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Title of the Book: *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

Author: Temsula Ao

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Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* is a collection of nine short stories that become poignant portrayals of the human drama that unfolds on the turbulent terrains of Nagaland that was dealing with political disharmony rather than being solitary or insular incidents. In her writings we find Nagaland becoming a performative space for the history, space, culture, people and politics generate candid mindset. A geographical area is put forth as metafictional chronotope that negotiates throughout the texts at the same time, topography, temporality and ideology. In purview of this her fiction becomes more ontological than epistemological for they concentrate not on the resume of a single person but on the collective experience of the Naga's whose motherland was going through turmoil.

Much like Egdon Heath in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, Nagaland in Temsula Ao's fiction casts its overarching presence and totally influences, directly or indirectly the fate, the choices and the actions of her characters. Nagaland's ongoing crisis where an underground army is fighting for freedom, for a separate identity from India and how Indian army is trying its best to contain it is reflected in the crisis of her characters who were in, I quote from Ao's writings itself, "circumstances (that were) forcing innocent, peace-loving people to turn to means that they would not ordinarily employ, just to stay safe and alive...they were indeed caught in a vice-like situation..." Place functions as a metonym rather than a metaphor for the fact that it determines both personal and political fate of her characters. It becomes almost impossible to extract their characters from their settings and they become excellent lenses through which one can sample the attitudes of people as well as get a pictorial depiction of what the land might be like at that point of time, both socially and physically.

The first story of the collection, 'The Jungle Major' is about Punaba who like many others was "caught in the new wave of patriotic fervour that swept the imagination of the people and plunged them into a struggle...to liberate their homeland from foreign rule." Here she takes an opportunity to describe the state her land was in, she writes of these times, "It seemed that a pall had descended upon the entire land." People were returning earlier than usual from work, a cloud of fear and suspicion was looming overhead, all the time and security forces harassed the villagers with both physical and mental torture if they harboured any supporter of this movement, which she continuously refers to as "the underground movement". Punaba often came to visit his wife at night with the plan that if security forces came to interrogate he would run away into the "thick jungle". This thick jungle that pervades all over Nagaland was

the place the people of Nagaland, who were fighting for their motherland find security, solace. These impenetrable, unchartered and un-mapped jungles with its uncertainties would harbour these very people who next course of action was kept under wrap. To the commoners their plans and actions were all secretive, thus impenetrable, unchartered and un-mapped as well. The crux of this story is that once when Punaba was with his wife, Khatila, the guards had fallen asleep and the police were almost on the brink of catching him when Khatila's ingenious plan of making Punaba pretend to be a servant helps him escape into the very heart of Mother Nature, these very jungles. The jungles nurture him and enable him to work on till he retires. Legend lends him the nick name of being the very 'jungle major' from which the title of the story is borrowed.

The theme of the jungle is continued in another story entitled 'Shadows'. It begins with, I quote:

It was a sunny day. For the first time in six days, the sun's rays had penetrated the thick foliage of the jungle. Washed clean by the heavy rains, the leaves were shining like the newly-washed hair of maidens spread out in the open to dry. Steam rose from the grounds as the dampness of the soil gave way...

This gives us a serene picture of the jungle. If the jungle is taken as a euphemism for the Nagaland movement, this beautiful picture gives us a hint of the movement; how they remain hidden mostly but sometimes (much like once in six days) they come out. They bask in the glory of being patriots who are fighting for their motherland. They are hidden by thick foliage, by thick dark secret and have a secretive life but they too at times come out to enjoy their personal lives. During their time they learn how to walk in the jungle without making a sound and imitate the sound of birds to communicate. They become like the creatures of the jungle, one with the jungle. Punaba in the earlier story, had become such as well. This was the case of each and every freedom fighter, each and every person who was fighting for the Naga movement. But here the jungle takes another form. It becomes the seat where divine justice is meted out. Even if the society was such that couldn't bring justice, Nature does. The jungle has its overarching presence. Divine retribution occurs for the crime that happened in "the thick shadows of the jungle" for the boy who "had left studies for good and that he wanted to follow his father into the jungle" was fighting for his motherland. The jungle did try to nurture "the unfortunate Imli" but the evil of the world was faster in its ways and the jungle turned out malevolent for "the notorious leader, Hoito". Ao writes, "It was as if the vast jungle had simply swallowed him up" and identity-less he wandered about the jungles to become, I quote,

"a mad man who roamed the forest, often shouting 'imi, imi'...his hair had grown long, become grey and matted, his flowing beard was almost white and his teeth were stained black from eating roots and berries from the jungle...the lone wanderer... to survive in the shadows of the jungle from predators, man and beast alike, and eating whatever was thrown away by them."

In fact the jungle didn't let him just be but became the site of his death. Boy chanced upon him and in order to take revenge because of Hoito's previous torture forced 'prickly leaves' inside his mouth and left him to dangle to death from a tree after severe tortures. Ironically his death happened in the same manner as he had commissioned the death of Imli. The jungle had witnessed the commission of the crime and the jungle had meted out justice. The jungle as an over arching presence is always there, Nature as an over arching presence is always there.

Similarly in the form of wind this time, in the story entitled 'The Last Song' Nature serves her part. Atrocities happened in a small village on the day of the dedication of their new church building which had been built with a lot of effort, both financial and physical. Soldiers not only humiliated the villagers but also burnt the old church after gang raping the helpless women. Apenyo, the singing beauty, had kept on humming her last song as she was molested and the Captain who had commissioned this ended up being punished as military intelligence years later had traced him to a "maximum security cell of an insane asylum." However this incident that happened in a small village misses out on getting any significance in the national narrative. Nature as an over arching figure doesn't take on the responsibility of punishing them but serves here as a recorder of things. She writes thus on "certain nights a peculiar wind blows through the village, which seems to start from the region of the graveyard and which sounds like a hymn." Thus Apenyo's last song continues to haunt the village refreshing the sordid memory, "as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children."

In another story entitled 'An Old Man Remembers' the jungle and the underground movement is shown to become a part that fashions the subjectivization of the protagonist Sashi. In his old age, memories of his "jungle days" come back to him. It was during those times when they had to keep on "running from one hideout to another in the deep jungles to escape the pursuing soldiers" to survive "in these remote hills". The jungles were their solace, the only protection for in the remote hills the story of their struggle was remote news to the rest of the world. The day he remembers, Nature is by his side foreboding his mood for there had been "constant drizzle since the morning has (had) intensified the biting cold of the winter day". However when his heart becomes lighter, the eastern sky is shown to get brighter. The jungle remained an area that was forbidden for as children he and his friend would go to the jungle to seek forbidden pleasures such as looking at naked women, much against their parent's permission, knowing that if reported being sighted there they would get into trouble. Later on when they were doing something anti-government they resorted to the jungle as well with the dream of nationhood in their hearts. However, Ao writes, the path wasn't smooth and blood was spilt and they all "were transformed into what they became in the jungle", something that would haunt him very often, something that had given him "nothing but pain" and had "wounded our (his) souls." The youth it is said were living in jungles like wild creatures, fighting wildly for a movement that was going wild for when the soldiers came attacking, "Run to the jungle" was the only cry, the only plea for survival and safety that could be heard. His friend Imli is described in an animalistic manner, when his father was killed. He is said to "whimper like a hurt animal". In the jungle, which had

initially scared them with its eerie sounds produced the “huge tree-trunk” which was to become their resting zone. They were eventually taken in by underground army who took them to their camps deep in the secrets of their forest. Ao writes, “as the topography of the land changed, and we found ourselves following steep animal trails” to describe the habitat of the underground army, who were fighting an animalistic battle, for to satisfy a primal urge of freedom for self and motherland. Steep hills had rendered natural protection to these children of Nagaland, who were fighting for their land, creating a “veritable fortress”. It was this jungle which sustained them, which allowed them to breed and also provide unending support that made them a little animalistic, a little behind civilization and urbanization, a place where tribal’s still dwell.

Enjoyable and touching to the core, Ao’s fiction seems as precise and detailed as reporting or non-fiction while being high on emotional quotient. Though her writing, a biography of Nagaland is created and it takes off the shroud of ignorance that covered the real history of the rather backward state. The alien-ness attached to Nagaland is removed and a more real, more human angle is presented.