



## TEMSULA AO'S THESE HILLS CALLED HOMES: STORIES FROM A WAR ZONE - AS AN USHERANCE TO THE SOCIAL COMMITMENT OF A WRITER

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### **Abstract:**

Literature from the North-Eastern region of India has often emerged from the lived experiences of conflict, identity and survival. With the same perspective, the present paper focuses on selected stories from Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, particularly "The Curfew Man," "The Night," and "The Potmaker." Temsula Ao, being both a writer and a witness to the troubled history of Nagaland, reflects in her narratives a deep social commitment towards her people and their everyday struggles. Ao's stories are not merely fictional representations but are closely connected with the social realities of insurgency, fear, displacement and the silent endurance of ordinary villagers.

In "The Curfew Man," the situation of curfew is not presented only as a political measure but as a lived condition that affects human relationships and daily life. Similarly, in "The Night," the atmosphere of tension and uncertainty shows how violence enters the private spaces of families and disturbs the sense of security. "The Potmaker," on the other hand, presents the life of a simple craftsman whose dignity of labour and attachment to tradition reveal the strength of common people even in disturbed times. Through these characters, Ao humanises those who are often reduced to statistics in reports of conflict.

Therefore, it can be observed that Temsula Ao's writing carries a strong sense of responsibility towards society. She gives voice to the unheard, records the memories of suffering, and at the same time preserves the cultural and emotional life of the Naga community. Her stories stand as a reminder that behind every history of violence there are human beings with hopes, fears and resilience, and it is this human dimension that forms the core of her social commitment.

### **Introduction:**

India being a vast land, is known for its resources and the same prosperity is seen to wave at a lot of folks for invasion, war and showcasing of power on the margins through the ancient times. This very practice is not only for our country but is very common throughout the globe. History recalls from Indus valley civilizations and points to the invasion of Aryans from central Asia on the Harappans; followed by several rulers and kings in competition with displaying their supremacy on the weaker groups. We have also seen the foreign Muslim invaders on this land. Later in the pre-independence India reflected the brutal treatment of British colonials. After the independence of India itself, we have seen the bloody dichotomy of India-Pakistan. All of these are chronicles of the history of India and what common remains amidst them are the sufferers. These historical events are not simply endured with handing of power or pride possessions from one person to another but it sheds tears of the victims.

The tumult of sorrow felt by the victims are generally women, children or the disabled ones. We see the same reality being reflected in the literary world also. Starting from the epics of India, *The Ramayana* penned by Valmiki and *The Mahabharata* by Vyasa depicts women and helpless individuals as perpetrators. The very central female character, Sita is negated to rumours and comments of the ordinary civilians by the king, Ramachandra, the 'Purushottama'. Despite the purity check of making Sita to pass through the scorching fire, Rama abandons his pregnant wife. In the second epic of Vyasa, we see multiple women characters under plight. Characters of *The Mahabharata* exhibit male dominance and show no light out of the royal clan. Female personas like Satyawati, Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi, Hidimba, Subhadra, Amba, and many more are observed to be the perpetrators of patriarchy in this text too. But today the recent text, *The Place of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni twists and shifts the focus with a different narrator of the epic - Mahabharata; here Draupadi becomes the storyteller and she not just glows as strong and courageous character but seeks to mock at the male characters in the lines, "I didn't fear the fate they imagined for me. I had no intention of committing honourable self-immolation. But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit - or harm - them". (118). Here Draupadi is the one who is pushed to an undesired fate and future which not just calls her Panchali but also brands her as a whore. Yet we see men involved in the story look out for their own prepositions instead of the wife of Pandavas. Chitra is not the only writer to speak of women's plights in a committed manner, but we see, Kavita Kane's novel, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* and also *Draupadi, Kunti and the Nishadins* (part of the anthology, *After Kurukshetra*) by Mahsweta Devi; she is seen to vocalise for the subalterns in India mainly shows her undertakings where after the battle of Kurukshetra, how the old lives take up saintly life. Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra being the prime ones according to the short story features the futility of war not only to women but also the weak and old.

The confrontations of Kunti, the mother of Pandavas with the Nishadins, the tribals brings the patriarchal depth in Indian society. The incident at Varanvrata to escape from the treachery of Kauravas to kill the pandavas along with their mother in a

house of lac is recalled by a fellow woman, Nishadin. The debate on taking the innocent lives of five young tribal men and their mother is finally lost by Kunti in the text. The line, "A heinous conspiracy, was it not? Ah, only the Rajavritta can play such games! For one year you stay there, knowing fully well the hut will be burnt down and you just have to save you and your sons' lives. So, you had to build concrete evidence to prove irrefutably that you six were burnt to death.... The Nishadas and Nishadins used to come regularly to Varnavat. Am I correct?" (38) though emphasises on how a woman can also be capable of targeting a weaker woman and ultimately carry the legacy of patriarchy (making women as enemies of each other), however we notice the responsibility of writer, Mahasweta Devi in underlining the determination and confidence not being lost by the widows of those five men burnt alive in sleep at Varnavat.

These widows are seen to be optimistic, courageous and full of new zeal for the coming of their life which proposes the readers to be the same. Despite the triple oppressed conditions of gender, economy and caste, these women are seen to get married and get along with their life normally in the portrayal of Mahasweta Devi. When we all get the retelling of Kunti, Gandhari, Urmila, Parvati, Uma, Sita we neglect the minor women characters who are triple oppressed yet have no space in the actual text even during retellings. Hence, we have Kavita Kane and Mahasweta Devi depicting such neglected personas with a strong validation as observed in the above respective quotations.

All in all, when we see revisiting myths or oral tradition of any land in literary form it should always serve its purpose of enlightening the readers. And this could be possible only with writers; Temsula Ao is also seen to do the same with the anthology, *These Hills Called Homes: Stories from a war zone*. In the text, the story, *The Pot Maker* is about a family which is skilled in pot making for generations in the Naga Community. Sentila, the female protagonist, is preoccupied in learning the art of pot making despite the fact of hard labour involved in it. Sentila's mother, Arnela who was not just an expert in pottery but also is one among saving their community against the odds like headhunting by their rival Naga community for their prowess in pottery; yet outrightly denies to teach this art and pass on the tradition to her daughter and future according to the Nagas. The only refusal for teaching pot making to her own daughter is explicit in the lines, "I shall not teach her this craft which has brought no joy to me and only a pittance for my troubles. Do you know how far that wretched place is from the village? Sixteen kilometres and a sheer drop to the riverbank: still we have to climb down because it is only there that you get both the grey and red clay required for making pots." (58) By these sayings of Arnela, we understand how the Nagas are tackling their day-to-day crisis with meagre options available in an exile atmosphere. Arnela is clear in her mind and pursues her daughter to learn the easier skill of weaving which is not disturbed by the climates and seasons unlike pottery. But on the other hand, Sentila is bound to master her traditional art form. In both the conditions we see women being bold, and sparkling with their spirit of determination as we see Sentila climbing the hard Rocky Mountains and covering a longer distance with her ten-month-old younger brother on her back and Arnela refusing to teach regardless of the warning from the village councils.

At the end we see Sentila being a perfect pot maker by mere observations of her mother while indulging in making a pot; a new pot maker is born by the descent of her mother, Arnela. The mother's death doesn't fall in the place of pot making for Sentila. The story definitely moves with the death of the mother but makes us feel balanced with the composed attitude of Sentila who reflects herself as a strong and much enduring one. The little girl is inevitable from the loss of her mother in contrast to the mastery in the skill of pot making; the agony of Sentila, "Mother, I did not wish it to happen this way; it simply came to me. Please forgive me." (67) distinctively reveals the love for Naga identity and community by the people of this land. Sentila is the younger one but is keen on protecting the values of Naga. In a war atmosphere displays of such characters are very rare and this unique revelation is brought in by Ao as a dutiful writer of her tribe.

Another writer Lalithambika Antaranjanam picks up an ancient tale from the kingdom of Raja of Travancore about a woman named 'Tatri kutty'; she is commonly referred as the fallen woman in the society of Kerala especially. This true incident is opted by the writer Lalithambika and unfolds the discrimination targeted to women in the short story, *Revenge Herself*. Tatri who once belonged to the Namboodiri brahmin community later chooses to become the most sought over prostitute in the Namboodiri society itself. In the beginning we see a docile, dutiful, compliant wife; but due to the concept of 'Antaranjanam' despite having a matriarchal tradition we see men mutating the practices to continue the hypocrisy over women.

The culture Antaranjanam is a unique belief brought in the matriarchy of Kerala; this when interpreted by Lalithambika Antaranjanam's story, *Revenge Herself* one can be clear on how the practice was only a mutation as to how to dominate women of the upper caste in all fields. Antaranjanam means the *innerborns* and is applied only to women of the Namboodiri Brahmins. Girls of this community when hit puberty are required to be in the inner walls of the house and away from sunlight till they die. This makes men take over all matters including economy and eventually females become dependent on them. Same condition is extended to Tatri too and moreover men are witnessed to indulge in more than one marriage to gain property or even take part in extramarital affairs. Tatri who could not bear this from her husband who invites a prostitute to the house and demands his wife, Tatri to prepare the nuptial bed; nonetheless Tatri denies in doing so and questions in return about her position which leads to an argument ending up by the husband's wish of wanting his wife to be one like a prostitute.

The lines, "Yeah, she is a prostitute. I brought her home knowing that she is one. I like prostitutes. Go, become a prostitute yourself!" (Antaranjanam 6) her husband moves Tatri to become one; as right from the beginning we have looked at these Antaranjanams to read Shiva Purana and sing verses and worship husband the same way as Lord Shiva and not debate on any matter. Antaranjanams are supposed to obey the single request of their husbands. Hence Tatri in the name of following the nuances of the Namboodiri community we see Tatri avenging against the scions of Namboodiri society. She uses her own sexuality for which she was insulted before and makes the same as her strength and finally targets her husband along with 63 paramours of hers in the court for execution by the Raja of Travancore. Tatri who has grown up into a full flourished adult is not recognisable even by her husband only till she revealed her true identity. In this text the weakness is converted into strength and we see Tatri pulling the so-called pillars too along with herself. Still this narration or event is an out of the box context where the writer accurately points out the real problems of society and re-narrates in an impactful manner. On similar grounds the paper beholds Temsula Ao with another short story called, 'The Night'. In this text there is a central female character, Imnala, who undergoes numerous

tribulations. Firstly, the young lady is a prospective bride in the Naga community and is cheated by a fellow Naga man who had promised her and the family for marriage but impregnates her out of the wedlock which is a terrible act in this society.

To add on the illegitimate relationship the also reveals the nuances of Nagas and how they treat the children without a father's name given or a clan in support. Imnala is left alone as the carrier of burden and the target of the gossip in the tribe with the outcome of a girl child without a father; as the father would have already betrayed Imanala and married another woman from the underground movement where he too was seen to join. The man never returns but Imnala is involved with another man Alemba who himself was pushy and urging for this physical intimacy. Now Imnala along with her parents and girl child has to confront a second set of shame from the village chiefs and Alemba's family too as he was already a married man. But to the dismay of Imnala's family, Alemba though denies having any responsibility for his paramour Imnala but is very assertive about his child. He agrees along with the permit of his family members on giving the clan's name for his unborn child.

This is very unusual in the Naga community and a rarest of rare act. Imnala who was seen to repent and cry on the words of her mother, "Remember, in our society a woman must have the protection of a man even if he happens to be blind or lame. A woman alone will always be in danger." (Ao 53); the promise of Imnala to herself is clear in the text, "I shall devote my life to bringing up these two children in the best way I can. I shall finish my high school, get a job and educate them. I shall spend every ounce of my energy so that they have a better life than mine." (54) stating how the vulnerable portrayal of women has disappeared. Temsula Ao is noted to bring this distinguished change only through her writings. Alemba before the meeting of the village heads with Imnala and his own wife and family members, promises Imnala as to everything will be taken care of and the same word is kept in time. This elevates the respect of the writer as we can witness the fulfilment as a writer towards her community. There is a revolution and change attempted to be brought in Ao's own community from the odds, besides the armed conflicts.

Further we have Sadat Hassan Manto also who dedicates his writings to the so-called sordid society of the undivided India. Manto, the Partition writer witnessing one of the bloodiest historical events in the world highlights on how he himself was divided into halves. Manto also gives an elevated position for women irrespective of their background. In fact, the characters in his writings are mostly pimps and prostitutes with humanity in the foreground. He is seen to completely break the barriers of the selfish desires of a prostitute in the Urdu short story, *Ten Rupees*. We do not find the child prostitute, Sarita, being selfless for money, sharing a sad story about her situation, being sadist, or gaudy and highly decked up with makeup like the general prostitutes. But we see a common girl, in her prime teenage years, earning for her family and taking pride for the position she owns. The enthusiasm to roam with her clients is obvious in these lines, "And your necktie is nice too." (Manto 2) or a song sung by sarita in the car with three men, "I wish I could be a bird singing through the forests." (2) and also her blissful attitude which is free from all kinds of worry makes her ask questions like, "If I put on your pants, and wore your shirt and your tie, would I look like a well-dressed businessman?" (2) She is honest, bounded by professional ethics and selfless in relation to money despite being a prostitute; thus we see this child prostitute repaying back and she stuns the driver, Khifayat with an interrogative reply, "This money-why should I take it?" (4) We see Manto breaking the stereotypical thoughts of the society on prostitutes especially and stop the readers to underestimate or more priorly generalise them.

A similar kind of duty is owed by Temsula Ao when she makes a Naga woman appear strong in front of the police officer in the story, *The Jungle Major*. In this text of Ao, we have an ardent childless couple who are often spoken to be a mismatch in all terms despite all the odds they face, they are seen to stay together in the olden times. The story highlights how Khatila, a Naga woman is capable of fooling the officers and saving not just her husband, the Major of an underground rebellious movement of Nagas but also the entire village from being reduced to ashes. Ao brings the wit and street smartness present instead of fear and terror after receiving the authorities at her door step as a common emotion. In the very story the warning of one of the officers to Khatila, at the time of joining the underground movement, "We know how to deal with women like you," (4) can send a chill on nerves to any lady, but Ao weaves the story so vividly that Khatila has a transformed appearance. Even though she is afraid of the danger and casualties that she and her husband, Punaba might have to face along with the entire village, she is smartly confronting the chief officer and helps to escape her husband in the disguise of a ragged servant. The officer who was tipped off to the presence of the injured jungle major in the house has only arrived as a search party and in overconfidence they are in the least notice of the servant. The reason given for not having a single drop of water in the house and sending her disguised husband to fetch some water is the real confidence and bold attitude of a Naga woman at times required.

The lines addressed to the disguised husband in front of the officers, "You no good loafer, what were you doing all day yesterday? There is no water in the house even to wash my face. Run to the well immediately or you will rue the day you were born." (6) shows how Khatila flourishes as a laid-back character; even when the village heads and chiefs warn for sheltering Punaba and deserts with any kind of support to the couple in lieu of protecting their village. Still Khatila stays unperturbed and self-controlled and finally handles the scene better than anyone else. This is a real commitment of Temsula Ao towards the society and bringing in the talent and critical skills of a woman even in the conflict times.

When a war zone itself has become the homes of Nagas, what else can one expect apart from their daily activities amidst the underground rebels? Temsula Ao's each story in this primary text stresses about the ushering the writer provides for her community. In one's homeland all are seen to be bold and mighty and independent and the same is witnessed even in these hills of Nagaland. But only the condition is of a war zone with a lot of trauma, sacrifice and deaths. There is writing from this state which highlights the horrid acts against the innocent Nagas by the result of both insurgency and counter insurgency, apart from the tales of legends, oral tradition and Christian reformation in such an environment. Thus, the research paper aims to bring in the committedness of the writer, Ao with secondary support across the Indian texts and call for a revolution in the literary world.

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