

Insurgency and Youth Identities in Temsula Ao's These Hills Called Homes: Stories from a War Zone

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Abstract:

Temsula Ao's "These Hills called Home: Stories from a War Zone" explores the depth of Naga Insurgency, which still remains as one of the oldest unresolved armed conflicts in Northeast India. This paper seeks to understand how Insurgency fashion the identity of Naga youths in their struggle to free themselves from the bondage of 'foreigners'. Nagas, being ethnically, linguistically and culturally distant from the other states of India, was discontent with the delineation of territories after the post-independence. Insurgency has caught Nagas in the spiral of violence, with bewildering experiences, yet they continue to speak of the home, identity, nation, nationality, and kept fighting, amidst endless torments and atrocities. Temsula Ao, gives the woeful taste of insurgency, where no one is left untouched by violence. She describe about the youth's life, being snatched away to become ruthless killers, and as they grew old, unable to resist to tell the tale of unspeakable terrors they have witnessed. This paper attempts to present how the identities of many Naga youths were built in their search for identity as insurgents, either out of compulsion or mandate to be 'patriots'.

Keywords: *Armed forces, identity, insurgency, violence, youth*

Introduction

Nagas are ethnically, linguistically and culturally distinct from other states of India. Bounded by Manipur in the south, Assam in the north and northwest, Arunachal in the north-east and Myanmar in the east, remained isolated and unknown to many till today. Nagas are known today, for their uniqueness, and unrest for self-determination. Insurgency remains as an inseparable entity of Naga history. A society, wherein insurgency dominates everything, Naga youths continue to struggle and rouse to different level, not forgetting the ordeal of their history.

Youth connotes insurgency in contemporary Naga society in particular and northeast in general. Youth were either compelled or self-spirited to join the patriotic band. It would be a lie, if a Naga failed to speak about the immense atrocities meted on a daily basis. Violence and bloodsheds were part and partial of Naga society. A daily picture of Naga volatile society and plea by Monalisa Chankija reads;

Stop, please stop this endless nightmare
 Wherein I read of another shot dead,
 Another apprehended, another tortured and maimed.

Stop this nightmare, I beg of you
 Wherein I have to write of another child orphaned,
 Another girl abused, another woman widowed.
 Stop this nightmare, I pray
 Wherein my people, victims of geography, history and politics
 Have become a prized booty
 To be overpowered and possessed
 By those who will not listen. (Changkija 36)

As seen from the above lines, Nagas became a mere suspect; they are liable to any degree of torture, un-warrant arrest, and could be killed without any justice under the draconian law. Literature becomes the only mouthpiece of these untold stories, how they survived acute atrocities and miseries.

Background of Naga Insurgency

The Naga insurgency movement for unified homeland begin with the formation of Naga Club in 1918 at Kohima. Discontentment due to delineation of territory further resulted in fight for identity, and nationhood through insurgency. The insurgency movement gained momentum rapidly. To suppress the uprising, the most controversial legislation known as AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958) was enforced in Naga inhabited areas, which only added excruciating tribulation and untold miseries to the Nagas. The inauguration of the present state Nagaland on December 1, 1963, creates much anguish and confusion among the Nagas. Underground activities continue to weigh its strength and expand to the remotest village. In 1975, following the signing of “Shillong Accord” by some section of NNC, Naga National movement took different forms and structures. It continues to reign with different factions even to the present day. In the process, history of Nagas is filled with political upheavals, violence and bloodsheds.

Today, Naga insurgency stories dominates not only the Naga literature, but much more in Northeast and postcolonial writings. These literature works continues to emit the bond of history in every Naga till to today. This paper attempts to study how Naga youths were caught between two juxtapose of uncertainty and chaos, fashioned by elements of insurgents and armed forces.

About the Author

Temsula Ao is one of the prominent modern Northeast writers, who put forward the issues of Northeast in her creative writings. She has published five volumes of poems, two collections of short stories entitled, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum For My Head* (2009), a critical book on Henry James and a *Memoir*. She is a recipient of Padma Shri, Sahitya Akedemi and even the Governor’s Gold medal award from the state of Meghalaya. Temsula Ao has portrayed the panoramic view of insurgency and youth identities in *These Hills Call Home: Stories from a War Zone*. She introduced in ‘Lest we Forget’, that “Many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of the Nagas from the early fifties of the last century, and their

demand for independence from the Indian states.” (Ao x) She reproduced and brings back those times of Naga insurgency with the help of her memory in her creative art. Themes on ‘Youth’ and ‘insurgency’ dominate in almost all her stories.

In ‘The Jungle Major’, ‘The Last Song’, ‘The Curfew Man’, ‘Shadows’, ‘An Old Man Remembers’, Temsula Ao, gives a detailed account of how Naga youth’s identity was fashioned by insurgency. Ao’s stories gives volumes about Naga insurgency and youths searching for identity.

Analysis and Implications of Insurgency in relation with Youth Identities

The Jungle Major

In “The Jungle Major”, Temsula speaks about Khatila’s entire village caught in the new wave of patriotic fervour. It gives a clear picture of the growing momentum of Naga Insurgency. Young people became more active and involved in these activities as seen in the lines; “young people spoke of the exploits of their peers in encounters with the government forces and eager to join the new band of ‘patriotic’ warriors to liberate their homeland from ‘foreign’ rule.” (Ao 3) This line speaks of how the youths were easily susceptible to insurgency and how to a youth it seems to be an adventurous life.

The iron hand used by armed forces were narrated in this manner; “Numerous stories proliferated of women being molested by security forces and the obstinate ones who refused to give information being severely beaten; not only that, sometimes they would be hung upside down and subjected to unspeakable tortures like chilli powder being rammed into their extremities.” (Ao 3) It proves how armed forces took advantage of the law into their hands; marked by savagery and barbaric acts. The story carries the truth of how the innocent villagers become victims. The young husband, despite knowing the danger and amount of hardships he has to undergo could no longer swallow the pain around him and finally has to give away his youth to be in the jungle. Now, Punaba has to keep running from armed forces. He could hardly visit his village or meet his wife at risk. The story projects how as a young husband, has to sacrifice his youth for the nation and the young bride was left to live alone.

The Last Song

In “The Last Song”, Ao brings in the story of Apenyo, young and beautiful singer who becomes victim of the so called savage and crazy Indian armed forces. The story depicts how armed forces purposely plan to punish the villagers; ‘it was decided that the army would go to this village on the day when they were dedicating the new church building and arrest all the leaders for their ‘crime’ of paying taxes to the underground forces” (Ao 26). It proves clearly that, armed forces excessively try to suppress insurgency by means of tormenting the poor innocent villagers.

Nevertheless, the identity of Naga lady was not threaten by any imminent incident as in; “Only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as in an unseen presence was guiding her.” (Ao 27) The boldness and strong determination overthrow her every fear and there she stand boldly against any eventuality. Next moment, the most disgusting and demonic act was committed by the captain and his soldiers; “what she saw turned her stomach, the young Captain was raping Apenyo...waiting for their turn.” (Ao 28)

The story proves nothing but the unbecoming of an educated Indian army officer. It portrays the minute fact of how young people especially young ladies became an easy

target of Indian maniacs in the name of countering insurgency. It also relates that young lives were vulnerable to all atrocities of insurgency and counter insurgency. Not only that, but their identity and existence itself was always at threat. A Naga youth dream was nothing but fear of if he will be the next victim. The story however speaks volume about fearlessness of a young Naga lady's identity. In spite of the brutality and cruelty of the armed forces, Naga youth identity and dignity is never lost nor compromised.

The Curfew Man

The story of "The Curfew Man" portrays the zenith of Nagas 'quest for identity'. The protagonist of the story Satemba, retired from Assam police and ended up as an informer of armed forces on the shrewd advice of the then SDO. After a particular incident, he started to doubt his identity; "for the first time in two and half years, he was beginning to question himself and his so-called 'job'." (Ao 41) Till then, he thought what he was doing was right and never question about his odd-job. He became a silent, painful person in himself. He became more confused when the stranger gripped by his neck and hissed; "Go back home curfew man, and if you value your life, never again carry tales." (Ao 41)

The story put before every reader that many Naga youths like Satemba has to take up odd jobs just to earn a living, while on the other create catastrophic disaster to Naga national movement. Nagas never willed themselves to help the armed forces but were coerced due to inescapable situations as seen in this story. The story produces a special visual on Naga's deplorable economic conditions and prevailing insurgent's movement at a very pitiful condition. It proves once again, that insurgency has created different identities among the Naga youths. They were seen as confused, lost and pitiful.

Shadows

"Shadows" describes how a young Naga youth named Imli dreamt of creating his identity as a freedom fighter ends in a tragic death arising out of hatred and communal feeling. To pursue his dream as a national fighter he joined the "twenty-one volunteers chosen to travel through the jungle guided by a relay band of scouts who would escort them from territory to territory until they reached Burma" (Ao 69) Imli ended his fate this way; "the inexperienced college boy who had joined the freedom fighter against all odds found his final resting place in an unmarked grave in the shadows of a deep forest in an alien land." (Ao 80) He was executed by his own companions on the behest of Hoito, the unit commander of the team, who could no longer tolerate the humiliation from Imli's father.

The story brings to light how insurgency has consummate many Naga youths in their search for identity to serve the nation. Ao tries to give a clear message to readers that, insurgency sometimes destroy the hopes and aspirations of many young patriots. Thus, insurgency changes the fate of many to great freedom fighters on the one end and tragic irreparable loss on the other. Identity of Naga youths forge ahead on these two ends as any sign of peaceful solution remains vague.

An Old Man Remembers

In “An Old Man Remembers”, Temsula Ao, narrates the story of an old man sharing his lost youth to his grandson after much hesitation. The story flashback those unspeakable atrocities Sashi, the old grandfather and his friends had witnessed when they were young. A clear instance of villagers confronting with armed forces can be seen in the lines; “a whole generation of people like old man Sashi, Imli and all their friends and relatives, the prime of their youth was a seemingly endless circle of beatings, rapes, burning of villages and grained filled barns. The forced labour, the grouping of villages and running from one hideout to another in the deep jungles to escape the pursuing soldiers turned young boys into men who survived to fight these forces, many losing their lives in the process and many become ruthless killers themselves.” (Ao 93) This revelation gives distinct evidence about youth life being occupied by violence and conflicts. Their histories were written with blood and tears.

Ao recounts how Sashi and Imli were forced to join the underground by circumstance; “we too, were young and carefree like you once, but all of a sudden our youth was snatched away from us, and instead of schoolbooks we were carrying guns and other weapons of destruction and living in the jungle like wild creatures.” (Ao 98) This line points out that, youth life was disastrous and tormenting. They have to live in jungle, keep changing their hideouts and adventuring some brutal ambush, those, which were potential threat to their existence. It is very clear in the lines; “We were not yet sixteen when we became such ruthless killers”, (Ao 108) “Our youth was claimed by the turbulence, which transformed boys, like Imli and me into killers.”(Ao 111) that, their youthful life was not by choice. They lost their identity as an innocent citizen just because they were Nagas. They have to live a life of insurgent even when they weren’t part of it, which eventually made them to become real insurgents in the process. The bitter truth about Naga youth’s identity from the prevailing insurgency movement could be drawn from this story.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Temsula Ao, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, could be viewed as her craving memories to speak to every reader about the turbulent years of Nagas, fed with insurgency related violence, search for identity and political turmoil. She depicted youths as most susceptible to insurgency. The story gives a clean chit of how it was very hard to live with haunted memories and broken dreams. All the more, her narratives portray the helplessness of Nagas in the midst of conflicts and violence. Although her stories originated with memories of different sections of Naga society, it reiterates insurgency as the root of all turmoil. Naga youths were prey to both insurgency and counter-insurgency. The stories were all about the dilemma and chaos of Naga youth identity plagued by insurgency and counter-insurgency.

In all her narration, a lucid sketch of how Nagas were trapped between insurgents and armed forces, aggravated by social, political and economic upheaval was

projected. From the land of Chinkis, Chinese, anti-nationals, tribals, ‘junglees’ as framed by ‘others’, Ao gives an unequivocal answer that, she came from a land poetry, where she can create beautiful art out of the worst turbulence. The unwavering hope of ‘free nation’ among the Naga youths never decreases with time and henceforth continues to hold the torch of their identity. Thus, these stories meticulously unfold the traumas and psychosis brought about by socio-political fracas, wherein Nagas continue to stand for their identity, culture and zeal to their last breathe. These stories furnish the clue of insurgency accountable of Nagas ‘quest for identity’.

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