but also involves the much talked of politics of the hills. The history of the politics of the North East is filled with a period of the rise of various insurgent bodies that emerged initially to claim sovereign status but gradually led the states toward mass violence and destruction due to personality clashes and tribalism. These insurgent bodies that worked towards safeguarding the region from mass invasion of the outsider only created acts of terrorism leading eventually to brutal killings of their own clansmen. This plight is the subject matter of Temsula Ao's stories.

**Key Words:** Naga, insurgent, violence, tribe, identity.

Northeast India has been considered as the unexplored corridor of links between Southeast Asia and South Asia. The Naga Hills occupy the most strategic part of this corridor. "Nagaland is a charming little state tucked away in the North-eastern corner of India, bordering Myanmar. It is inhabited by 16 hospitable tribes and other sub-tribes. Each tribe is distinctively different from the other in terms of tradition, customary practices, language and attire. But all are bound by a unique identity –

NAGA"(Karmakar 13). The Naga is a generic term that represents many tribes. "Each tribe speaks distinctive languages and possesses their tribe's specific traditions of origin, myths and legends of migrations beside a host of other folk narratives that serves as the receptacle of the collective memory of the people's experiences. Naga remained untouched by the higher civilizations of even the neighbouring districts/states. They lived in isolation practicing their distinctive customs, and the only trade route nearest to them on the Indian side is to Assam" (Kanungo 1).

The eight states of North -East India that constitute the North –East, have gone through a tumultuous period in history. It can only be experienced painfully by those who sacrificed their life or lost their dear ones for the greater good of the people. The history of the region is one that not only preserves the culture and tradition but also involves the much talked of politics of the hills. The first significant interaction of the Naga with outsiders took place during the two World Wars which led to the introduction of external materials into their territory, and considerably transformed their traditional way of living. The First World War got enough ammunition to Nagaland to change their weapons and the battle between the British and the Japanese at Kohima. The Second World War made the Naga a divided community, and changed their trade pattern forever. After the war, international boundary between India and Myanmar was patrolled and the Naga found themselves in two different countries.

In the light of Naga history many writers of the region have dealt with Naga issues in their writing and most of the writings today are undeniably filled with pages of violence experienced in the past or encountered on daily basis. For the states of the North East, writing or raising voice in the light of some ongoing issues through any medium has always remained a challenge. One reason can be that most of the region's social and political issues are constantly at stake. However, in spite of emerging in the literary world only recently, the region today has a good number of writers who have taken up bold steps against threats and tensions. For example Temsula Ao and Lhusi Haralu through their stories and poems pinpointed the disturbed state of Nagaland. Most of the writings from the North-East run through a common subject matter where they deal with topics concerning the state, terror, insurgency ,violence, memory and displacement, a literature of and in bondage.

This article is dealing with a focus on a particular state in the North East, Nagaland, a region that spearheaded the movement among the rest of the North Eastern states towards claiming statehood and the literary depiction of the problems. Nagaland has a long history of waging battles not only in its demand for statehood and sovereignty but also in acting as a battleground. Often referred to as the ‘Stalingrad of the East’ the ‘Battle of Kohima’ was fought in the home of Nagaland, a history that is often forgotten and ignored. The stories of an accomplished writer from the North East, Temsula Ao whose collection of short stories written in English, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) echo in a very sensitive manner the terror-ridden lives of the Naga people. This article is a critical reading of three of her stories, “An Old Man Remembers” , "The Curfew Man" and "The Pot Maker", which reflect the period of insurgency, the unrest and turmoil that has ravaged the land. "It was as though a great cataclysmic upheaval threw up many realities for the Nagas within which they are still struggling to settle for a legitimate identity"(Ao x ).Apart from the representation of terror, the book compellingly portrays the cultural and traditional life forms of the tribal people through the memories that most often remain “unacknowledged” (Ao ix). Focusing on Temsula Ao’s short stories, the reading will pinpoint how literature carries the potential to capture the history of a region that has undergone a time of terror and also suggest possibilities of future peace.

Temsula Ao is a distinguished writer from the North East India. Preferred to be known as a poet, she has five collections of poems: *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). She has also authored the book *Ao-Naga Oral Traditions* (2000). Similarly, she is the writer of excellent stories also. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is one among them.

### **Identity Crisis**

*These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* depicts the lives of the Naga people struggling to come to terms with their identity. Set in the initial turbulent decades of the Naga insurgency Temsula Ao’s short stories are essentially rooted to the issues of Naga separatist battle for autonomy which started since the end of the British Raj in 1947. What is significant about Ao’s stories is that they do not explicitly point to the political struggle; rather the stories capture the voices of common Naga people who are trapped in the struggle between the state and the Naga ethnic insurgency groups. "The Naga

exposure to the outside world through their contact with the British led to profound changes in the Naga world view. The impact of western education and Christianity led to gradual change in the outlook. It helped in building up a sense of belonging among different tribes and gave a common Naga identity" (Elizabeth19).The State of India, on the other hand, exerts its dominion over the territory through bio-political strategies and seeks to normalize, institutionalize and regulate Naga identity. Temsula Ao's stories are essentially fraught with the historicity of these issues which destabilize the identity markers of the Naga people—whether Naga identity will be viewed in terms of Naga ethnicity or it will be formulated by bio-political strategies employed by the state mechanism.

Temsula Ao's stories "An Old Man Remembers", tells the story of Shashi and Imli who were made soldiers and ended their life at jungle. Their life was painful, pathetic and heart-touching. The bitterness of memory of the life of jungle haunted their mind almost all the time. The terrific life of the jungle is vividly drawn in the story: "By the time when we reached the forest, away from the mayhem in the village, it was already dark. We were hungry, we were cold, but most of all were terrified, not knowing where we were heading. The eerie jungle sounds were beginning to grow in volume, which only added to our fear" (Ao 99). Situations and circumstances compelled Shashi and Imli to involve in the underground group. It is evident in their conversation: "soldiers we were made into and that's what we resolved to remain" ( 101). As an underground army, they also committed brutal crimes but at the same time they repented for their acts. When they felt desperate and tried to flee from the jungle life, they were shocked as their village was totally shattered. Many villagers took shelter in the forest at the west end of the village where the forest was at one time considered to be the home of spirits. The old man "Sashi struggled to tell his story because he suffered from identity conflict" (Elizabeth 66).

The state with its sovereign body put in circulation the bio-political strategies of normalization and subjectification to subdue the Naga voice. As Foucault puts it, what emerges with the introduction of bio-politics as a practice is the notion of a social body as the object of government. It is the notion of population i.e. bio-politics concerned with population as a subject of discipline in the diverse forms of rehabilitation, normalization and institutionalization. According to Foucault the disciplinary control achieved by the bio-politics creates the "docile body" (135) through a series of appropriate technologies: "For millennia man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with additional capacity for

political existence: modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question.” (Foucault 143)

"The Pot Maker", is another story of Ao, deals with the theme of conflict between the individual and community. This is further complicated by the changes in society leading to conflict between tradition and modernity. The village setting sets the tone for the community based society where each is interdependent on the other for survival. Tradition still holds sway over the lives of the individuals and it is evident that the communal spirit is always superior to individual will. The changing values and its effects on traditional way of life are portrayed through the conflict between the protagonist Sentila who desires to become expert pot maker, and her mother Arenla who refuses to teach her the craft. This conflict between mother and daughter is symbolic of the conflict between tradition and modernity. Sentila is the representative of the younger generation who have a thirst for reclaiming cultural knowledge. "Arenla exemplifies the confused state of identity conflict faced by those living during a time of cultural transition. The conflict between them results in a strain on their relationship"(Elizabeth 68).

Besides the ongoing socio- political developments, the Naga psyche suffered from identity crisis caused by colonialism which brought about changing values . In *The Naga Imbroglia*, Charles Chasie traces the roots of corruption and identity conflict among the Nagas to the colonial legacy and points out that the Nagas had "only recently made their entry into money economy from the barter system" and became "enamoured of the easy convenience and power of money" (Chasie 127).

However, the state has taken it for granted that Nagaland is within its territory, and what is necessary is to rehabilitate, normalize and institutionalize the identity of the Naga people through the bio-political measures. From the story it is evident that for the state ‘government of men’ is more vital than the ‘government of territory.’He and other people of his community familiarize themselves with newer terminologies and mediate their lives with implications of those terminologies: “It was at this stage that a new vocabulary also began to creep into everyday language of the people. Words like convoy, grouping, curfew and ‘situation’ began to acquire sinister dimensions as a result of the conflict taking place between the government and underground armies” (Ao 10).

Temsula Ao's stories are the dissemination of the state's circulation of the controlling measures in the lives of the people, as evident in the story titled *The Curfew Man*: "The night curfew was the worst for people living in small towns because soon after dark all social activities ceased" ( 34). So, it is evident that the state's controlling measure does not simply consist of violence; rather it puts in circulation certain strategies of normalization. "The Curfew Man" brings into focus strategic divisions of people in the Naga territory such as—the Indian force, the insurgents, and the emerging state- sponsored section of spies. The state's art of governance manoeuvres such policies which encompass every sphere of Naga life. The story is about a newly emerging spy called Satemba who has to engage himself as a spy because of the dire need of employment:

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 did 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. (35)

This anthology of short stories "from a war zone" is an eloquent proof that the violent phase in Naga life will remain etched in their collective memory. In 'An Old Man Remembers,' Sashi who remained reticent all his life about his days in the jungle when he fought against the Indian Army, breaks down when he is prodded by his grandson Moalemba to tell the story. As Shashi narrates the real story of life the grandson listens attentively. Temsula Ao very vividly depicts the pains and sufferings the old man undergoes in his old age especially the physical suffering, loneliness, sleeplessness, longing for companionship etc. When grandfather cries during his sleep Moalemba goes to him and put his arms around him and consoles him.

The quest for identity depends a lot on the emotional, cultural and social stability of an individual. Though the stories are based on the socio- political and historical settings, it is not a literature of protest or revolt against the external forces and influence that have deeply stamped the Nagas perception of themselves. So, it is evident that politicization of the bare life refers to a state of affairs where all the subjects without exception obey the laws, accomplish the task expected of them, practice the trade to

which they are assigned, and adhere to the established order in so far as this order conforms to the law of the state. However, in the process people, innocent and active suffer greatly, undergo unexplainable sufferings and heartfelt pains. Temsula Ao brilliantly narrates the predicament of the poor people.

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