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The Portrayal of Violence in the Writings of Temsula Ao and Easterine Iralu

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“India’s Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometres wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken’s Neck. The region has been the battleground for generations of subnational identities confronting insensitive nation states and their bureaucracies as well as of internecine strife. It is a battle that continues, of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions, of power, bitterness and compassion.” (*Hazarika*, 1994: xvi). Any interaction with the youths of the region appraises one of the general discontents that prevail in these states. The deep seated suspicion, distrust and bitterness will be disconcerting to anyone who may have been given to understand that all these were things of the past. They are definitely dissatisfied with the affairs of administration, especially in the field of employment and an alarming number of young men talk of glibly of entering into violent activities.

Political changes have been many. But political change does not mean political development. And Nagaland is a case in point. It has been and still seeing political changes aplenty. There is the great preoccupation with the established and maintenance of peace, there is the human problem of the men who are underground, again there are little bands flirting with Red China and Pakistan and the great problem of educating the thousands of little villages, not only in the conventional sense but also in the firm beliefs of oneness with the entire national unity among themselves and progress through peace. One thing is disappearing, the people’s initiative of governing, for what northeast needs is not sympathy but recognition. These manifold problems need expert and imaginative handling which can be possible only after each problem is sympathetically studied by selfless and dedicated persons. Political development is a concomitant development.

Northeast is precariously situated, linked to the country only by the bottle neck at Siliguri. The moment Siliguri is dislodged by any alien force; the entire Northeast will be cut off from the rest of Indian sub-continent. There was this fearful possibility during the 1962 Chinese aggression. Therefore political myopia in this important and highly sensitive area can have grave consequences. “If the Siliguri gap were ever to fall to the Chinese, Bhutan, NEFA, Assam and Nagaland would be cut off from India”. (Mehta, 1973, p. 257). No armies can guard a frontier as ably and willingly as the sons of the frontiers and given a content hill people there is no reason why our borders cannot be sealed to any enemies from outside. New Delhi has to realise that though Nagaland is small and economically backward, it is strategically extremely valuable to the sub-continent. Peace is important in far

away Gujarat as it is in Kohima. Years ago, in his lecture, Curzon said rightly about the frontiers: “Frontiers are indeed the razor’s edge on which hand suspended the modern issue of war and peace, or life or death of nation.., (Curzon, 1907)

There is widespread violence in present times. Every country every state has to face it. May be the nature of violence differs

from place to place. “India’s Northeast region has been the battleground for generations of sub national identities confronting insensitive nation states and their bureaucracies as well as of internecine strife. It is a battle that continues, of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions, of power, bitterness and compassion.”(Hazarika, 1994: xvi). It is natural that after decades of violence the writers from the region express their sufferings, of fear and terror they had endured, the loss of faith, the bitterness, the anger, and pain of shattered dreams; and in spite of all, hopes for a better future through their writings. They have been portraying such events of their life which has left an ineradicable impression in their mind.

“Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt ‘to live with it’, as they are expected to do by the distant centres of power.” (Misra, 2011: xix)”.

. The violence in the state of Nagaland had provoked me to make an always . Tamsula Ao, the Padma Shree writer from Nagaland had portrayed this violence in her writings too. More than half a century of bloodshed has marked the history of the Naga people who live in the troubled North Eastern region of India .Her ‘*These Hills called Home*’ (*The Stories from a war zone*), shows the naga struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity. It describes how the naga people cope with violence, how they negotiate power and force and seek and find spaces and enjoyment in the midst of terror. She details a way of life under the threat from the forces of modernization and war. She is in the process of questioning, revaluing and readapting a new set of values in this merging naga society. She thus quotes:

“I hear the land cry

Over and over again

Let all the dead awaken

And teach the living

How not to die”

The two world wars , the recent disturbances have had their varied impact on the nagas which is evident in Tamsula Ao’s –“ *These Hills called Homes*”.(*The stories from the warzone*), show how the gradual control of the extremists and insurgents over the Naga National Council and the Nagaland administration, has led to Naga disturbances , social, political and economic unrest.

In 'The Jungle Major', 'Soaba', 'The Last Song', 'The Curfew Man', 'An old Man remembers', Temsula Ao, gives a vivid account of the disturbances in Nagaland. In 'The Jungle Major', she shows how the subject of independence became a public talk; young people spoke of the exploits of their peers in encounters with the government forces and were eager to join the new band of 'patriotic' warriors to liberate their homeland from 'foreign' rule. The oppressive measures adopted by the army to quell the rebellion backfired and the villages became more sympathetic towards the underground forces, when they heard of the atrocities committed by the armed forces on innocent villagers.

In 'Soaba', Temsula Ao speaks about the new breed who takes up arms; they became the disquieting elements in the power struggle between the two warring groups. Created by the government they were designated as "Home Guards", reputed to be the perpetrator of several heinous crimes. This band was equipped with vehicles as well as guns, and was given free rations of rum to boots. They moved around town harassing the public at will, after settling old scores with rivals whom they would not have dared to challenge under normal circumstances.

In 'The Last Song', Temsula Ao, speaks about 'the government forces determined to 'teach', all those villagers the consequences of 'supporting' the rebel cause. Even the house of God could not save them from the atrocities of the army.

In the 'Curfew Man', she speaks about the innocent villagers who had to bear the brunt of the many restrictions imposed on their lives as the night curfew was on. There were several incidents where civilians were shot dead by the patrol killed in 'encounters' with the army. There were the people who co-operated both between the government forces and the so called 'freedom fighter', some by choice and some by compulsion.

In 'Shadows', Temsula Ao, speaks about the soldiers of the underground Naga army, who travel through the jungle guided by a relay band of 'scouts' to learn everything about guerrilla warfare and use of sophisticated weaponry while they were in the designated training camp. Only those men who had displayed extraordinary courage in encounters with the Indian Army were considered. There was also the group of jungle rogues who had been terrorizing innocent villagers on both sides of the international border, looting, extorting money and causing general mayhem whenever they got a chance.

In 'An Old Man remembers', Temsula Ao speaks about 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 cycle of beatings, rapes, burning 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 becoming ruthless killers themselves. He (the old man) resolved to tell his grandson how his generation had lost their youth to the dream of nationhood and how that period of history was written with the blood and tears of

countless innocents. Their dream to escape and go back to their families kept them going only to be shattered.

The author details a way of life under the threat from the forces of modernization and war. The jungle operations, the raiding of camps of the underground, patrolling of the security forces, the searching of villages, aerial action and arrests- gives a vivid and realistic account of poignant and bewildering experiences of people caught in a spiral of violence, under the Indian Government, before Nagaland was declared an independent region. The snipping and ambushing of the underground Naga movement, the imposition of fines, the kidnapping and recruiting and their sabotage activities, show how the Naga issue , speak movingly of home, country, nation, nationality and identity, for making a better life for themselves and posterity.

Easterine Kire Iralu from Nagaland is another significant writer from Nagaland who has written several books including three collections of poetry and short stories. Her first novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* was the first-ever Naga novel to be published. She has translated 200 oral poems from her native language, Tenyidie, into English. *Mari* is an interesting novel relating the life and experiences of the girl named Mari. At the beginning of the novel she thus quotes:

*“When you go home
Tell them of us
And say for your tomorrow
We gave our today”*

Inscription on the war memorial of the 2nd Division at the Kohima War Cemetery

It relates the impact of the Japanese invasion of India on the simple folks of Kohima .Her description of Nature before the invasion,

Flowers grew wild all over town because there were such few houses. Here and there were flowering trees like the pink bohemia and the scarlet flame of the forest. The town certainly looked colourful with the trees and flowers all around. (Mari, 2010: 10)

After the invasion,

The front yard which used to be filled with flowers, was unrecognizable. Large craters had left been left by the shell and there were lot of ammunition near the house, from different-sized mortar shells to glittering rifle shots.

(Mari, 2010: 94)

Though she and Temshila Ao have written and popularised several volumes of naga folk tales which would be another interesting discussion. But in this paper I would like to discuss the depiction of violence rampant in the lives of the nagas.

The Nagas have been suffering from the traumas of war from the Japanese invasion, Then their fight For freedom against the Indian government.

Bitter Wormwood, a novel on the Indo-Naga conflict

Life on hold, is set in Nagaland during the troubled times of independence and central characters represent the people who were affected by naga Nationalism.

A Naga Village Remembered is an account of the lost battle between the colonial forces of Britain and the little village of Khonoma. Growing up in Kohima in the 1960s she very closely experienced the conflict fought close to the Naga village.

Easterine Iralu has been persistent in sensitizing the world about the real situation back home. The love for her native land and culture colour her writings with nostalgia for the golden days. She expresses a strong political awareness by addressing issues such as identity and ethnicity; question the violence that has dismantled homes due to insurgency. In a recent biographical note, Easterine Eralu writes about her experience of growing up in Nagaland: "Curfews and continued periods of gunfire were all a part of growing up in Nagaland".(Easterine Iralu in ICORN, Autumn 2006). But the conflict became worse with the emergence of infighting in the eighties. In 1987, the cycle of killing and counter revenge went on unrestricted. Two levels of violence existed. On one hand, the atrocities of the Indian army continued and on the other the infighting due to ideological differences between the Naga freedom fighters. She had lived in a house that was stalked by armed men at night because of the political writings of her husband. The pain she went through when her son was kidnapped. Phones being tapped, every movement of the family was closely watched. She used to keep a double barrel gun for the security of her family. Finally she escaped from the brutality of the life in Nagaland where children were traumatized and took refuge in Tromsa, N Norway in 2005. Away from a city where it was normal to hear gunshots in the night, be in constant fear of death. She felt the price of peace for the years of conflict, was too high for the people to pay. She never stopped thinking about her people. The bitterness of the past should not shadow the life of the new generation for they deserve a better life. She feels that *The North-East Writers Forum* is a milestone in the Indian literary world showing that there was much more to the North-East than political literature. In fact she has written stories and poems based on native traditions and the natural beauty of the region.

Away from home she continued writing about her native state. She felt a personal need to write about the conflict in her homeland for deep in her heart she hopes to influence change through her writings. Her native state Nagaland has a history of insurgency and independence movements. "The sudden

displacement of the young from a placid existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and confusion in urban settlements is also fallout of recent Naga history and one that has left them disabled in more ways than one". (Ao, 2006: x). She feels that this history of violence should end at some point. In fact, she felt the need for her personal catharsis before she could go on to write for other people. She seriously feels that the time has come to address the silences that had occurred because of the conflict. Peace has to be restored in the region for the good old days to come back. She uses her writing, and her public position that has resulted, to inform Nagas and the rest of the world about the conflict of the region.

The gospel of Naga nationalism was preached to the young affecting most of them. Many young students pledged their support to the naga movement and others went further and promised to join its ranks on completing their studies and even leaving their studies for the cause. Actually there was continuous pressure to do the most natural thing for the nagas in those circumstances, i.e., participate in nationalist activities and fight for the naga independence. Though strongly confident at first of achieving independence, from 1967 onwards, naga politics slowly losing its earlier grip on the naga public. Compared to the tremendous appeal and impact of the movement in the earlier years, (specially between 1946-1962), it seemed as though from 1967 onwards the common naga men and women began to be disenchanted with the bickerings in the ranks of its once solid and united leadership. By 1975 disenchantment was so great that to anyone looking on from outside it appeared that the movement reached its nadir. It is sad but also true to some extent that a people's movement which nearly reached its zenith all but collapsed so drastically and all because of differences among the men at the top. The tremendous loss of lives, energy and time and the failure of the naga leadership cannot be overlooked. They were not far sighted enough and failed to curb tribal rivalries. Many senior elements among the nagas have since then weighed up the adverse and poisonous effects of these rivalries and consequently the appeal of the erring politicians has lost much of its credibility for the naga public. The people are ashamed of these leaders. There is a growing apathy of the people themselves and growing political dissipation and the naga people and elders alike must share the blame for the present sorry state of affairs.

Easterine Kire Iralu, herself a naga and has tried portray the problems from an insider's point of view as he she sees it. in her New release Bitter Wormwood

A single visit to the region and a few interviews with the youth of the region will appraise one of the general discontent that prevails in these states. The deep seated suspicion, distrust and bitterness will be disconcerting to anyone who may have been given to understand that all these were things of the past. They are definitely dissatisfied with the affairs of administration, especially in the field of employment and an alarming number of young men talk of glibly of entering into violent activities. On the other hand, there is a tendency among the rest of Indian's today to deliberately look the other way when trouble is imminent. A political change does not mean political

development. And Nagaland is a case in point. It has been and still seeing Political changes aplenty. There is the great preoccupation with the established and maintenance of peace, there is the human problem of the men who are underground, again there are little bands flirting with Red China and Pakistan and the great problem of educating the thousands of little villages, not only in the conventional sense but also in the firm beliefs of oneness with the entire national unity among themselves and progress through peace. One thing is disappearing ,the people's initiative of governing, for what northeast needs is not sympathy but recognition.

These manifold problems need expert and imaginative handling which can be possible only after each problem is sympathetically studied by selfless and dedicated persons. Political development is a concomitant development.

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