

The Exploration of Women: A Close Analysis of Temsula Ao's Three Major Short Stories "The Last Song" "The Jungle Major" and "Soaba"

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Abstract

Woman and the story of her condition has become the subject matter of many writers in literature since the time women have found a consciousness about their rights and freedom. Temsula Ao, a gigantic name in the domain of feminism steps forward to uphold her individualized concerns regarding the predicaments of women in the Naga society. Her feminist narrative is constructed round the major female figures of her three major short stories "**The Last Song**", "**The Jungle Major**" and "**Soaba**". Her female characters reflect the multiple facets of femininity and womanhood. Through the character of Apenyo, Libeni and Imtila, she expounds the sufferings and exploitations women undergo under the patriarchal hegemony and despotisms and how the patriarchal hegemonic inclinations (represented by the Naga patriarchal society and the Indian Military Force) have set up an impediment for the female members of the Naga society ;and in Khatila, she finds all the latent potentialities and coqueries to fight against the impending dangers which may befall upon her husband and her villagers.

Key words: Predicaments, patriarchal, Military Force, Brutality and Feminism

Introduction

In the history of Northeastern literature of Indian writing, Temsula Ao is a celebrated figure. She adds an outstanding contribution to the Indian English literature both as a poet and a short story writer. In her short stories, she echoes the oral tradition of narrative in song covering a wide gamut of personal thoughts and emotions in her concerns over the rapid changes taking place in her homeland and with her

people where she dwells on the history, culture and traditions of her community, raising questions on gender identity and acknowledging the danger of erasure of orthodoxy history and acculturations. The stories from *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* throw a light on women's predicament in politically volatile and violence ridden world. The women's situation becomes insecure and dangerous during the military operations. They become victims of numerous brutalities caused by the military operations and by the emulous perceptions prevalent in their aged-old traditions and cultures which sound somewhat feminazi. Some stories deal with the Naga way of life immensely expounding a view of women's experiences in tradition-bound villages and towns. The young unmarried mother is ridiculed and stigmatized for having an affair with a married man and is the butt of jokes but her predicament is to ensure her unborn child is not labelled with illegitimacy. "**Three Women**" whose stories illustrate the maternal bond that links women and addresses multiple themes of adoption, rape, incest, sex and gender discrimination.

In the preface to the collection, "**Lest We Forget**", Temsula Ao refers to the memory of the traumatic experience, the pain and agony in their retrieval to be recounted and represented in written form. She keeps on saying "I have endeavoured to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged" (ix). She states clearly that the stories are not about the "historical facts" nor is she attempting to voice the deformities of the events which raged from a place like the conflagration of enormity. In the warlike situation that prevailed when the humanity and ethical countenances were reduced to the level of being immensely assaulted and violated, the survivors were left with their minds and assurances permanently disrupted. Being a mouthpiece of the actual happenings Temsula Ao keeps on asserting, "the thrust of the narrative is to probe how the events of that era have restructured and revolutionized the Naga psyche" (x).

Temsula Ao brings out the unexplored images of how women have been the victims of different dehumanized exploitations. Women have been made to confront the violent soaks, particularly from the Indian soldiers. The short stories like "**The Last Song**", "**The Jungle Major**" and "**Soaba**" depict the female figures who were forced to undergo the critical situations and predicaments when warlike and unstable conditions had prevailed. The women, as mothers and daughters, wives and widows, in their particular circumstance reflect the various facets of womanly role. Ao's female characters always respond with courage, strength, defiance, cunning and reveal their vulnerability. They are found with a strong determination in their holding to take risks to protect their families, their people and themselves and some of them even sacrifice their lives. This paper will examine the women's predicaments in volatile environments under the patriarchal control and military operations through the short stories such as "**The Jungle Major**", "**Soaba**" and "**The Last Song**" of Temsula Ao.

Apenyo and Libeni in "The Last Song"

In the story "**The Last Song**" Ao describes a young girl, Apenyo, who was brutally gang-raped by the Indian army during the chaos and confusion period of Nagaland. Women during those days underwent the double facets of exploitation. The first one was under the patriarchal hegemony of their society and the another was under the brutal military operations. The story powerfully depicts how women and children are treated in a conflicting political situation. The entire narrative is constructed with the operations of the young captain and his group in the villages. During the operation, Apenyo became a victim of an immense dehumanized physical exploitation by the Army captain and "he grabbed Apenyo by the hair and with a bemused look on his face dragged her away from the crowd towards the old church building." Ao further sings of the totalitarian acts of the armed forces in the story as: "the young captain was raping Apenyo while a few soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn." Thus, women become a victim

and a prey to the armed force's brutality during the insurgency and counter-insurgency period and the traumatic phase undergone by the women remains as a mental stigma throughout their lives. Temsula in her story "**The Last Song**" narrates the nature of violence and crime done against female in a place of tension. The extremely pitiable condition of law and order in these places and the manipulation of power and law by the Army is what this story is about. She mixes the personal references and the then political agitations. The law and judicial system are not in favor of the women to protect them from such crime. In the opening line of "**The Last Song**" Temsula Ao writes: -

"It seemed the little girl was born to sing.... what the mother considered unreasonable behavior in a child barely a year old, was actually the first indication of the singing genius that she had given birth to".

The girl's mother has a dogmatic mind. She believes in God and worships the almighty God. She never left her alone at home. Apenyo is a perfect blend of beauties in physical countenance and singing skills. Temsula stressed:-

"Every time the choir sang it was her voice that made even the commonest song sound heavenly. Along with her singing voice, her beauty also blossomed as Apenyo approached her eighteenth birthday...which earned her nickname singing beauty".

As the story progresses, we find that the government decides to nab down all the people associated with the different anti-national activities on the celebration day of church building and arrest all the leaders. The mother and the daughter experienced insured in everywhere of their territory. Armed forces were at the top of their despotism to set their tyrannous reigning over the common people including the women and little children. Apenyo and her mother were also brutally raped and killed by the Indian Military forces. The picture here sounds same as those of the Jewish women and young girls of Germany during the reign of Nazi under the leadership of Hitler. Hitler and his army brutally raped and killed the Jewish people during the World War II (1939). This story of exploitation of women still haunts the minds of the young generation psychologically. Temsula Ao through her woe telling stories capture the voices of Violence, pain that conferred on woman. Temsula portrays the Naga culture where males are always in a dominated position and woman are defined as the 'Other' of men. The women are always bound to the different stereo-typical roles which the patriarchy always imposes upon. Women struggle to set up their individualized voices. They are made women with the imposition of certain roles and functions. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir's famous first sentence in part two of '**The Second Sex**' (1949) deserves worth-mentioning: -

"One is not born a woman,
rather one becomes a woman"

The set-rules compel women aware of their role in the society. As mothers, sisters and daughters, they should be the real crusaders to bring upheaval in the society and makes changes possible by making people aware of their responsibilities. With regard to the patriarchy of Naga society, Temsula Ao refers to the tragedy of unending physical abuse that goes unabated behind many homes. To cite an example, we can quote from Monalisa's "**Weapons of words on pages of pain**" where she is explicit in her terse language and in her opinion about the brute force of man: -

"Masculine hands
Raining blows on bodies
Soft and feminine."

In "**The Last Song**" Temsula Ao expresses her feminist concerns on Naga women, i.e., Apenyo and Libeni. Temsula Ao's story can also be discussed from the perspectives of 'Social Castration' of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. 'Social castration' is a particular condition in which a specific section of the society is made powerless for the sake of enjoying power by another section of people of the society. They

deal with woman's lack of power in every arena of the society and this 'lack' is represented by means of the word 'Castration' as a male possession. In "**The Last Song**," the young captain grabbed Apenyo by the hair. He uses the body of Apenyo to quench the thirst of his sexual pleasure. He is very much aware of the position of women and his power being a representative of Indian military. So, he and his men cross all the limits of his instinctual drives and indulge himself to rape Apenyo and her mother. The Apenyo was gang-raped and similarly the soldiers raped the 'limp body' of her mother Libeni's too. The members of patriarchy do not dare to step forward to save these women as the women always have been an object of sex to them. They have already taken it for granted that women are the objects to appease the sexual hunger of the male-members of the society. They have silently accepted what happened to Apenyo and her mother.

Khatila in "The Jungle Major"

The story "**The Jungle Major**" is set against a scenario of war, deals with the story of a couple namely Punaba and Khatila. They were a childless couple. In Temsula Ao's words, Punaba, a driver by profession, is drawn into the freedom movement a year after his marriage. Their homeland is wracked by clashes between the 'patriotic' warriors and the government forces. The pictures of molestation and rape of women and the torture of men have become the echo of the subject matters of Temsula Ao's short story. These pathetic images of women are caught in at the backdrop of the Naga independence movement. At that time, the movement started spreading through their land, swept the assurances of the people's freedom and drew them into a vortex. In the story, Punaba's membership in the underground army affects Khatila's life in the village. He faces dangers living in the jungles and the danger of being a wanted man to be hunted by the government forces. On the other hand, Khatila becomes a target of surveillance and reports of strange visitors with provisions coming to her door in the absence of adults who would be working in their fields soon reaches the ears of the authorities who question the villagers and Khatila too. She would feign indifference to her husband's absence but the shadow of the threat of rape for lying to the government agencies remained. Leaving no doubt about their intentions, the dangerous predicament for her is heightened when she understands the perilous course she has to navigate. The fires of conflict that is scorching the land is reaching her doorstep and village. She is threatened with punishment of a special kind. "We know how to deal with women like you, the officer said, giving her a lascivious look" (4). The village is in danger of being razed. Under such threats, the elders of the village request her to send her words to Punaba not to visit the village again. She is aware of that her husband will soon be informed of such incidents through the secret spies. What is to be noted is that, despite her attempt to protect her husband, both she and the village are at risk and danger. She has to negotiate a dangerous course being the wife of an underground functionary agent. The individual and the community, both are at risk. In such a condition, she realizes that she has to play the part of a dutiful villager because "in her position, she could not afford to antagonize the village authorities in any way".

Khatila who has so far played a minor role in the theatre of armed conflict as compared to her husband, realizes the gravity of their situation. With deft thinking, she resorts to an audacious ploy. In Khatila, Temsula Ao brings out a new womanized attitude who she keeps on reflecting in the moments of extreme danger to protect and save her husband, herself and the entire villagers from the impending or definite death. Punaba is disguised with shabby clothes and ash smeared on his entire body. He is the lazy servant who has failed to fill up the water containers. Khatila berates him loudly and at the same time empties the water containers on the bamboo platform in the rear of the house. Loading the water carrying baskets with the empty containers, the servant is harangued to fetch water when the search party arrives. It is a nonchalant, irritated, disheveled angry woman scolding her lazy servant who opens the door. Though intelligence reports were accurate, the officer not having a clear idea of the wanted person was confused. Seizing the moment, Khatila pushes the disguised Punaba passed off as an inarticulate simpleton to fetch the

water. Punaba, eluding the security cordon, escapes to the safety of the jungle while Khatila tries to charm the captain with an offer of tea. The party refuses her offer as they are to carry out their searching operations in the remaining houses of the village. Khatila is extremely grateful that the ugliness of her husband had saved them and their village. The young and inexperienced army officer did not realize that: “The beautiful but simple village woman had thus foiled a meticulously planned ‘operation’ of the mighty Indian army and that a prized quarry had simply walked away to freedom” (7). In Khatila, Temsula Ao depicts a woman who is beautiful, resourceful and courageous. Aware of the dangerous predicament she is confronted with, her instinct for survival guides her actions. Armed with audacity and pluck, she is a figure of resistance and rebellion in several fronts. Standing up to threats, bullets and possible death, she is a lady with a brave soul. By portraying Khatila, Temsula Ao challenges preconceptions about women, their abilities and intelligences. She is an emancipated woman who has all the potentialities to set the individualized voice of women on the screen. Temsula Ao through the portrayal of Khatila speaks of the consciousness of the womanliness. Woman is a separate entity. They are not supposed to be identified in relation to their counterpart men. They are no longer the affixation of ‘Fe’ with the root ‘Male’. Her Khatila is the form of the repressed anger of the entire women of the Naga-society. Her coquettishness to serve her villagers as a savior represents the voices of women in a new light and color. Khatila is similar to the legendary heroines in Ao-Naga folklore. In her essay “**Gender and Power: Some Women-Centered Narratives from Ao-Naga Folklore**”, Temsula Ao states: - “The image of women is generally projected as the weaker sex in the normative hierarchy of any patriarchal system. . . .” The power structures with the family and society among the Nagas has always rested with the male” (71). In Khatila, Temsula Ao offers a redefinition of women which is against the male-constructed stereo typical identity of “the weaker sex” of the society. Women are considered marginalized or inferior in the history and the origin of the civilization of the people. But Khatila’s presence of mind, audacity and her clever ploy reflect the nature of power women may have possessed. In delineating such a character, Temsula Ao subtly highlights the dichotomy between the real and the mythical, the factual and the fictional in understanding women’s power.

Imtila in “Soaba”

In “**Imtila**”, Temsula Ao presents a woman caught in a painful plight. Whether lacking a strong will or economic independence, Imtila does not lack in compassion despite being married to an uncompassionate brute, taking an unfortunate idiot boy under her protection. It is the tragic death of Supiba that jolts her husband out of the miasma of evil he had descended into. Caught in the dilemma of living in a house that was not less than hell or to salvage her marriage: “She tried to pick up the broken pieces of their former life and create new order from the pathetic remains. It was not an easy task but she persevered because the alternative was too frightening to contemplate” (20-21). Imtila finds herself trapped in an unpleasant predicament. Against her will, Imtila becomes a prisoner of her husband's notoriety. His changed fortunes bring unwelcome changes in her life. Her will to be a normal house wife looking after her husband and children becomes the dream of a dream. She has to meet all the requirements to cope up with her husband's status like dressing up in the expensive clothes and jewellery he has bought for her and playing the role of the amiable hostess to his guests. Her freedom is restricted and she cannot go out anywhere without a bodyguard. She has become a doll at the arms of her husband represents the orthodoxically patriarchal norms imposed upon the females. She is not less than Henrik Ibsen’s Nora of “**A Doll’s House**” who constantly finds herself confined inside the fences of her husband’s rules and regulations. Her family and friends who cannot visit freely to her house unlike before feel uncomfortable and stay away leaving her lonely and isolated in the unpleasant environment. Under the circumstances, looking for some relief from her dark and terrifying predicament, she finds a welcome diversion in the activities of Soaba or Supiba, short for “stupid bastard”, an expletive Boss uses, which in his simple mind he preferred to Soaba, who arouses her compassion.

Living under the same roof with Boss took its toll as he becomes distant from the wife and children. From their growing estrangement, “he sensed that his wife had gone away from the sanctuary of their relationship and had retreated into a world where he had no place”. His degeneration and growing brutality concurs with the breakdown of family life and decline of their marriage. Imtila takes to sleeping in another room. He loses his physical desire for her and other women. However out of an egotistical perversity, to prove his manhood, women hired with promises of money and a good time are brought to his house to be used, abused and discarded. Imtila finds herself in an impossible predicament. Living in the same house in loneliness, insecurity and discomfort ability with her husband, her life has become an unending misery to be shared with others. one night, Imtila takes the frightened and bewildered Supiba who had hidden himself in the pantry by giving him refuge from the raucous party in the quiet of her room in the rear of the house. She pushes him under her bed motioning him to keep quiet. After several hours, feeling cramped, he crawls out and looks about him curiously. While Imtila is in the bathroom, he spies what looks like a toy in her dressing table drawer and picks it up. At that moment, Boss who has been rampaging through the house comes across Supiba holding a gun. Mistaking him to be the assassin, Boss is about to shoot him when Imtila rushes out of her bathroom and explores her husband taking an aim at Supiba. Amidst Imtila’s screamings and Supiba’s frightened growls, the drunken man kills the innocent boy. Imtila, in anguish, cries out: “Oh my poor boy, were you born for this? Why did I let you come to this evil place? (19). She becomes disconsolate weeping and muttering the words repeatedly while a “stupefied Boss” is led away by his bodyguards back to the noisy party which carried on as if nothing had taken place. Though Imtila appears to be held hostage to her husband’s will and power and lacks the economic resources to leave, she retains her humanity. In the chaos and wretchedness of her life, it is left to Imtila to pick up the pieces for Soaba’s innocence and senseless death teaches her that love and compassion can exist even when the world is darkened by evil.

Conclusion

The History has been the witness of the different voices risen by the different marginalized sections of the society to get back their rights and freedoms. The feminist voice has been a matter of study since the ancient history. Not a single field of Arts is left unturned to propagate the voices of feminists. Literature has become a weapon for many feminist writers to hold their concerns over the feminism. Tamsula Ao, a Northeastern Indian writer has raised many issues related to the feminist consciousness and the experimentation of an innovative feminist parole. Her writings mark the presence of the plenty of references related to feminism. A close study of her short stories especially "**The Last Song**" , "**The Jungle Major**" and "**Soaba**" upholds numerous connotations of the feminism. The female characters like Apenyo, Libeni, Imtila and Khatila represent the epitome of the feminism. The lives of these ladies symbolize the hardships, exploitations, struggles, impediments, courageousness, brevity and determinations of the women of the Naga society. Naga women suffer from an unending misery under the Patriarchal power structure and the Military operations led by the Indian Armed Forces from time to time. Apenyo, Libeni and Imtila represent the exploitations, hardships of life, struggle for the exploration of the self-identity, bondage life and powerlessness of the female members of the Naga society. They become compelled to lay down their power to the lust and infatuations of the men. On the other hand, Khatila represents the fighting spirits, courageousness, brevity and determinations of the women of the Naga society. Tamsula Ao in "**The Last Song**" and "**Soaba**" shows the miserable conditions of the women and how the women have been used as an object of the male-sexual lust and desirability. Khatila in "**The Jungle Major**" is set as an example of emancipated, independent and brave women to fight against the unjust done to them by men in the phallogocentric society since antiquity. Tamsula Ao like other feminists like Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam, Mamta Kalia, Sylvia Plath, Manju Kapur and so on has become the speaker of the physical and psychological conditions of women of the Naga society.

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