

A Study on the Select Literary Works of Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire and Monalisa Chankija as Resistance Literature

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ABSTRACT

Writers from India's North-East focus on the theme of violence as the region has been marked with bloodshed and political unrest for decades. In Temsula Ao's collection of short stories, she throws light on the socio-cultural aspect of her people. In her short stories, the traditions, customs and socioeconomic aspect of the people is narrated in detail. The style of narration is simple but nothing short in bringing out the rich experiences and past of the people. Easterine Kire in the novel 'Bitter wormwood' uses imagery and symbols to depict life and regrowth. The title of the novel itself is significant. According to many myths, bitter wormwood is an insect which is considered to bring good luck as it chases away spirits. She uses this as a symbol of peace between the Nagas and the Indian Army. Monalisa Changkija's poems is a documented re-telling of the Naga issue.

The writings of Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire and Monalisa Changkija echoes the conflict of man vs. society. The experiences are recorded and documented as testaments for the future generation. It is likely that people had undergone traumatic experiences however there is a tireless fight for a better future.

Keywords: Conflict, Resistance, Social Justice, Forgiveness, Hope

The North-East India is a region widely known for bloodshed, violence and political unrest as much as it is recognized for its diverse cultures, traditions and the vast flora and fauna. People of the North-East states comprising of the seven states- Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Sikkim, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh also known as the seven sisters share a common bond in the history of violence and a feeling of negligence from the Centre, i.e., the mainland India. A region so differently unique in culture, traditions and living styles from the rest of India is perhaps the reason why the broad term 'North-East India' is looked upon as a separate indigenous group from the rest of India.

Violence and political unrest in the North-Eastern states of India go hand in hand in disrupting the ordinary lives of the people. According to numerous reports and newspaper articles, thousands have lost their lives in the clash of the parties. Predictably the literature from North-East India resonates violence as a dominant theme. Writers from different parts of the region in-

corporate the atrocities faced by the people, their fight for justice and their cause for the rebellion.

Writings from the North-East is an emerging literature. However, as noted by Margaret Ch. Zama it should be maintained that “‘emerging’ does not necessarily denote only the new but also refers to that fact that though more new writings in English and the vernacular are indeed being generated from the region, so also is the emergence of previous and existing works accessible for the first time to the rest of the world” (Zama xi). Though the numbers of recognized writers are few, the literature from the NE region is slowly gaining prominence as a mainstream genre of Indian literature. Noted writers from this region unite in bringing out similar themes such as nature and violence which sadly has steered to stereotyping them. Kailash C Baral points out that the writers are ‘individualistic in their approach and narrative styles, but collectively represent the ethos of the region regarding their shared history and political destiny, and therefore aspire towards a vision beyond narrow ethnic mappings’ (Zama xiii). The voice of the literature at present may echo the same issue, but it is unfair to say that the region is restricted to such writings only.

To understand the writings of the NE India fully, one needs to have an unambiguous knowledge of the history of the region. Every writer talking about violence or political disturbance has a deep connection with the past and current political scenario of the place. For instance, the breakout of insurgency in Nagaland and Manipur is a case of a longstanding issue between the militant groups and the State armed forces. The formation of the Naga National Council (NNC) under the leadership of Phizo known as the father of Naga Nationalism and the subsequent result of the disintegration of the party into the NSCN IM and K becomes a foundation in analyzing the past and the present condition of the region. Through the writings, the socio, economic and political backdrop is exposed giving light to the living conditions of the people.

Most of the writings of North-East India fall under the category of the literature of resistance. Harlow accurately points out that ‘the assertion at the center of *Resistance Literature* is straightforward: literature represents an essential “arena of *struggle*” for those people who seek liberation through armed fighting from oppressive colonialism.’ Rightly so, the literature of the NE India is a struggle against the forced imposition of the armed forces and the resistance against various atrocities. In this thesis, a clear study of the history of the Nagas is analyzed to understand the sociological and psychological effect of the people during and after the war. The researcher does not in any way condemn or support any Naga group or side with the other party, the armed forces. This paper is an attempt to study the multifaceted sides of the Naga story through the lives of the characters. As Edward Said points out in *Orientalism* “Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority” (3). The purpose of literary works is to be discussed and not to viewed as ‘the limitations that follow upon disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people or geographical region’ (Said 108).

Temsula Ao’s collection of short stories “Laburnum for my head.” Temsula Ao is one of the most prominent writers from Nagaland. Her short stories are simple yet very powerful in unmasking both the harsh reality as well as the beauty of her people, the Nagas. The setting of the stories is in Mokukchung, a dominant district of the Aos- a major Naga tribe. However, the expe-

riences and the cultural attributes she narrates are a representation of the rest of the Nagas. In the eight stories of the collection, she blends in the cultural as well as the socio-economic aspect of the people. In the story “Laburnum for my head,” Temsula Ao documents the story of a woman Lentina who defies the staunch Naga patriarchal society by following her heart’s desire. According to the Naga Ao custom, men performed the last rites of the dead. They are responsible for the supervision as well as the erection of the tomb site. Lentina, a strong woman in her own right, refuses to give in to this demand, and she follows the men to bury the mortal remains of her husband. Ao narrates that

“Her words were met with silence because no one was prepared to voice dissent at such a moment. So the party departed, and in the graveyard, while the last prayers droned on, Lenten stood among the assortment of headstones and began ruminating on man’s puny attempts to defy death; as if erecting these memorials would bring the dead back to life” (Ao 4)

The story of Lentina also brings in one core element of Naga writings, i.e., the close relationship with nature. The Nagas and the people of the NE India are known to be people in tune with the goodness of nature. It comes as no surprise that in this story, Ao narrates Lentina’s quest for growing a laburnum tree in her ‘reserved’ graveyard. To her, even after death having a tree with beautiful yellow flowers proves a complete satisfaction of living a full life. She takes in every effort small and big to fulfill her wish of having a laburnum tree bloom on her grave after she dies. Poignantly Temsula Ao writes that after Lentina’s death,

“And if you observe carefully, you will be amazed to see in the entire terrain, there is so far, only one laburnum tree bedecked in its seasonal glory, standing tall over all the other plants...” (Ao 20). Lentina becomes the hero of the village, the society and she becomes the image of the laburnum, standing tall over all the other.

“The Death of a Hunter” is another story of the social and psychological process a young hunter undergoes. One incident of killing a boar haunts his emotional state almost making him guilty for the act. This hunt for animals as a form of survival and living brings a new perspective to the hunter. Despite being a famed hunter, he gives up his skills and lives a new life afresh as soon as the haunting of the dreams stops. Emotionally and psychologically, the sense of empathy for animals overtakes him and eventually, he gives up his famed skill.

In Temsula Ao’s other short stories, “The Letter,” “A Simple Question,” “Sonny” and “Flight” she chronicles the Naga war with the Indian government for sovereignty. Ananya Guha expresses that “Violence is enmeshed in the literary culture of north-east India because of long-standing oppressive binaries of militarism and militancy it has been subjected to. By responding to violence, several writers have not just emphasized the syncretistic nature of the different literary cultures but also rejected straightjacketing of their expression as manifestations of their violence-prone existence alone”. The stories are subtle in narration and style but nothing short in illustrating the rawness of an ordinary man’s fight for survival. She also puts forward their confusion, illusion, and insecurity of a future so blur because of the injustice of the political atmosphere.

Retelling stories or documenting the past is not a revolt to provoke the emotions of the readers instead it is a mechanism to forget the past knowing how traumatic such events can last for generations. Perhaps Temsula Ao documents the past experiences of the people to forget

them so that history does not repeat itself in the future. Nicola King writes in *Memory, Narrative, Identity: remembering the self*:

Individual memories of personal accounts are reworked continuously and retranslated in the present; so traumatic historical events seem to demand representation and re-reading, to resist the memorialization which is also a kind of forgetting, the forgetting that assumes that remembering is finished (qtd. in McLeod 198)

Temsula Ao emphasizes the traumatic experiences people harbor from generation to generation because of the violent past. The Nagas are rich in oral tradition. Oral songs record the tradition and the history. Sadly, it is not only origin, ethnicity, the culture that is passed down but stories of the atrocities people faced from both opposing parties becomes a vital part of their lives leaving a mark too deep to erase. McLeod rightly points out “LaCapra suggests it is not as simple as just wishing to forget; the victim also has a duty to the dead to remember the past atrocities, and so trauma assumes a memorial function’ (198). Re-telling these stories through the written form serves as an essential duty to remember the past- the people, the good and the bad. Joseph Chandra explains that literature of rupture is “an Activist Literature that struggles for social justice. It is a struggle for a just social order that never ends” (22). Temsula Ao’s short stories cannot be read without empathy. It is the voice of the voiceless and articulates the experience of deprivation and dispossession. It is subaltern literature that looks at human sufferings beyond socio-cultural barriers. The right to be human is at the centre of all India’s NE literature.

“These Hills Called Home” was published in 2009 and it is a collection of 10 short stories. The backdrop of these stories traces back to the early fifties of the last century- their demand for independence from the Indian state. Temsula Ao quotes “More than half a century of bloodshed has marked the history of the Naga people who live in the troubled northeastern region of India. Their struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity provide the backdrop for the stories that make up this unusual collection”.

“The Jungle Major” is a story of a wise woman Khatila who saves her husband Punaba, an underground (local militant). It was a time when Indian army would raid villages in search of suspected militants. Villagers were threatened and prosecuted if they were caught hiding or sheltering any of the ‘wanted’ people. Khatila’s presence of mind during the raid helps her husband escape from the punishment of the army. Punishment levied on the underground were serious and most times, death was the penalty. They are torn between saving their kin, their villager and their fear of the army if caught. An apparent struggle between the two factions existed leaving the common man exposed to inhumane treatment. Pou observes that “ For non-Nagas, reading these stories could be a journey to understand the Naga cause from a different perspective at a personal level.” (142)

“An old man remembers” is a retelling of the Naga Nationalism. The grandfather narrates the history of the Naga past to this grandchildren. This story is an important illustration of the Naga oral tradition. Temsula Ao highlights the importance of oral culture and blends it in her writings. The grandfather recounts the relentless issue of Naga nationalism as a way of venting out his unhappiness. ‘Soaba’ highlights the tension between the Indian government and the Naga movement during the peak of the political unrest. Ao writes that “It was at this stage that a new vocabulary also began to creep into the 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” (10). Similarly, in the other stories, Ao describes the experiences and the force exerted on the people by both the army and the militant. She belongs to the Naga Ao tribe, but she is objective in her re-writing of the stories. She seems to let the readers decide for themselves, not to choose sides but to portray that ‘the only hope lies in refusing to accept one’s condition of permanent disposition and pain as a way of life’ (Chandra 24)

Eastern Kire is another widely recognized writer from North East India. The novel chosen for study is a crucial one as it spans from the 1950’s and 60’s period of Naga fight for freedom. Giving an introduction to the book, Kire says that, ...*Bitter Wormwood* was not an easy book to write. I did not want it to be about taking sides. I threw away the first manuscript and started afresh concentrating on the character and their lives. I am so glad I did that because the characters became real to me in the new manuscript... The two friends, Mose and Neituo, with their Angami humor are typical men of my tribe. Mose is based on the life of my uncle who was a soldier in the Naga Army. Harivallabh Joshi [who was posted to the Naga Hills in the early 1960’s] gave me his account of serving there, and he appears in the book as Himmat, the noble old Indian soldier... (www.the [hindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com))

Kire gives a personal touch to the novel by bringing in real life experiences of the Naga people and their supposed mindset. She tries to bring in the perspective of the Naga as well as the Indian army soldier through the characters. Mose, the main protagonist of the novel, takes us through the troubled times of the Naga fight for freedom and the period when many villages in Nagaland were brutally affected by war especially when the Japanese occupied the villages. Himmat and Mose who were ‘sworn enemies’ one belonging to the Naga army and the other belonging to the Indian military reconciles through their grandchildren, Neibou and Rakesh. Kira beautifully brings out unprejudiced narratives from both the sides. She is empathetic in portraying the effect and the aftermath of the war. “She skillfully weaves the theme of unrest in the Naga society and the desire to recover from the trauma by suggesting a human need to heal and forgive. Forgiveness can lead the way forward in the relationship between India and Nagas” (Pou 151). The novel is a literature of conflict as it deals with man vs. society. There is a struggle to forget the memories of the past and envision new hope for the future, and at the same time, the inability to move forward with a new perspective hinders those still caught in the conflict. Neibou, in the novel, speaks out his opinion saying:

“We have to learn to let the past remain where it is. The trouble with the Nagas is that we have allowed the conflict to define us for too long. It has overtaken our lives so much that we have been colonized by it and it demands on us. But we do not have to let it continue to define us and limit us... We are still allowing ourselves to be bound by cultural dictates and the culture of conflict itself” (Kire 236)

Neibou becomes an instrument in voicing out the attitudes and values his grandfather taught him. He is determined to carry the legacy of his grandfather for a better brighter future. He echoes Nassim Ezekiel’s sentiments as seen in his poem “Prayers-III.” Ezekiel says:

I have to sing

The song of my experience

Ezekiel's viewpoint that "...my own inspiration is and always was 'my inner life.' And writing is, for me a way of coping with tension between my inner and outer life" (Das 97) is like a message to the Nagas as pointed out by Neibou. He realizes that violence only breeds violence and the best way for a peaceful tomorrow is only through forgiveness. The title of the novel 'Bitter wormwood' is significant as this particular wormwood used by Kire is an optimistic symbol for a better future of the Nagas. As per many traditions, Wormwood has various magical uses such as it is burned to gain protection from wandering spirits... Neibou explains the significance of the wormwood to his friend Rakesh by saying "It's a herb we use for cuts and insect bites. When I was young, grandfather would pluck that and put it behind my ear on our way to the forest. 'That will keep the bad spirits away from you, the leaf will make sure they don't get at you' (Kire 243)

Rakesh is equally receptive to learning about the Naga struggle. He has no preconceived notion of the people despite hearing countless rumors of the Naga war. It shows that his grandfather Hemmat who served in the Indian Army spreads no negative notion about the people but instead is humanistic. Opinions aside, his grandfather is a loyal and noble soldier of the Indian army. Himmat openly says 'we were pawns in a bigger game, that's all. All those men killed. Fathers and sons and husbands. And for what? If the Nagas want their own country, let them have it, that is what I say now. It's none of our business. At least, not to lose so many lives over' (Kire 201). He was loyal to the Indian Army as much as Neibou's grandfather, Mose was to the Naga army. Understandably, he holds no grudges against his 'enemy.' The novel is a positive message of how issues of conflict can only be resolved with forgiveness. Only with reconciliation, the Nagas can look forward to a future with hope.

Monalisa Chankija is another important literary figure from the NE India. In 'The Harvard Crimson,' Stauffer defines protest literature as 'text that not only criticizes and protests society, but that suggests, either explicitly or implicitly, a solution to society's ills.' Her collection of poems "Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain" (1982) and "Monsoon Mourning" (2007) fulfills what Lautner points out as protest literature. He says "it engages social issues immediate to the moment" "in order to reshape the audience's consciousness" (*The Harvard Crimson*)

"Not to be dead" is an explicit poem where she is not threatened by whatsoever to speak her mind. She writes:

If tomorrow
my body
is riddled
with bullets,
I shall not be dead
Nor will I be
be defeated and silenced

Chankija is the only eminent journalist working as an editor, proprietor and publisher of a daily newspaper from the NE India. She launched the newspaper 'Nagaland Page' in 1999 and ever since then, her boldness and stand for justice has been met with both accolades and threats from opposing parties. In her speech at the book release of "*Cogitating For a Better Deal*" in

1994, she said, ‘Both as a journalist and a writer, for me, the freedom of speech and expression is integral and crucial to and for an individual’s personhood. So, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights unambiguously declares, these rights and freedoms are entitlements of all individuals... Therefore, I urge today that ideas, views, and opinions, whether educated or not, must find a public space so that they enrich us and enable and empower us...’ Suitably, she is fearless in writing about the issues of bloodshed, violence and like a real journalist, she is unbiased in portraying her views.

Changkija expresses her desperate plea to stop the killing in Nagaland by the security forces. She laments the rich history of the past and how at present people are torn apart because of the constant attacking. She pleads in ‘Stop this Nightmare’;

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

Known to be a direct forward speaker, she holds back no emotions to put across her voice. The poem “Shoot” seems to be a response to the threats she receives and not one to be frightened or cornered, she, in turn, challenges them saying:

Go ahead, shoot and blast us to eternity
I give you my word, we will not move
Neither from our stand nor to distract your aim

The poet becomes the mouthpiece of the voiceless and the voiced. The naked truth laid barren from her work as a journalist, and a keen researcher of the Naga fight for freedom makes her altogether a critical literary figure in advocating the social and political issues.

The writers and their literary works can also be categorized as activist literature depicting the stark social reality. Alexander Watson, Editor of *Apogee*, an essential annual journal in an interview with Camellia Freeman, emphasized on their mission which reads: ‘We believe that by elevating unrepresented literary voices we can effect real change: change in readers’ attitudes, change in writers’ positions in literature, and broader change in society’. If this motto is universal and accepted, there is hope in the progress of the writings of India’s NE. Njabulo S Ndebele in his keynote speech at ‘*Open Book Cape Town*’ questions whether literature should be political. He mentions how during the apartheid regime, blacks were oppressed, and from a moral point of view, the State represented evil since they were in control of the blacks. Though the degree of suffering varies, similar sentiments could be well traced with the Naga history. Adding to this Toni Morrison in ‘*Poets and Writers*’ projects that ‘All good art is political.’ It is safe to say that there is no political agenda in the writings of Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire and Monalisa Changkija. Instead, there is an intense urgency to change the political condition of the present which has been dragged for decades now.

Deriving hope from established writers belonging to the similar genre such as the African-American literature, one can imagine a future where the voice of the people is heard without discrimination. All the three writers chosen for the research illuminates growth, fire, and hope in making their voice heard. Their representation of the experiences of the common man and the political scenario defines them also as progenitors of literary activism. Amy King strongly feels

in 'What is Literary Activism?' that 'people need to read more from the perspectives of writers from marginalized groups and encourage these writers to continue writing.' The writers from the NE India and mainly these three prominent writers chosen are unapologetic about sensitive issues of the political disturbance. They break from the patriarchal Naga society by coming out as strong voices of the region. They do not shy away from depicting the unfortunate events, and reversely, they insist that people should be made aware of the social reality. In conclusion, the writers seem to be in a parallel position to what Alice Walker says, "Activism is my rent for living on the planet."

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