

Revisiting Naga Cultural Heritage through Tamsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

Rakesh Ghosh

Research Scholar,

Dept. of English and Foreign Languages,

Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak (M.P.)

&

Dr Deepa Moni Boruah

Assistant Professor,

Dept. of English and Foreign Languages,

Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak (M.P.)

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Abstract:

The present research paper aims to study the glorious past of Naga Culture in re-establishing peace in a region, that is marred by a decade of violence by analyzing Tamsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home- Stories from a War Zone*. It also aims to examine the Text through a deconstructionist lens to see the rich cultural heritage of the Naga tribe instead of focusing on violence and conflict. Tamsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home – Stories from a War Zone*, is a collection of ten short stories, where each story tries to locate their lost cultural heritage rather than violence and conflict, justifying human values, which says that in war, there are no winners or losers, the impact of the war can only be assessed only in human terms. In the Text, the writer successfully portrays the cultural background of the Naga people. She tried to bring back the lost glory of the community by negating the misrepresentation of the Naga people by the 'Outsiders'. It will also analyze the Text as a tribal woman's incessant effort to bring forth the Naga culture and dynamic of her people to the worldview. This study is based on secondary data and incorporated through the textual analysis research method.

Keywords: Nagaland, Culture, Heritage, Modernism, and Deconstruction.

Objective:

The main objective of this research paper is to justify the human value which says in conflicts, "there are no winners, only victims..." (Ao, x) by highlighting the age-old rich cultural heritage of the Naga society through Temsula Ao's Text, *These Hills Called Homes- Stories from A War Zone*. This paper also aims to give an insight into the reflection and preservation of the Naga cultural heritage amidst the whirl of change as represented in the Text.

Introduction:

The word 'culture' is a very complex and contested one; hence, it has varied meanings. The term does not only represent an 'essence of being' but, rather it can best be understood as a mobile signifier. There are several controversies over the definition of 'culture'. The British cultural critic Raymond Williams famously asserted that "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Williams 87). If one tries to understand the workings of any societal structure, the person must know the culture of that particular society. "The Latin root of the word 'culture' is colere, which can mean anything from cultivating and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting." (Eagleton 8). An English poet and cultural critic, Mathew Arnold developed the concept of culture to mean "the study and pursuit of perfection" (Arnold 11). In a general sense, 'culture' means the way of life; it shows how human beings are living in a peaceful co-existence with each other in a given society. While defining the terminology, one has to be very cautious due to its nature of multiplicity.

The idea of culture is not static, rather it is dynamic. As time passed, the symbols that constituted the meaning of culture also transformed. In this transition, the indigenous people are caught between change and tradition. They are being drawn into the vortex of modernization. One such indigenous community is the Naga tribe of Nagaland, the Northeast region of India. The culture of Nagaland in its specific term and the culture of Northeast in its general term is very distinct from the rest of India. While commenting on the uniqueness of Northeast literature, Tilottoma Misra, in her edited volume *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* puts it as:

There is an intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation of 'other' culture is a recurrent feature of the literature of the seven northeastern

states. Each small community or linguistic group has responded in its own distinctive manner through its oral or written communication to the encounters with the majoritarian cultures from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country. (Misra xi)

The sense of 'cultural loss' is what makes Northeast literature a different of its kind. Temsula Ao is a renowned writer from Nagaland, a northeast region of India. She belonged to the Ao tribe, a major tribe of Nagaland. "The name Ao is a current mispronunciation of Aor, their own word for themselves, meaning according to their own statements, "those who came" (i.e., across the Dikhu), as distinct from Mirir ("those who did not come")", (Mills 1). In her Text, *These Hills Called Home – Stories from a War Zone*, Ao took her pen to pen the culture of her Naga community.

Naga Culture as Represented in the Text:

Temsula Ao's short story collection, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, explores Naga culture and identity amid violence and conflict. Set in Nagaland, India, during the decades-long Naga insurgency, Ao's stories offer a glimpse into the lives of ordinary people struggling to survive and maintain their culture in the face of oppression and displacement. Ao revisits Naga culture and traditions through her stories, highlighting their resilience and beauty in adversity. She writes about Naga folktales, myths, legends, and everyday customs and practices, such as weaving, cooking, and traditional ceremonies. In doing so, Ao creates a vivid and authentic portrait of Naga culture while challenging stereotypical representations of the Naga people as violent or exotic.

The book, *These Hills Called Home – Stories from a War Zone* is a collection of ten short stories. Throughout the Text, Ao tries to depict her own culture as being drawn into the vortex of modernization, which affected the psyche of the Naga people. While commenting on the Naga historical tradition and the role of the modern generation, the writer mentioned the indifferent attitude of the young generation toward their tradition and culture, Ao puts it, "A Few of the stories in this collection try to capture the ambiance of the traditional Naga way of life, which, even for our youngsters today, is increasingly becoming irrelevant in the face of the 'progress' and 'development' which is only now catching the Naga people." (Ao x) The reverberation of this

indifferent attitude towards one's cultural heritage is also a poignant topic, discussed by Dr Santosh Kumar Sonker in the blurb of the book *When an Adivasi Sings*, where the translator stated that:

Registering a strong presence of Adivasi sensibility of North-East in the field of literature, it depicts the poet's worry over the deteriorating interest of the Adivasi youths in their cultural roots. It highlights her effort to search for a path through which Adivasi cultural traditions can run along with the modern ways of life. (Sonker)

The impact of modernization can also be seen as taking its shape in the story, 'Soaba'. It tells the story of a village orphan, Imtimoa. He was commonly known among the villagers as 'Soaba' which means 'idiot'. In this Text, Ao portrays the life of an innocent boy being destroyed and killed by the agents of political violence in the region. In this story, for the first time, the people got acquainted with vocabulary like- 'convoy', 'grouping', 'curfew', and 'situation'. The coexistence of vernacular and English dialects among the villagers can be understood from different levels. On the one hand, using English words such as – 'grouping', 'curfew', 'convoy', and others with their vernacular terminologies articulates their reciprocity with the modern world. On the other hand, this coexistence of tradition and modernity depicts the poignant reality of the Naga people. Manjeet Baruah, in the book *Remains of Spring*, uttered the feeling of discontentment:

... when the presence of such vocabulary is seen along with their awareness of war technologies, the irony of their reality becomes even more evident. The irony is that they are part of the modernity of the times but in terms of political violence rather than social welfare. (Baruah xvii)

Another story, 'The Last Song', is about a little girl Apenyo and her village. During colonialism, the Nagas were converted to Christianity as a part of the Britishers' tendency of 'cultural colonialism. So, the villagers of this village follow the Christian culture. Apenyo used to go to church with her mother, Libeni and had a great interest in singing. Whenever she went to church on Sunday, she used to join the congregation, "When the congregation sang together, Apenyo would also join." (Ao 24). The story also tells the rich weaving culture of Nagaland. The people of Nagaland are great craftsmen. They are very ingenious in terms of artistic creativity. Handloom weaving plays an important role in the daily life of North-eastern people:

It is one of the largest family-based traditional industries in the northeast region. The products are enormous, matching with varied cultures, languages, and dialects. The unique creativity and skill of the weavers are found in each and every design. The identity of a particular community can also be known after observing their attires in many parts of the world. (Ckj 34)

In this story 'The Last Song', Ao portrays the culture of 'weaving shawls' by the village women, "Libeni had the reputation of being one of the best weavers in the village, and her shawls were in great demand" (Ao 24). It also describes their clothing during the festive seasons, where the tribe's men wear the shawls and 'lungis' for the women. The writer narrated the food habits of the Naga people honestly without paying any heed to the stereotype notions, "pigs earmarked for the feast were given special food to fatten them up" (Ibid., 25). The Naga culture forbade the cremation of any such person who died in an accident or whose death was not natural, "The deaths of these unfortunate people were considered to be from unnatural causes, and according to tradition, they could not be buried in the village graveyard" (Ibid., 30).

In another story, 'The Night', Ao honestly portrays the combustion in a family caught between the web of youthful passion and social norms. Imnala, a beautiful girl mothering an illegitimate child, fell in love with Repalemba, commonly known as Alemba, a young contractor from town who already had two children. Their unacknowledged relationship became public talk when Imnala got pregnant for the second time. As per their societal norms, it denies any recognition to any boy who is born out of an illegal relationship between a man and a woman. For such a case, the "...boy to be thus branded was to become a non-person. He would not claim kinship with any clan and therefore would not be able to sit on any assembly of men when he grew up" (Ibid., 46).

The pottery culture is described in the story 'The Pot Maker'. "Pottery is not a widely practiced craft in Nagaland. It is restricted to women." (*Miscellaneous Arts and Crafts in Nagaland / IGNCA*). In this story, the little girl named Sentila has a great interest in her clan's pot-making culture: "She began to dream of becoming a pot maker like her mother and grandmother" (Ao 57). However, Arenla, her mother, did not want her daughter to be in pot-making, as it involved a great deal of physical labour. When the village council learned about her parents' ignorance of carrying forward their culture, the village council summoned her father, Mesoba. They told him to remind

his wife that “it was the duty to teach her daughter the skill that was handed down from generation to generation for the good of the entire village. They also told him that skills such as pot making, which not only catered to the needs of the people but also symbolized the tradition and history of the people, did not ‘belong’ to any individual”. (Ibid., 62)

A Deconstructionist notion of the Text:

“North-East India is a politically vital and strategically vulnerable region of India.” (Das 33). The multiplicity of different ethnic groups and their fractured identities in this region have always been targeted either by foreign invaders or by government policies. It has always been observed as a mainland tendency to see the people of the Northeast region only as a specimen of anthropological studies. Today, if someone knows Nagaland or the Northeast by its name, they know the region only as a conflict-ridden state. Jamuna Bini, a famous poet from Arunachal Pradesh, also uttered in her text ‘Jab Adivasi Gata Hai’ translated into English ‘When an Adivasi Sings’:

When a person from a developed society looks at an Adivasi, his understanding is preoccupied with the prejudice that Adivasis are uncivilized, beggars and violent. The language, living-style, dress and festivals of the Adivasis seem trivial to him. But while passing through these poems, you will realize that the culture and tendencies of the Adivasis are not less than anyone, but they are freer and more progressive. (Bini 26)

The people of mainland India never try to focus on their unique lifestyle or culture as it does not conform to Eurocentric standards. In this Text, *These Hills Called Home - Stories from a War Zone*, Ao tries to deconstruct all those preconceived notions of the dominant national discourse by bringing alive the age-old rich cultural heritage of the Naga tribe. Here, she dismisses all the violence and conflict between the Indian State and Nagaland and discusses their cultural artifact. So, the Text can be seen as a product of Ao's deconstructive notion, where the contemporary writers focus more on the perpetrated violence by the mainlanders upon the indigenous people. Ao's critical bend of mind shifted towards the portrayal of the rich cultural heritage of the Naga tribe. This Text can also be seen as a reaction against mainstream shrewd politics, which always funds to demean the indigenous language and culture.

Conclusion:

The Naga indigenous culture is significant in contemporary times. The Nagas face various challenges, encompassing environmental deterioration, economic advancement, and societal transformation. Nevertheless, the Naga culture is a foundation of fortitude and adaptability for the Naga community. Incorporating Naga culture can provide valuable support to these indigenous communities in tackling the difficulties they encounter and constructing a more promising future for themselves. Ao's writing explores the intricate connection between 'culture' and 'identity' as a key issue. Ao asserts that 'culture' is important to the 'Naga identity', emphasizing the profound and enduring bond that the Naga people have with their cultural heritage. The relationship is also apparent in Ao's stories, which are abundant in Naga folktales, myths, legends, and rituals. A specific indigenous community or group identity is facilitated by its culture. It plays a significant role in shaping a society's ideas, rituals, and value system. Furthermore, it establishes a connection with the land and its vital resources for maintaining life. Ao's narratives also question the notion of culture as fixed and immutable. She demonstrates the dynamic and adaptable nature of culture, highlighting its ability to accommodate the evolving needs of individuals. Therefore, culture influences all aspects of human existence to varying degrees. Tamsula Ao, in this Text, *These Hills Called Home – Stories from a War Zone*, skillfully tries her hand at bringing back the lost glory of her community and culture by portraying the religious belief system, weaving and pottery-making practices, social customs, and rituals of the tribal people of Nagaland. She did not want her region or the community to be seen as only a contested space of violence and conflict but rather as an abbot of peace. She focuses on the 'face-to-face community' culture to bring forth the Naga culture and dynamic of her people to the worldview by deconstructing the preconceived notion of the Naga people and their cultural identity. For Nagas, their cultural identity is their everything, and whosoever is not willing to follow their culture is considered their enemy, "anyone refusing to do so will be considered an enemy of the village". (Ao 62)

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