



Power, Surveillance and Interpellation

A Critical Reading of Tamsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*

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Abstract: This study presents a critical analysis of Tamsula Ao's novel *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, examining the delicate interaction between cultural harmony and dominant force. It analyses a powerful exploration of identity, conflict and the struggle for self-preservation. The study has been carried out using the theoretical perspective of Michel Foucault's Panopticism and the two apparatuses by Louis Althusser. It asserts that the novel depicts how power functions in a militaristic society through discipline, monitoring and ideological conditioning. The study uncovers a complex structure of power that operates in Nagaland's military-dominated sociopolitical environment through discipline, ideology and surveillance. It shows how individual views in the conflict-ridden region of Nagaland are shaped by both Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) through an analysis of a selection of stories. This study also emphasizes how Ao's narratives show resistance and human perseverance while also revealing hidden and visible control strategies. It shows how individuals and their consciousness are simultaneously governed by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs). It also examines how military active regions shows the subtle internalization of power and the persistence of resistance.

Index terms– Panopticism, Power, Interpellation, RSAs, ISAs, Surveillance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tamsula Ao (1945-2022) was born in Jorhat, Assam, and she belonged to the Ao Naga ethnic group of Nagaland. She is regarded as one of the earliest writers of Nagaland to articulate the realities of the region in English. As she was not just a writer and poet, but also an ethnographer, her works transcend aesthetic appeal and become testimonies to Naga culture. Focusing on the culture, identity and struggles of the Naga people, Ao succeeded in bringing regional experiences within discursive frameworks of national and global discourse, thereby challenging the marginalisation of voices from Northeast India in mainstream literary discourse.

Tamsula Ao's oeuvre, which ranges from poetry collections such as "Songs Along the Way Home" to prose narratives such as *Laburnum for My Head*, seamlessly interweaves ethnographic details with lyrical expression. Her texts move beyond the conventions of fiction; they carry collective memory, bearing witness to regional violence, displacement and social fragmentation. In this respect, her writings exemplify the convergence of testimonial literature and postcolonial discourse, situating Naga identity within the larger debates on power, memory and representation. Over the course of her career, she has been honored with awards such as the Padma Shri Award (2007), the Nagaland Governor's Award (2009), the Sahitya Akademi Award (2013) and the Kusumagraj National Literature Award (2015). These prestigious recognitions not only celebrate her literary excellence but also mark the legitimisation of Naga literature within the wider framework of Indian writing in English. More importantly, they affirm the testimonial power of her work, which documents conflict, memory and identity in ways that resist silencing and erasure.

As such, Ao's literary contribution thus provides a critical entry point for examining how literature from conflict zones functions simultaneously as art and as cultural memory. Her legacy continues to shape the way Naga identity and culture are remembered, studied and understood, making her work indispensable to any exploration of Naga literature and its place within Indian writing in English.

II. THESE HILLS CALLED HOME AS TESTIMONY

Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) extends her insights into the terrain of conflict-ridden Nagaland. This collection of short stories portrays the everyday struggles of individuals and communities in Nagaland, a state long caught in the crossfire between insurgents' demands for sovereignty and the coercive authority of the Indian state. This conflict spans over five decades, and Ao's stories reveal how this long period of unrest has affected every aspect of one's existence, memory and identity. Ao demonstrates how the combined pressures of militarisation and rapid modernisation have disrupted the Naga identity, an identity once firmly anchored in nature and tradition. She juxtaposes characters from different generations, from the young to the old, in her narratives to show how these forces have affected each member of the community differently. Her works illustrate the resilience of her people and her desire for peace in the region. Thus, *These Hills Called Home* is not only made up of tales of fiction but also stands as a testimony to the life of the people of Nagaland.

More than a literary text, the collection functions as a cultural archive and a mode of resistance. By exposing the realities of living in the paradox of sovereignty and subordination, where the aspiration for autonomy collides with the pervasive reach of state power, Ao's stories reveal how everyday life becomes infiltrated by surveillance, discipline and ideological control. In this sense, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* provides a lens through which Michel Foucault's theories of power, discipline and surveillance alongside Louis Althusser's models of state apparatuses can be read in the lived realities of a conflict zone.

These Hills Called Home has been a significant source for academic inquiry into Northeast India. Many research papers have examined this text from diverse perspectives, including women's studies, geographical analysis, explorations of insurgency, patterns of political violence and gendered subalternity. Despite the abundance of scholarship, relatively few studies have applied Michel Foucault's idea of power structures and Louis Althusser's concept of state apparatuses to analyse the text. Moreover, there remains a significant gap in research that integrates both Foucault and Althusser to examine the dynamics of power in Ao's work.

The paper "Gendered Subalternity in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*" analyses the representation of gendered subalternity in Ao's *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*. The analysis is based on the views of scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Judith Butler and Ranajit Guha to understand how women's voices are systematically silenced within structures of patriarchy, insurgency and the coercive machinery of the state. Another paper titled "Narrative of Political Violence and Social Realities: A Study of Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*," explores the social realities and patterns of political violence in Nagaland. Similarly, the paper "Exploring Insurgency in Nagaland through Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*" analyses themes such as military brutality, loss of innocent lives and destruction of both public and private property. In addition, the paper "Women in Conflict Areas: Insights from Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*" examines narratives that address sexual assault against women, thereby exposing how violence in conflict zones intensifies gendered vulnerability and silences female voices.

III. DISCUSSION

Temsula Ao's stories in *These Hills Called Home* commemorate a tragic past and show how the coercive power of the state authority shattered the fragile peace of Nagaland. By portraying military interventions and oppressive regulations, she reveals how a dominant and chaotic system of authority operates in subtle yet pervasive ways, producing internal divisions and segregation within communities. The structures of power designed to regulate and manipulate the population extend further, manifesting in recurring conflicts and policies that fracture social cohesion from within.

Scholars have long described the northeastern region as one marked by political unrest sustained by prolonged military interventions. Ao's narratives reflect this reality, where the Indian government and its armed forces sought to consolidate control over Nagaland, and recurrent violence and military

interventions produced freedom fighters who emerged in response to systemic brutality. Yet those fighters were soon branded as threats to state authority and declared enemies of the nation.

Ao maps the rippling effects of state violence, showing that measures intended to secure beyond battle sites and reach even the most peaceful villages. Military interventions and coercive policies of the government disrupted people's everyday life, eroding social trust and forcing people to internalise fear and compliance as survival strategies. However, what is especially important about Ao's account is that she describes an unexpected process of how the sustained oppression of the state authority inadvertently created circumstances for people to become politically aware and active, where personal grievances transformed into collective consciousness and participation in the movement became normalised through repeated exposure to violence. As repression intensified, more villagers were drawn into organised resistance, and involvement in the movement became part of the social fabric and communal identity. This process in the long run restructured patterns of solidarity and belonging, converting episodic dissent into durable forms of collective action. It can be said that Ao's work highlights the dialectical relationship between coercion and mobilization, revealing how the state authority's attempts to suppress opposition created the very conditions for resistance. To substantiate these claims, the following analysis closely examines specific stories from *These Hills Called Home*.

IV. POWER, DISCIPLINE AND SURVEILLANCE

Using Foucault's framework of power, discipline, and surveillance, the study will show how state practices produce internalised compliance in everyday life. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault talks about a process that ensures compliance even without direct enforcement. Central to this idea is the concept of "Panopticon," a model based on Jeremy Bentham's prison design in which a centrally located watchtower enables guards to monitor inmates without being directly seen and exposed. Foucault explains that the possibility of being seen creates a sense of perpetual surveillance and turns individuals into "docile bodies." The panopticon mechanism produces a system in which individuals self-regulate their behaviour and actions, believing they are always being watched. In such conditions, individuals are reduced to subjects disciplined, manipulated and optimised for productivity within modern systems of control. Power, according to Foucault, is not merely repressive but also productive because it regulates conduct, generates knowledge and structures society (Foucault 200-2). In the context of Ao's narratives, this model can account for why fear and coercion become a part of daily existence even in the absence of direct enforcement.

In *These Hills Called Home*, the working of the Panopticon apparatus finds a detailed portrayal through the story. Surveillance ceases to be an abstract concept, for it turns into a reality in Nagaland; it takes shape in the form of curfews, armed forces and continuous patrols. Under these conditions, Ao demonstrates how the villagers practice self-regulation and modify their practices and ways of talking in response to being watched. Such a real-life case of surveillance proves the previous assertion that the force of the state penetrates everyday life. The functioning of the Panopticon mechanism is visible in the narratives of *These Hills Called Home*. Surveillance ceases to be an abstract concept, for it becomes a lived reality in Nagaland as it takes shape in the form of curfews, armed forces and continuous patrols. Ao demonstrates how the Naga villagers begin to self-regulate, altering daily routines, speech and actions in anticipation of scrutiny in her stories. Such a real-life case of surveillance proves the assertion that state coercion seeps into ordinary life, eroding trust and producing internalised fear. A central figure who embodies this dynamic is Imlichuba in the short story "Saoba." As a member of the government-deployed Flying Squad, he functions as the local face of state discipline. Positioned as an ally of the government, Imlichuba's unquestioned power over the villagers is demonstrated through the force he exerts to suppress rebel movements, illustrating how disciplinary power operates at both the communal and individual levels.

Imlichuba personifies the disciplinary gaze that Foucault theorizes through the Panopticon. His relentless patrols through the village, hunting for signs of rebellion, exemplify how surveillance directly shapes the behaviour and conduct of the villagers. Their refusal to challenge his enforcements or question his authority demonstrates how "disciplinary power" operates not merely through overt coercion but through the internalisation of fear and compliance. What is particularly compelling here is the way surveillance becomes "performative"; the Flying Squad's patrols are not just about catching rebels but about reminding the villagers that they are always being watched, and that possibility alone compels villagers to conform. This echoes Foucault's idea that the Panopticon doesn't require constant punishment; the mere possibility of being watched is enough to produce obedience. This story clearly

shows how surveillance works as a mechanism of control; the mere presence of the Flying Squad compels self-regulation and silence. Imlichuba's role illustrates how colonial power structures deploy surveillance as a strategy of domination, ensuring that resistance is suppressed before it can even emerge. His patrols and interventions do more than search for rebels; they perform authority. Moreover, Ao shows how Imlichuba's unquestioned power his ability to punish, intimidate and enforce, translates structural state power into everyday social control at the village level.

In the short story "The Curfew Man" of *These Hills Called Home*, a distinctly panoptic atmosphere is generated by the military's constant presence, where the potential for observation regulates behavior even in the absence of soldiers. This dynamic corresponds to what Foucault's theory states: that power functions most effectively when it is both pervasive and invisible, compelling individuals to internalize discipline. Likewise, in "An Old Man Remembers," the lingering memory of past violence still informs the conduct of the people in the present time, transforming memory itself into a site of surveillance. In this case, the effects of monitoring are not only visible in the physical world but also penetrate the thoughts of people and show the lasting impact of disciplinary power on one's consciousness. Surveillance, therefore, is not confined to external enforcement but gets internalised, shaping memory, perception and self-regulation.

Foucault states, "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (194). To understand this statement, one needs to look at the idea of power not in terms of deprivation, as a creative principle that produces a certain condition of existence. This means power can fabricate knowledge, identities and social realities rather than merely suppressing them. As Foucault shows in *Discipline and Punish*, power operates relationally within different institutions, customs and practices, and it is not centralised but distributed. This understanding of the productive dimension of power is particularly useful in interpreting Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*. The violence depicted in her stories does not operate only to silence the voices of communities, but most importantly, to reorganise the identities, reshape social interactions, and embed new forms of compliance and fear into people's everyday lives. Thus, surveillance and coercion are not just instruments of repression but also a productive mechanism that generates altered subjectivities and collective realities. Ao's stories illustrate Foucault's claim that power produces "rituals of truth," showing how communities internalize discipline and how violence itself becomes a formative force in the lived experience of Nagaland.

In contrast to the character Imlichuba in the short story "Saoba" who embodies the state authority, Punaba, who appears in the story "The Jungle Major," embodies the insurgent authority. However, Punaba's role mirrors the disciplinary structures of the state as exhibited by Imlichuba. He is involved in leading operations, recruitments, missions and camps. He sets rules, enforces punishments and demands loyalty, commanding recognition from the villagers in a manner comparable to the Indian army. This parallel demonstrates that power operates across multiple levels of structure within the region, the insurgent groups and the government, revealing its dispersed and relational nature rather than a single centralized core. Through the replication of disciplinary mechanisms, insurgent authority makes clear that power is not vested in a single sovereign core but is distributed among conflicting points. By analysing Ao's narrative, it becomes clear how Foucault's insight into the nature of power being relational and distributed among institutions and practices, and sustained through both compliance and resistance. Authority, therefore, is exercised through a set of structures rather than a centralized form of domination, showing how discipline and control permeate diverse social formations. In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault states that "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere... power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (93). This is shown through Ao's narrative, where power operates within structures of both insurgency and government and creates a network of authority based on compliance, resistance and repetition.

In *These Hills Called Home*, the insurgent group is portrayed as both the victims of state violence and as operators of power. As much as they are fighting against the state force, they also maintain their own forms of power and exercise discipline upon people by establishing rules, punishments and demanding loyalty. This duality reflects Foucault's insight that power is diffuse and exists in multiple sites. As he observes, "The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination" (Foucault 170).

The character Old Man Sashi, in the short story “An Old Man Remembers,” reminisces about his childhood and youth days, a time when villagers found themselves caught between the authority of the insurgents and that of the government. With no choice but to aid both parties, the villagers became subjects of power while at the same time acting agents of power. This power dynamic shows Foucault’s point that power operates relationally, and it does not work in a single direction. The villagers observed protocols enforced by both the state and insurgents, thereby representing the negotiation of authority across opposing sites.

As Foucault observes, “one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess” (Foucault 26). Power, therefore, is not absolute; it generates resistance from within itself. Ao’s narrative demonstrates this interplay vividly, as characters live under military surveillance while also subject to insurgent control, actively participating in the circulation and contestation of power. In this way, the text exemplifies how power is diffuse, relational and sustained through both domination and resistance. Khatila, the female protagonist in the short story “The Jungle Major” symbolises a form of resistance exhibited on an emotional level. Her relationship with her husband Punaba, the leader of an insurgent group, evolves into an intimate bond that threatens the disciplinary practices of authority. Even though Punaba embodies an alternative form of power that function alongside the government, he is affected by his own emotional involvement with Khatila, thus making his status vulnerable. In addition, the described interconnection shows how Foucault is right in claiming that power is relational and never absolute, as resistance can emerge from within its very operations. Ao’s story proves that emotional bonds might become the cause of fissures in the authority structure, thereby complicating the neat binaries of domination and submission. As Ao describes in the story, “But the choir sang on unfazed, though uneasy shuffles could be heard from among the crowds” (Ao 27), highlighting how beneath the surface of compliance, subtle forms of resistance and unease persist.

In the short story “The Last Song,” the character Apenyo embodies the resistance of people safeguarding their identity. When a new church was built to celebrate Christmas after the closure of the old one, the villagers’ gathering was disrupted by the army. Yet Apenyo’s act of singing in defiance of the soldiers becomes a powerful symbol of resistance, as the congregation joins her voice in solidarity. The ensuing chaos, which claims her life and that of her mother, underscores the violent methods through which authority seeks to impose control. Villagers present in the church join Apenyo’s singing and stand with her. When the soldier came chaos happened, causing her life and that of her mother. However, her death transforms her into a lasting emblem of resistance, demonstrating how power does not simply suppress individuals but also shapes perspectives, identities and collective memory. As Ao narrates, Thus on a cold December night in a remote village, an old storyteller gathers the young of the land around the leaping flames of a hearth and squats on the bare earth among them to pass on the story of that Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children. (Ao 33)

This moment can also be considered as another illustration of Foucault’s insight that where power exists, resistance also emerges from within it, and that acts of defiance, even when silenced, can produce enduring identities and truths.

V. REPRESSIVE STATE APPARATUS (RSA) AND IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS (ISA)

Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, devised a mechanism known as the State Apparatus. In his book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970), he refers to the apparatuses as an authority in which power is exercised to maintain order. The State apparatus branches into two: the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The RSA operates mainly by enforcing extreme measures to maintain order. In this apparatus, the authority functions as a single unit. It uses force like police, army, prison, etc. However, ISA operates through ideological control and uses consent in shaping the perspective of individuals. It is heterogeneous in nature and teaches social norms and roles.

Althusser says that ideology makes individuals become subjects and makes them act according to the roles that have been established for them and which they do not question. Individuals start recognizing themselves as being subjects who can perform those roles and accept that the way of living that has been given to them is natural and unavoidable, so that the social values and ideologies become part of their nature. Ideology does not uncover the pre-existing “true” identity but it interpellates people in a constructed identity and thus gives shape to the identity of the subject. Therefore, it explains the willingness of people to adopt identities and behaviors that are socially constructed. He says that

individuals are born within ideology: social norms and institutions precede their subjectivity and regulate behavior long before they accept them (Althusser 190).

One of the key concepts of ISA is “interpellation.” According to the concept of interpellation, Althusser states that individuals undergo a process of transformation in a preconstructed society governed by its own set of values and identities. In other words, ideology transforms individuals into subjects, inducing them to accept roles that are defined by authority. These individuals come to recognise themselves in those roles and accept them as natural or inevitable without even questioning them. This way, the social values and expectations embedded in ideology are internalised and reproduced. Instead of upholding one’s already existing “true” identity, ideology “interpellates” people into identities constructed by social institutions and gives the subject a sense of self created through the ideological framework. Interpellation, therefore, explains how individuals willingly adopt identities and behaviors moulded by broader social structures, making socially prescribed roles appear self-evident rather than imposed. According to Althusser, individuals are born into ideology: social norms and institutions prefigure their subjectivity and govern behaviour before they even recognise or endorse those norms (Althusser 190). Building on Althusser’s claim that ideology constitutes subjects, Ao’s depiction of the curfew shows how state power both interpellates and disciplines everyday life in Nagaland: “Of these, the night curfew was the worst for people living in town because soon after dark all social activities ceased, even church services or social gatherings had to be concluded before the curfew hour began” (Ao, 34). The most obvious representation of RSA is the imposition of curfew by the Indian government. During this imposition, the villagers are constricted to move freely and are controlled by using drastic force. The curfew symbolises the transformation of an ordinary life to being controlled and altered to maintain control.

The disciplining of time and space, however, is only one dimension of state violence; it often precipitates displacement, material deprivation and sustained fear, as Ao describes in her narrative clearly: “It was the season of festivities, but they had to go hungry for days in make shift camps, always hungry, always cold; but most of all terribly afraid of the marauding Indian army that had burnt their granaries and villages and that was now even pursuing them even in their jungle hide outs” (Ao 96). When the army found any information that the village aids the insurgency group, the army would go on a spree of destruction. The army would punish and torture the villagers and even set the houses on fire. Ao shows that such acts of terror frightened the villages into disregarding any help to the insurgents. Similar incidents of this nature forced many of them to flee into the jungles, where they were even left stranded and starved to death. These measures associated with extreme violence are a perfect demonstration of how RSA operates. RSA not only has an impact on the present time but also has the tendency to last for generations.

The short story “The Night,” which centers on a young woman Imnala, dramatises how ideology and social customs influence subjectivity under the forces of patriarchy in a militarised society. After being abandoned by her lover, Imnala had to raise her child alone and confront sustained stigma from a society that condemns an unmarried mother as a deviant. “Remember, in our society a woman must have the protection of a man even if he happens to be blind or lame” (Ao 53). As a result of the pressure of existing societal norms, she started to internalise the idea that being a single mother is unnatural. By sacrificing her free will, she found herself yearning for companionship. This internalisation had limited her choices and thus made her attempts to form new relationships filled with shame and dependence. When she entered a relationship with Alemba, a married man, the community’s surveillance and gossip intensified: villagers defamed her and her family, and Alemba’s household was disgraced. Ao shows how social condemnation functions as a form of power comparable to the physical violence that serves as the backdrop of Ao’s narratives. The community’s scrutiny disciplined Imnala into marginality, producing exclusion and fractured belonging through everyday practices rather than through formal coercion. News of her pregnancy extends the defamation to her kin; a village meeting follows, and Alemba and his family are compelled to return to their former life in town. Imnala’s story thus illustrates how ideology and communal policing through gossip, shame, and social sanction reshape individual lives, converting private vulnerability into public punishment and reinforcing structures of gendered control. “In Ao society, for a boy to be thus branded was to become a non-person. He could not claim kinship with any clan and therefore would not be able to sit on any assembly of men when he grew up. If he wanted to marry, whom could he choose, since he was not able to claim membership in any clan?” (Ao 46). Ao demonstrates how in the Ao society, an illegitimate son, not acknowledged by his father, cannot claim membership in the clan and is barred from participating in the decision-making of the village. He will not be welcome in any event. When the time of marriage comes, the boy may face tremendous difficulties,

and choosing a wife may become an impossible task. His identity as an individual exists partially as an outsider as he would not be allowed to claim membership.

Within Althusser's concept of interpellation, it can be said that Imnala is "hailed" into a preconstructed identity. She recognised and accepted the ideological role assigned to her by society. Her acknowledgement makes that role appear natural and inevitable. This shows the way in which ideology functions not only by prescribing norms but by influencing one's self-perception and behaviour, so that compliance becomes self-enforced. As evident from Ao's depiction, there are two aspects of power in these villages, the first being the use of force and surveillance by the state, while other internalizing of the same through communal surveillance, gossip and moral judgment.

VI. CONCLUSION

These Hills Called Home does more than record violence; it relates how violence is lived, remembered and woven into the everyday experience of the people of Nagaland. The stories by Ao reveal how people's lives are structured through the interplay of coercion and consent. The use of Michel Foucault's insights on surveillance and discipline alongside Louis Althusser's framework of state apparatuses demonstrates how authority permeates the everyday life of the people through curfews, patrols, memory and social norms, and individuals internalise fear, compliance and stigma as a part of their existence. Yet Ao's stories also remind us that power is never absolute and is not unchallengeable. Resistance emerges in fragile yet powerful ways: through the defiance of Apenyo in her song, through the love of Khatila, and through the endurance of the villagers. Such acts of bravery show that despite all the forces of militarisation and ideologies of domination, human dignity does live on. Ao's stories, thus, become more than mere testimonies; they prove that literature can preserve memory, reveal the hidden workings of power, and show how resilient communities are when they find themselves caught between sovereignty and subjection. Her narratives invite us to see power not only as domination but also as a relational force that generates resistance, solidarity and hope.

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