



Reconstructing the Past: A Study of History, Memory, and Trauma in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

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Abstract:

This study attempts to examine and explore the subaltern voice and experiences that have to be scrutinised through the close reading of Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. It is a collection of ten short stories based on personal and collective historical accounts of conflict, violence, and oppression imposed on the native people by the dominant groups. Foregrounding the text into the frame of neo-historical approach and memory study, the narratives in this collection tend to explore the unforgettable, painful, and superimposed experiences that remain silent and unrecognised in the mainstream narratives. By revisiting the historical past interwoven with memory and trauma, Ao attempts to delineate the narratives which act as a counter history to dominant historiography and give voices to the unheard. This study also takes into consideration how the characters representing the voices of ordinary people, are affected by their personal, historical, and collective self and identity marked with the atrocities and onslaught of the conflicted war zone and bear the memory of scars and blemish in their psyche.

Keywords: war, conflict, subalternity, historical consciousness, memory, trauma, survival.

Introduction

Temsula Ao, one of the most important and prolific voices in the arena of English literature in Northeast, pens down the past historical and lived experiences of long termed consequences of war afflicted Nagaland in her short story *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. She attempts to reconstruct the unrecognised, undermined, and silent voices of the people living in the periphery through the reminiscences of the past. The aim of this paper is to explore how Temsula Ao reconstructs the past of the Naga people foregrounding the lived, long lost, and agonised experiences through war, history, memory and trauma in the short story *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Set against the historical backdrop of constant conflict and surveillance in the 1960s between the Naga insurgent group and Indian militarisation, the stories relate, reflect and re-examine the violent and distorted lives of ordinary Naga people whose lives have been fractured, fragmented and disoriented by the ongoing conflict, fear, threats, displacement, despair, and dilemma from both the Naga insurgent group and the Indian military. Ao uses memory not as a passive residue but as an archive of the factual events of the past that preserve the pain, agony, silence, endurance and resilience. Temsula Ao unfolds the sardonic and bitter experiences of multiple ordinary native people witnessing and going through the traumatic phases of a war-afflicted situation. She delineates the trajectory of pain, loss and struggle to survive amidst the conflict, leading to curfew, fear, displacement and violence that affect the personal and collective memory of Naga people.

Narratives as presented in this short story collection *These Hills called home* by Temsula, which are mostly unwritten and oral narratives play an essential role in the formation of the history of Naga community as these narratives restore and retrieve the essence of the past in the present and transfer it to the next generation to preserve historical consciousness. Alan Robinson in his book *Narrating the past: Historiography, Memory, and the Contemporary Novel* remarks, “Humans are constantly in transition from the elusive present into future which

itself soon becomes the ever receding past. Understandably, we deal with this temporal dislocation by seeking to preserve, retrieve and reinterpret or appropriate past experience " (4). The narratives that sustain lived realities of the conflicting past, provide a profound exploration of how the past is constructed through the fragmented and disoriented sense of memory, war and trauma. Ao believes that past events always appeal to the present cognition of any individual who tries to create a present past by narrating the events directly or indirectly witnessed.

Literature Review

Rai and Tripathi in their article “Redemption of the Naga Historical Consciousness: An analysis of Tamsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*” talks about the blurring of the ethnocentric movements of the Naga people under the dominance of military power of Indian nation states. The paper argues over the importance of reviving historical consciousness by retelling the past events of ethnic struggle of the Naga community. Nayan Jyoti Hazarika in her article " Representation of Women in Tamsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*" examines the role and representation against the backdrop of Nagas' struggle for independence and military groups of Indian nation states. The paper argues how women amidst the war afflicted zone turn to be rebels by resisting both patriarchy and militarisation. Ao, through the resistant narratives of women, challenges the stereotyped gender binary. Sithara P.M. in her article “Enunciating the Everyday Resistance of Women in Tamsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone*” unmasks how women are not mere victims of ideological conflict and difference of political bodies, but also resist the power and contribute to the formation of individual and collective identity. It highlights the implications of subtle ways of resistance that give space to the Northeast women. Ruma Ahmed in her article “The Portrayal of women in Tamsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*”

examines the condition of women marginalization and resistance in a war ridden Naga society. It shows how women have to surrender to the systematic violence and cruelties in the society. Their wretched conditions reveal how women are traumatised and vulnerable to the dominant and oppressive ideology and patriarchy during explicit war and atrocity. Kamal in his article “Ethnic Identity in Tamsula Ao’s These Hills Called Home” attempts to portray the role of ethnicity in establishing the identity of a community. It reveals how challenging it is for Naga ethnicity to sustain their unique identity.

Theoretical Perspectives

The neo-historical approach and the lens of memory have been applied to reinterpret the nuances and gaps that remain unheard and unrecognised in the narratives of mainstream history. Hayden white, the most extinguished figure of neo-historical approach, unmask the history and fiction based on the true and the real as he contends, “Historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional history is interested in the real” (147). He holds the idea about meta-history that a narrative structure becomes an essential tool for the historical interpretation as the raw historical events discovered by the research have no logical and coherent connection among them. The historians use a narrative technique, called emplotment, to endow the events with meaning and significance. The novelist plays a crucial role to process the historical facts into literary craft through the addition to emplotment and aesthetic qualities on the past events through imaginative faculties. Sergio Matos develops the view that “The novelist is able to capture what the historian is hardly to do” (430). He elaborates on the distinction between history and historical fiction in terms of degree and he argues that historical composition is not objective and scientific but a verbal craft or fiction constructed through literary techniques of emplotment. Carlo Ginzburg has extended the idea of microhistory in opposition to the concept of metahistory. He is of the opinion that historical interpretation

requires the voices of the overlooked and marginalised people. He favours historical specificity that prioritises concrete individual events to reveal broader cultural patterns.

Interconnectedness between History and Memory

According to Bacon, the parts of human learning have reference to the three parts of Man's understanding: "History to his memory, poesy to his imagination, and philosophy to his reason" (285). Ao tries to echo the assumption of Bacon that history is somehow characterised by its relationship to memory - that it is, in effect, the intellectual form under which memory spills over into organised knowledge. George Santayana talks about the interconnectedness of history with memory as history is a store house of the events of the past that is recorded and composed in the pages of history through memory. Santayana quotes, "History is nothing but assisted and recorded memory" (175). John Lucas argues about the involvement between history and memory that history is personal, participatory, and reflective. He considers history as 'the remembered past', rejecting the idea that history is a pure science aiming to reconstruct what exactly it was. Ludmilla Jordanova, the British historian elaborates the act of history writing which is connected with the transmission of memories. She argues that the practice of history is, after all, a highly specialised form of commemoration.

Subjective Interpretation of History

In the story *The Jungle Major* subjective experiences of the female protagonist named Katalia, a simple and ordinary and strong willed woman and her husband Punaba have been reconstructed through the narratives of the omniscient third person narrator, who acts as a neutral observer of incidents that happened. Before the outbreak of war, Katalia had been struggling with her personal life regarding her choice, personal liberty and identity. She is conflicted by her decision of choosing her own husband as some strict norms and social

customs that prevail in her society grip, cripple, and contradict her. Nevertheless, she proves herself to be an indomitable and strong woman as she sticks to her decision of marrying the man of lower status she has strongly desired. Though She had to go through many social stigma and taunting remarks from the people of her society, she daringly shows her fearless and resilient spirit to defend herself against all the rumours, insult and condemnation. The story of overcoming all the personal hardships and problems reveals how the narratives of hierarchy, clan conflict, patriarchy, and gender discrimination tend to control both the body and mind of women. The class and clan conflict has been vividly reflected through the sharp comments of her society people towards her "The relatives' as well as the general public's indignation over the proposed marriage was due to the immense disparity between them not only because of the outward appearances but also of the family position of the girl and her betrothed". After marriage Katalia tries to maintain rhythm and order with her husband. To the society, marriage though appears evil but to her it seems to beautify her life. The narrator narrates, "Punaba earns enough to keep his wife in relative comfort. The woman, who was called Katalia, seemed happy and content in her new role as a housewife" (3).

The happy and contented marital life of Katalia and Punaba had been shattered down like a daydream when the entire land was caught with the fire and smoke of the patriotic fervour that swept the imagination of the people and plunged them into a struggle. The personal struggle of Punaba turns into a collective struggle of Naga people as war interweaves and infuses her experiences with the historical struggle of Naga. The village where happiness and rhythm used to prevail with traces of some domestic excitement, rituals, and clamour turns to be a battleground that keeps surveillance on the ordinary people of Nagaland. The native people are no more free to talk and move in their own land which they freed from the clutches of British colonizers and turn into subjects of interpellation from individual subjects as the narratives of new rule and domination by Indian Militarization begin to control the gaze and movement of

Naga people. The narrator narrates the situation, "Skirmishes were taking place close to the village and the atmosphere within the village became one of fear and mutual suspicion. People return from their fields much earlier than they used to. It seemed that a Pall had descended upon the entire land" (3-4).

Personal Memory

"Memory is a tricky thing: it picks and chooses what to perceive and what to discard. Sometimes it is the trivial that triggers the process of remembering a great loss. I remember how the memory of my mother's special curry of sun- dried fish used to haunt me long after her death, as though the absence of this exotic dish from the family menu made her death more real than anything else about her. But as I grew into middle age and beyond, it struck me how memories are often sifted through an invisible sieve, and selections are made of both the good and the bad, either to be preserved or discarded. I suppose life has its own mechanism of putting its house in order so that human beings can live with a modicum of peace and tranquility" (Ao ix).

In the story *The Old Man*, an old man narrates the harrowing experiences of war afflicted time from recollections of his memory as he himself witnessed and suffered from the consequences of violent war. He recalls the past of his own youth and the whole generation of his time as they missed the full-fledged beauty of youth they dreamt of for the devastating and exhausting outburst of war that crushed the coloured and dreamy lives of the Naga youth.

The older man reminisces and narrates the story of transmission from innocent youths to ruthless killers. The story illustrates the failings of ideologies based on truthfulness and non-violence of Naga youths who joined Underground Army but the atrocities and inhuman killings from the side of Indian Army dehumanised the innocent youths, who turned into ruthless killers. The old man did not hesitate to confess how they have been atrocious by killing their

enemies in their jungle life driven by scarcity of food, fear, threats, struggle, disappointment, existential crisis. He feels pity and mercy after looking at the face of dead enemies and seems to reflect a sense of helplessness and human tragedy in a power driven society. The irony of fate is that a whole generation who are known as the freedom fighters, should be honoured and glorified for their commitment and sacrifice. However, they are the mere victims of power structure leading them to a vulnerable state of existence. They could not get relief after their full surrender from jungle life. Again they are imprisoned by the law of the Indian nation states for taking up arms against the Government of India. The story reveals how an individual is not an individual but turns into ideological subject of interpellation

Collective Memory

In the story *An Old Man Remembers*, the older man who is the inheritor of the historical past, has a tremendous responsibility to pass on the personal and collective memories and make sense of the impact left by the struggle on the lives of communities. He directly witnesses the events that imprint his mind with violence, fear and threats. His body, voice and habits become the space of war and conflict. The memory of personal experience becomes fragmented, disordered and emotional breakdown. He is highly haunted and stimulated by some specific memories, like adventurous and joyful life with friends, excitement and exuberance of shared truth, risky moments of jungle life, brutal violence of war years etc. In his old age all these burdensome images and experiences surface, suggesting how trauma reshapes the texture of individual memory. The narratives about the transition from a young innocent youth to an older man with an amount of accumulated memories play a crucial role in shaping the personal as well as collective identity of his community.

Memory in the life of the old man acts as a great stimulus in stirring all the past events he directly witnessed and experienced, and he could not resist himself from sharing his

tremendous experiences when his grandson asked him, "Grandfather, is it true that you and Imli killed many people when you were in the jungle?" The older man Sashi was completely taken aback by the question. He never spoke about his jungle days; it was as though that phase of his life was consigned to a dark place in his heart and would be buried with him when his time came. However, that night the disturbed question of the child stirred old spectres and left him speechless for a long time. He recalls the memory of what his friend, Imli had said to him that "The young had the right to know about the people's history and that they should not grow up ignorant about the unspeakable atrocities that the old generation had witnessed. However, every time he rushed to him by saying, "What good will it do them?" (93). The old man realises the truth, "Imli was right because now his grandson was hurling a question at him from the other side of history. Even in the midst of grappling with his confused thoughts, he paused to salute the memory of his friend, "Good old sensible Imli, how right you were and how wrong I was in thinking that the bad things will go away if one does not talk about them. The war period for the whole generation of people like older man Sashi, Imli and all their friends and relatives was a seemingly endless cycle of beatings, rapes, burning of villages and grain-filled barns. Their prime youth was completely shattered and traumatic, as forced labour, the grouping of villages, and running from one hideout to another in the deep jungles to escape the pursuing soldiers turned them into ruthless killers. The narrator unfolds the story of releasing the guilt through the mouth of the old man by quoting, "Survivors like Imli and himself, did they not owe it to their fallen friends to tell the world what it was like to be fifteen and sixteen in the turbulent fifties in these remote hills they called home? Did he have the right to keep youngsters like his own grandson in the dark about the price their parents and grandparents had paid for a piece of earth they now called Nagaland?" (93).

Memory as a Recovery or Reconstruction

Aristotle famously distinguished memory from anamnesis. He defined memory as a kind of remembering that takes the apparent form of retention or preservation: the persistence within the mind of impressions formed at an earlier moment. Anamnesis denotes a kind of remembering that is experienced as a deliberate action of retrieval or recovery: the effortful bringing to the surface of the mind of things otherwise latent or seemingly forgotten. Saint Augustine develops the metaphor of memory as a storehouse, in which the sensory and intellectual impressions of past experience are preserved awaiting future use. He explains the vagaries of anamnesis as “when I go into this storehouse, I ask that what I want should be brought forth. Something appears immediately, but others require to be searched for longer, and then dragged out, as it were, from some hidden recess” (Augustine, ch. 8). In the story *The Old Man*, the old man stands at the juncture of memory and anamnesis as he suffers from the accumulation of sticky and stingy memory for witnessing with first hand experiences and the act of anamnesis seems to be an act of triggering and doubling the pain for him and to others waiting to listen to. However, having been haunted by the inner impulses of his own psychic development and need for equilibrium, he recalls the memory of vibrant talk of his friend and he feels the urge of sharing to his grandson for preserving the knowledge and glory of his community. The identity of a community is formed and crafted by the outlines and outpouring of the individual as well as collective memories. Marc Auge, an eminent anthropologist, gives an analogy on memory and said that “Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are crafted by the sea” (20).

Trauma as a lived memory

Forgetting and forgiveness are two inseparable concepts that these two ideas are interwoven to understand how trauma turns into a living memory. When human beings suffer, they intend

to propitiate their agonised souls. Forgetting is inescapable when humans suffer from historical injustice as they find themselves in the position of impossibility to give punishment to the dominant group. Arendt examines the nature of people regarding the possibility and limits of forgiveness for something traumatic and unjustified. In the middle of the 20th century, in the essay *The Human Condition*, She argues, “Men are unable to forgive what they can not punish and ... they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable” (241). In the book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, Simon Wiesenthal asked religious and political leaders if they would have forgiven a Nazi SS officer on his deathbed who committed his crimes against the Jews. Responses from those who responded to the question of Wiesenthal reveal that the understanding and application of forgiveness is a complex task. It is clear that how one understands and applies forgiveness is fundamental to how one operates as a social being. In the story *The Jungle Major*, the older man bears the painful memories of his own life from childhood to adulthood that he had witnessed and experienced. He suffers from the dilemma whether he should share with the next generation as he tries to forget the tormenting burden of memory and relieve the people of future generations of his own community from traumatic past experiences of the older generation.

Conclusion

Narratives that Temsula Ao presents in this collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from Warzone* revisit, revive, and reinterpret the history of the past and turn them in the process of remembering, proving the fact that history is not fixed but in a state of transition. Revisiting and finding alternative narratives to meta history retrieve the memory and trauma which can not be a parallel story of chronicle happenings and events but is fragmented, unorganised and disoriented that survivors of scars and pain revisit through story telling, memory, and oral narrative. Ao uses memory as an immaterial signifier of recalling the incidents and trajectory

during continuous war between Angami people of Nagaland and Indian military groups. Temsula Ao through her authentic representation of individual experience of characters affiliated with memories of conflict and trauma with their collective notion about war and its effects give a new perspective to dominant narratives that intended to hide the alternative.

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