

Gendered Subalternity in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

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ABSTRACT: Temsula Ao's literary work, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, offers a profound exploration of the complex interplay between gender and subalternity within the context of Naga society. This research paper explores the meticulous portrayal of gendered subalternity in Ao's writings, examining how the author elucidates the experiences of women and marginalized individuals in the Naga Hills. Through a close textual analysis, this study uncovers the multifaceted ways in which Ao's characters negotiate their identities, resist oppressive structures, and carve out spaces for agency and empowerment. By drawing on feminist theoretical frameworks, this research sheds light on the intricate relationships between gender, culture, and resistance in Ao's narratives. Furthermore, it interrogates how Ao's literary representations challenge dominant narratives and contribute to a richer understanding of subalternity in Naga literature. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that Ao's work serves as a compelling and essential contribution to the discourse on gendered subalternity in the context of Naga society, offering fresh perspectives on resistance, identity, and the power of storytelling.

KEYWORD: Northeast, subjugation, patriarchy, women, identity, marginalized, subaltern.

Introduction:

The theory of 'Gendered Subalternity' is an extension of the broader concept of subalternity within postcolonial and feminist studies. It explores the intersection of gender, class, and colonialism, with a focus on the experiences and voices of marginalized and oppressed women in colonial and postcolonial contexts. This theory draws significantly on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal work 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in which she reconfigures Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern and expands it to address gendered aspects of subalternity.

Temsula Ao's poignant collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, offers a compelling exploration of the often-overlooked dimension of gendered subalternity within the context of the Naga society. This collection, a masterful blend of storytelling and social commentary, probes into the intricate lives of Naga women, unraveling the complex layers of their experiences, aspirations, and challenges. Through the lens of Ao's evocative prose, with special reference to three short stories from the collection, namely *The Night*, *The Last Song*, and *The Pot Maker*, we embark on a journey that unveils the multifaceted narratives of women who have long been relegated to the peripheries of history and literature. In this article, we shall delve into the profound ways in which Ao's literary oeuvre sheds light on the gendered subalternity inherent in the Naga culture, highlighting the resilience and agency of these women who call the hills their home.

Analysis:

Temsula Ao in her short-story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* vividly portrays the hardships faced by the Naga tribe and the subjugation of women. This collection prominently highlights the oppression endured by women within the confines of societal norms and patriarchal traditions.

Society, a collaborative creation of both genders, initially operated harmoniously, with men and women making equal contributions. However, as time progressed, ‘men’ the dominant group sought control, leading to the emergence of a patriarchal system. Within this framework, ‘women’ often faced expectations of silence and obedience, yielding authority to men, who were considered superior. Traits like strength, courage, and stability were attributed to men, while women were unjustly characterized as weak, flexible, and emotional. Girls were socialized to be submissive, discouraged from challenging men, and confined to domestic roles, preparing to serve men dutifully. Importantly, men’s mistakes were labeled as crimes, while women’s errors were unfairly stigmatized as ‘sins.’

Adultery is regarded as a grave sin in patriarchy, and it often places a disproportionately heavy burden on women. While adultery typically involves the actions of both parties, it is usually women who endure the brunt of the pain, shame, and the stigma associated with being labeled adulterous. In such situations, men can often disavow any accusation of adultery and continue with their lives relatively unscathed. In contrast, women are left to contend with the physical, emotional, and social consequences of their actions. They must undergo the physical rigors of pregnancy and childbirth, shoulder the responsibility of raising the child, and often live with the child for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, women frequently find themselves in the challenging position of seeking recognition and a name for their children, a name that affirms the child’s paternity- a duty often forsaken by the child’s father.

The identity and status of a woman in society are often intrinsically tied to the name of her husband. In cases of adultery, where the woman’s fidelity is questioned, the judgment of her actions is swift and severe. The name of the father can significantly shape the child’s destiny even before birth, and it can determine the woman’s standing as a wife within her community. Within the context of Naga communities, adultery accusations often lead to community meetings convened by prominent clan members to determine the appropriate course of action for the woman who has allegedly lost her purity bearing a bastard in her womb. Temsula Ao’s short story *The Night* provides a vivid portrayal of the repercussions faced by women in such situations through the experiences of the character ‘Imnala’.

Imnala, a beautiful girl in her village, attracted the attention of numerous suitors from different clans. However, it was the engineer boy who won her heart with his love, care, and heartfelt gifts. His captivating words and persistent courtship eventually convinced her to visit his parents’ house, where he lived alone. There, they shared passionate moments for several consecutive days.

“Completely bowled over by the man’s ardour and pledges of eternal love, she became his willing lover and on the pretext of going to a friend’s hopuse, she spent those heavenly hours with the man she loved and who, she thought, loved her in return.”¹

When Imnala showed her resistance to getting pregnant, the engineer boy promised to marry her soon. However, his sudden disappearance from the village, citing the urgency of an important matter, left Imnala in shock. The village residents later delivered the unsettling news that “Imnala’s suitor had joined Naga underground army and had gone to China for training. Not only that, it was rumoured that he had taken a wife from the female recruits of the outfit and was living with her in the training camp.”² It became evident that his return was uncertain.

This revelation struck Innala like a sudden thunderclap because she realized that her life was about to take a drastic turn, as she was now carrying a child in her womb. In due course, Innala gave birth to a baby girl, but the entire society labeled the child as bastard. The man who had refused to acknowledge or name the child was equally responsible for this unfortunate situation. But he walked away without consequence, leaving Innala to bear the shame and sole responsibility for the child's upbringing.

Despite the hardships that had plagued Innala's life, a glimmer of hope and the prospect of love emerged when Repalemba, often referred to as Alemba, entered her life. Alemba worked as a contractor and his business endeavors had brought prosperity to Innala's family. During his frequent visits to their home, Alemba would generously bring gifts for Innala. Alemba was a married man with a wife and two children, and his intentions toward Innala were not initially questioned. However, on one of his visits, Alemba seized an opportunity when he found Innala alone in the house, and they shared an intimate moment. "They made love for the first time on her sick bed."³ This unexpected encounter led to another unfortunate turn of events for the family. Innala became pregnant once again. Ao observes:

"Innala became pregnant out of wedlock for the second time. The village was agog with the news and tongues began to wag: 'What can you expect from a girl like this? The old man's greed has landed him with a second bastard grandchild' 'She too is greedy, you know what I mean?'"⁴

Once again, Innala found herself abandoned by her suitor due to the oppressive weight of societal norms. He left her with a message, telling her not to worry about the child, but neglecting her own well-being. Innala's frustration exploded as she tore at her hair and cried out, "What about me? Will I ever find solace again?"⁵ This poignant scene in Temsula Ao's narrative underscores the frightening struggle for survival in a society where men hold dominant positions of power and influence. It exposes how a woman's individuality often goes unnoticed, overshadowed by the overpowering presence of men who are quick to exploit her vulnerability. Innala's ordeal reflects the harsh reality that women like her face. Ao echoes in the background, serving as a somber reminder of the societal constraints that women in their community grapple with. "Remember, in our society, a woman must have the protection of a man, even if he happens to be blind or lame. A woman alone will always be in danger."⁶ In this male-dominated world, the safety and status of a woman often hinge on her connection to a man, regardless of his qualities or intentions. Innala's predicament sheds light on the vulnerability and marginalization that women endure, emphasizing the need for societal change and the recognition of women's individuality and rights.

The social evil of patriarchal stereotypes inflicted an additional layer of suffering upon women, worsening their already awful circumstances. This tragic situation was further worsened by the actions of army officials who cruelly exploited women's bodies and used them as a means of battleground. Temsula Ao's heartbreaking story *The Last Song* unveils the horrifying victimization and brutality that women endure during the period of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Nagaland. The story delicately exposes the depths of human degradation and the hateful treatment of women at the hands of the armed forces. It narrates the traumatic fate of Apenyo and her widow mother, who became hapless victims during a planned massacre initiated by the Indian army against villagers accused of supporting rebels by providing donations and taxes.

The Indian army executed this massacre during the inauguration of a new church building, under the wrong belief that the villagers were helping the rebellion groups. In the face of impending danger, a few local leaders (gaonburas) attempted to plead with the army officers to spare the lives of the innocent. In such situation, chaos spread over the entire community as its members sought refuge for their lives. Amid this chaotic turmoil, Apenyo, the lead singer of the church choir, remarkably stood her ground, defiantly raising her voice in protest against the injustices committed by the Indian army.

She continued to sing with unwavering courage, seemingly guided by some unseen force.

“She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her. Her mother, standing with the congregation, saw her daughter singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to God in heaven.”⁷

However, the defiance of a woman probably wounded the Captain’s pride and he “grapped Apenyo by the hair and with a bemused look on his face dragged her away from the crowd towards the old church building.”⁸ When her mother Libeni entered the old church, “the young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn.”⁹ Libeni lost temper and charged forward with a wild rage; but tragically, she too fell victim to the same horrifying assault. The poor girl’s body was used as a battlefield. The captain and his fellow soldiers mercilessly hit her and raped her until she took her last breath.

This brutality in the story leaves the readers dumbfounded and fills with a deep sense of trauma in their mind failing to believe in such sheer cruelty. The oppression of the innocent women compels the readers to reflect on the situation and ponder over the question of how any human being could commit such an inhumane act against a fellow human, especially one of the opposite gender. Ao’s narrative vividly illustrates how militarism and patriarchy join hands in subjugating women. Her writings serve as a poignant representation of the emotional turmoil, suffering, and silent apprehensions experienced by women in conflict zones.

Another story *The Pot Maker* from Temsula Ao’s same collection narrates the plight of a woman named Arenla, who faces a lack of financial freedom and decision-making authority within her household. In the patriarchal Naga society, men are primarily responsible for safeguarding the village, leaving women with the burden of providing financial support to their families. However, the available job opportunities for women are often limited to traditional, low-paying roles.

Arenla, who works as a pot maker, is determined not to see her daughter, Sentila, endure the same fate of limited prospects and meager earnings. Despite the constraints imposed by her gender and society, Arenla vehemently opposes Sentila’s idea of following in her footsteps as a low-paid pot maker. She recognizes the need for her daughter to pursue a livelihood that offers greater value and stability. Arenla’s aspirations for Sentila extend beyond just financial concerns. She wishes for her daughter to learn the art of weaving, a profession of higher value and lower vulnerability to external factors like seasonal variations. Unlike pot making, which is subject to the whims of nature, weaving can be a more dependable source of income for Sentila. In her own way, within the limitations of her societal role, Arenla advocates for her daughter’s future and strives to provide her with better opportunities refusing to train her the skill of pottery, “I shall not teach her this craft which has brought no joy to me and only a pittance for my troubles.”¹⁰

However, the patriarchal system severely restricts a woman’s agency, even when it comes to making decisions concerning her own daughter. The village council, which is predominantly composed of men, strongly believes in the preservation of traditional skills without any alteration or adaptation. This is because these skills are seen as a source of the village’s prestige and social status, and it is considered their responsibility to uphold this hierarchy in comparison to other communities. When the council learned about Arenla’s refusal, it summoned Sentila’s father to appear before them and asked him to deliver the explanations, “Why was Arenla refusing to pass on the skill to her daughter.”¹¹

The council declares that the responsibility of transmitting the long-standing tradition to the new generation rests solely on the shoulders of mothers. They firmly believe that this duty is in service of the collective welfare of the entire village. In a stern warning to Mesoba, the father, they conveyed their message:

“...to remind his wife that it was her duty to teach her daughter the skill that has 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 to the tradition and history of the people did not ‘belong’ to any individual....Your wife should be willing to pass on the gift to her daughter..... Anyone refusing to do so will be considered an enemy of the village.”¹²

In a patriarchal society, women often cannot enjoy the freedom to pursue their passions or imagine a brighter future for their children. As the story unfolds, Arenla is compelled to yield to the Village Council’s authoritative directive. But, this tragic turn of events ultimately led to Arenla’s heartbroken death; and it was only her spirit that continued to guide her daughter.

This story encapsulates the struggles of Naga women like Arenla, who are constrained by traditional gender roles. A mother’s aspiration for her daughter to achieve a brighter future with fewer challenges and greater opportunities remains unfulfilled due to the societal restrictions imposed upon her as a woman. Despite her relentless efforts to secure a future for her child that surpasses her own experiences and desires, her dreams are shattered by the limitations imposed by her marginalized position in society.

Conclusion:

Temsula Ao’s portrayal of marginalized groups in her work sheds a glaring light on the universal mistreatment of women in societies that have assigned them an inferior status compared to men. While the stories are rooted in the specific context of Nagaland, their significance transcends geographical boundaries, resonating across the entire Northeast region and, indeed, with unheard voices of subaltern individuals worldwide. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* serves as a poignant exploration of gendered subalternity, echoing the experiences of marginalized women from every corner of the globe.

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