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## **Reclaiming the Margins: Exploring Double Marginalisation in Temsula Ao's 'The Last Song' and 'A Simple Question'**

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### **Abstract:**

The margins have always been considered disadvantaged within a social circle. Bell Hooks states that “to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” but Toni Morrison, with conviction, mentioned that even though she stood at the margin, she claimed it to be the centre and let the world come towards where she was. Keeping this in view, the paper attempts to relocate the concept of double marginalisation of Naga tribal women in Temsula Ao's short stories, namely, 'The Last Song' and 'A Simple Question'. A tribal subalternised female suffers more in her everyday life, not only due to her tribal identity but also because of her chromosomal build-up. Temsula Ao is a writer from Northeast India, conferred with Padma Shri (2007) and Sahitya Akademi Award (2013) for her significant contribution to expressing the plight of the Naga society (mainly women) due to the gruesome and horrific incidents of the past. The primary theme of the paper would revolve around Ao's women. For this research, the researcher has chosen two of Ao's short stories from her recent collections, namely, *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) and *These Hills Called Home: Stories from War Zone* (2006) to contextualise and relocate the concept of double marginalisation as portrayed by Temsula Ao in her short stories.

**Keywords:** Double Marginalisation, Margins, Women, Northeast India, Naga women.

### **Introduction**

Since times immemorial, the inadvertent *othering* of voices has been a tangible concept in postcolonial literature from where the idea of centre and margin arises. Now, when someone

talks about the centre and the margin, a question arises: Are the marginalised categories of people also marginalised within those categories? The primary reason for such a question to pop up in various thinkers' heads is the concept of intersectionality. This question further propels the debate towards understanding how various discriminatory factors meet at a specific intersection to affect the lives of the marginalised people who are already looked upon with prejudices. Such a biased approach towards people who happen to be marginalised within their own societies due to hegemonic values or socio-economic and cultural factors is called 'double marginalisation.' Postcolonial writers often explore the experiences of people who belong to minority groups within their own societies, such as women, lower castes, or indigenous communities, which are further marginalised by the colonial powers that dominate them. This results in double exclusion from the main discourse, and the subject feels caught between two worlds.

Double marginalisation is an essential theme in postcolonial literature, highlighting colonialism's complex and multifaceted nature and its ongoing effects on individuals and societies. For example, a postcolonial feminist analysis might argue that women in colonised societies are doubly marginalised by their gender within their own culture and by the colonial power structure that reinforces patriarchal norms and marginalises their voices and experiences. Similarly, a postcolonial analysis of race might argue that people of colour in colonised societies are doubly marginalised, facing discrimination and marginalisation both within their own societies and by the colonial power structure that reinforces white supremacy and colonial ideologies.

### **Pushed towards the periphery**

The region of Northeast India has forever been grappling with issues of national identity as it is perceived to be distinct from the rest of India. Throughout both colonial and postcolonial eras, portraying the Northeast as the *other* has posed a significant threat to their valued customs and heritage. The people from Northeast India are often left out of the debate and are pushed towards the margins in multiple ways.

One such tribe from Northeast India is the Ao-Naga tribe, an indigenous group that inhabits parts of Northeast India and northwest Myanmar. The inhabitants of Northeast India, marginalised from the centre, face twice the number of barriers in their struggle for equality, especially the women of certain marginalised tribes. These women are first thrown out of the

central discourse because they are *othered* by the majority. Further, they face discrimination because of their gender. Such women are double marginalised.

Naga women play an essential role in the Naga society and culture. According to their tradition and culture, Naga women are active in agriculture and are responsible for growing crops such as rice, maize, and vegetables. They are also skilled weavers and produce traditional textiles and clothing. Besides these roles, Naga women also proactively participate in community development and decision-making processes.

An article published on the website, *The Conversation* by Lianboi Vaiphei, Assistant Professor at the University of Delhi, discusses the struggles of Naga women in India's Northeast region for political representation as they face resistance from male-dominated traditional tribal councils. According to Vaiphei, despite legal provisions of reserving one-third of women's seats in village councils, women are often excluded from decision-making processes (Vaiphei). The article highlights the efforts of women's groups to challenge these patriarchal structures and push for greater gender equality in political representation. It also discusses the tension between preserving traditional cultural practices and advancing gender equality. Despite the challenges of gender inequality, Naga women have made significant strides in recent years. Many have achieved higher education and are participating in politics and leadership positions. Many Naga women's organisations and movements aim to empower and uplift women in the community. However, some cultural practices within the Naga society still limit the opportunities and freedoms for women. These include early marriage and expecting women to focus on domestic duties over pursuing their careers and ambitions.

### **The Teller of Untold Tales - Temsula Ao**

Temsula Ao, an Indian writer and academic, was born in Nagaland, Northeast India. She is known for her contributions to Naga literature and works exploring Naga identity, culture, and history. She has authored several books, including *Laburnum for My Head* and *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for her book *These Hills Called Home* in 2013. In addition to her literary endeavours, Ao has also served as a professor of English literature at North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya. Through depicting marginalised characters and exploring oppressive systems, literature becomes a powerful tool for raising awareness of the impact of double marginalisation and advocating for social and economic justice. Moreover, Temsula Ao's short

stories highlight the critical intersections between gender-based social and economic inequalities.

### **Literature Review**

Temsula Ao's short stories often depict the everyday struggles of marginalised communities in Northeast India while exploring the skewed dynamics of profound economic inequalities that affect people's lives. In his paper, Das discusses Temsula Ao's collection of stories titled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, which portrays women as victims of violence at both emotional and physical levels in a patriarchal society. Despite being victims, women play a significant role in the Ao-Naga society and emerge as independent and daring women who tackle their lives amidst the brutality done by the armed forces. Women also support their families financially and preserve nature. He further analyses the collection in the context of two paradoxical sides of women - both victors and victims - who subvert society's patriarchal set-up and traditions (Das, 76).

Her works offer a powerful insight into the daily experiences of those marginalised by gender and social status. Her work challenges readers to reflect on how economic and social structures perpetuate inequality and consider alternative models prioritising equity and justice. P.M. Sithara, in 'Enunciating the Everyday Resistance of Women in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*' reveals that the role of militarism and patriarchy in side-lining women resulted in anguish and pain. Even though this passive violence against women pushes them towards the margins, firstly because of their gender and secondly because of their socio-economic condition, Ao's women rise from those doubly marginalised spaces and reclaim their space in the central debate (Sithara 133).

In the past, women were socially constructed as subservient to men to such an extent that they began to accept it as a part of their identity. Despite progress, the traditional values of Naga society still place women in subordinate positions in public life. Women's achievements are often viewed as noteworthy despite their gender, thus perpetuating the bias that men are inherently superior. Even now, many women may defer to male superiority out of respect for tradition, causing them to struggle with the psychological impact of subordination. This legacy of female subservience persists among Naga women, regardless of their education or social status, and appears paradoxical in the context of a modern, educated society (Ao 98).

Nilsen and Roy argue that the interactions between dominant and subaltern groups involve intricate negotiations and contests that require a dynamic understanding of subalternity

and hegemony across various power structures. Therefore, studying the literature from northeast India is crucial in comprehending subaltern groups' opposing actions to resist dominant ideologies (Nilsen and Roy 2-4).

### **Apenyo & Libeni: Victims of the Patriarchal Indian State and Societal Culture**

Temsula Ao's collection of short stories published in 2006, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, is a breathtakingly beautiful composition depicting the violence which re-structured and 'revolutionised' the Naga psyche. This collection consists of 10 short stories that play around the negotiation of people between the insurgent groups and state-sponsored machinery, which lead to atrocities such as rape, torture, destruction of homes, burning down of villages, etc. Ao, in the introduction of the collection, has precisely mentioned:

..there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims, the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life – their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone*, pp 10).

The story, 'The Last Song', starts with the mother, Libeni, fighting against the odds after the death of her husband, Zhamben, to provide everything for her daughter. Zhamben was a teacher who sang folk songs and Christian hymns at the church. After his sudden death, Libeni's world came crashing upon her and her daughter, who had to keep their head held high amidst the storm of insurgency. In doing so, she raised her daughter, Apenyo, while working in the fields. Apenyo, despite all the hardships, never lost the gift of an exquisite voice passed down to her by her father; she continued to sing. The villagers had also recognised her love for singing, and she was soon inducted into the church choir. To her mother's happiness, people started calling her the 'singing beauty' when she reached adulthood. She was allocated the position of the lead singer in the inauguration of a new church building for which the villagers had been putting much meticulous effort for many years.

It is worth noting that Libeni and her daughter were ousted from society due to the lack of a male figure in their life. Still, it was only because of Apenyo's innocent struggle to bring her love of singing to fruition that the villagers started recognising her and her mother as an essential part of the clan. These female characters were, in a sense, marginalised because of Zhamben's death because the Naga society is highly patriarchal, and they believe that women

must be protected by men as their security cannot be compromised. An instance to prove this fact can also be found in the story when Libeni's

“relatives told her to get married again so that she and little Apenyo would have a man to protect and look after them. However, Libeni would not listen, and when they repeatedly told her to think about it seriously, she asked them never to bring up the subject again” (Ao, *The Last Song*, pp 32).

The story continues and leads us to witness the separatist movement within the story as Nagaland was going through troubled times because of the army-insurgency clash, which led to genocides and the death of the mother and the daughter – because of rape. All this happened because the militants forced the villagers to recruit people towards the cause or pay taxes. When the Indian army started unearthing the records of these betrayals, they were shocked to see the number of people who had to pay taxes and to teach them a lesson by arresting all the leaders of such a movement. The army opened fire at the church congregation where all the villagers were gathered and commanded the village headman to come forward accompanied by the pastor. Through the chaos, Apenyo continued to sing, and her singing was considered an act of defiance which further enraged the soldiers, and they started to inflict violence on the crowd. Libeni tried to stop Apenyo, but she kept on singing as if a divine presence was guiding her to follow the path she had been travelling and to keep singing. To teach her a lesson, the captain grabbed her by the hair, dragged her away from the crowd and started raping her while a few other soldiers waited for their turn while looking at the heart-wrenching scene. When Libeni, while searching for her daughter, goes to the spot, she is shocked to see the scenario and tries to intervene. On seeing this, a soldier grabbed her, pinned her down and "bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body, using the woman's new lungi afterwards, which he had flung aside, to wipe himself. The small band of soldiers then took their turn, even though by the time the fourth one mounted, the woman was already dead” (Ao, *The Last Song*, 28). Then the army continued to kill the people who tried to flee from the spot or wanted to take refuge in the old church. The whole village was burned down to ashes, and people went missing; thousands of burnt bones were found on the premises of both the old and new churches. The remains of the mother and the daughter who became victims of the patriarchal forces of the mechanism of the Indian State too assimilated with the remains of other dead people. Because of their “unnatural death,” the mother-daughter duo was buried outside the periphery of the village graveyard. The Naga villagers reasoned their decision stating that the graveyard premises were only for those who died a natural death. Thus,

their own society, along with the patriarchal Indian State, became the perpetrators for these women.

Temsula Ao's storytelling in "The Last Song" draws on the oral tradition of folklore and can be interpreted as a challenge to the dominant literary culture of mainland India. Apenyo's singing is a form of resistance and an expression of dissent, empowering marginalised voices and restoring their agency, thereby representing the duality of marginalisation, leading to the downfall of the mother-daughter duo.

### **Imdongla: A Victim of Gender Discrimination and Her Tribal Roots**

'A Simple Question' is a short story by Temsula Ao in the collection of her short stories titled *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). This short story deals with double marginalisation when seen through a deconstructive pattern. The prominent character in the short story, Imdongla, suffers from double marginalisation in her life, firstly as a woman who must abide by all the rules of the tribe and secondly as a tribal woman who is subjugated and oppressed not only by the government personnel but also by the rebels. Her husband Tekaba was a "gaonburah", a representative of the villagers answerable to the rebels.

Firstly, let us talk about how Imdongla was marginalised as a woman in her own tribe. As in the story, the rebels started collecting taxes from the villagers for their own expenses and food. We notice a change in Imdongla's character as she saves her husband and other villagers from the rebels by using her strategic presence of mind. For instance, in the story, the rebels were on the verge of beating her husband along with other villagers; it was then that she used her mind and said, "Hey, Toshi, why don't you tell this man that I could not return this rice to you this morning as promised. Remember you lent it to my son for the age-set feast? Here it is" (Ao, *Laburnum for My Head*, pp 74). By her words, she saved her husband and the other villager from the cruelty of the rebels. Nevertheless, the villagers or her husband did not appreciate her deed and her presence of mind. We can see this in the story when the rebels raised the taxes, and everyone in the village was stressing about a way to pay the taxes, she came up with her strong voice but

"Imdongla forcefully butted in to advise resisting the so-and-so's from the jungle. Tekaba tried to hush her, 'Keep quiet, woman, you know nothing.' At this, she flared up, 'Know nothing? Well, who saved you the last time when you stood there like a statue about to wet your loin cloth?'" (Ao, *Laburnum for My Head*, pp 76).

We can see that even after doing so much for the villagers and for her husband, she was marginalised as a woman merely based on her gender. The results could have been different if she had been a male figure. Secondly, she was marginalised as a tribal person. The situation between the government and the rebels was not good, so the villagers suffered. They were the ones who paid the taxes to the rebels, and if found helping the government officials, they were not only humiliated but also killed by the rebels. The army personnel were also not in their favour, as in the story, when they found villagers helping the rebels by paying taxes to them and other resources, they arrested all the village elders and the gaonburahs.

### **Conclusion**

Temsula Ao's depiction of double-marginalised women exposes the harsh treatment inflicted on them in a society that deems women inferior to men. While the stories may be centred around incidents in the Ao Naga tribe, they have broader implications for society, particularly in the Northeast region. These stories represent the unheard voices of the subaltern from various parts of the world. Society is created through the combined efforts of both men and women; however, men have used their physical strength to assert dominance over women, leading to the development of a patriarchal society. Women are expected to remain silent and obedient, while men are deemed superior and expected to possess qualities such as strength, courage, and stability. Women are assigned domestic responsibilities and taught to serve men. Furthermore, while the wrongdoings of men are seen as crimes, but those of women are viewed as sins. While showcasing women who face injustices twice, Ao's stories never fail to highlight them as the ones who stand against oppression.

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