

Temsula Ao's 'The Last Song': A Critique of the Postcolonial Nation

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ABSTRACT

North East India has constituted a glaring failure of the Indian state's nation building process. It has been ravaged by violence, insurgency and counter-insurgency movements which have left thousands of people homeless, dead and maimed. The writers of this region therefore express a strong awareness of their identity and ethnicity and interrogate issues such as identity, ethnicity, displacement, memory, violence and the idea of a nation. They address political issues through their writing and interrogate the cult of violence that has ravaged their home states for decades. These writers exhibit a strong sense of rootedness and make use of myths and tribal folklore to reconstruct history and create new spaces of opposition to the cultural and political hegemony. The asymmetrical power relation between the centre and the northeast has given rise to decades of armed conflicts and demands for self-determination and complete secession from India. Very few stories succeed in making it to the headlines in national media. However, writers of the region like Temsula Ao seek to reconstruct the spaces for marginalized groups of society. Her short story "The Last Song" tells us of the brutal rape and killing of two Naga women who dared to challenge the hegemony of the Indian army and thus engage in the creation of a site for ideological contestation where various voices find utterance and serves as a scathing critique of the post-colonial nation.

Keywords: identity, ethnicity, violence, autonomy, nation

North east India has constituted a glaring failure of the Indian state's nation building process. It has been ravaged by violence, insurgency and counter-insurgency movements which have left thousands of people homeless, dead and maimed. The writers of this region express a strong awareness of their identity and ethnicity and interrogate issues such as identity, ethnicity, displacement, memory, violence and the idea of a nation. They address political issues through their writing and interrogate the cult of violence that has ravaged their home states for decades. Their writing is embedded in identity politics and grapples with issues of dispossession, up rootedness, alienation and the continued memory of injustice and loss. These writers therefore exhibit a strong sense of rootedness and make use of myths and tribal folklore to project their identity and give shape to their experiences. They also use them as strategy to reconstruct history and create new spaces of opposition to the cultural and political hegemony. They contest and interrogate elitist historiography by going back to their oral

roots as a reference point. Though they represent a mélange of diverse cultures they find common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the predicament of their people.

Home to over 200 ethnic groups and dialects the North East present a mélange of cultures and traditions. Most of the tribes of this region are immigrants from central China and Southeast Asia, Tibet, Nepal and Middle India. Barring the Austro-Asiatics like the Khasis and the Indo-Aryans, most of the tribes speak languages and dialects belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. Having significantly higher ethnic and linguistic fractionalization compared to the rest of India, the cultural differences with mainland India is obvious and therefore many scholars have questioned the unequal and forced integration of the region into the Indian mainstream. Questions of ethnicity and identity are crucial to the north east writers. The asymmetrical power relation between the centre and the northeast, neglect and apathy of mainland policy-makers has given rise to decades of armed conflicts and demands for greater autonomy and complete secession from India. The region is stereotyped as savage, primitive, irrational, underdeveloped, superstitious etc. which has further reduced the north east to the cultural margins. The region and its history has been misrepresented and misinterpreted and makes it a contested terrain.

According to Sanjay Barbora, ethno-nationalist identities are important categories of identity formation in north east India; however this process is a contested one and serves the dual purpose of nation building and resisting domination and control. When India gained independence in 1947, many ethnic tribes came at a crossroad. The state's failure to accommodate the numerous tribes into a coherent nation- state resulted in the cultural and social hegemony of some dominant ethnic groups which further pushed the tribes into yet another long series of confrontations with not only the state apparatus but also with the dominant groups representing the state. Therefore the political discourse of the region has been marked by violence, insurgency and counter-insurgency movements. Brutal atrocities in the form of torture, rape, burning of villages, wanton destruction of crops and livelihood are committed on the people in the name of quelling insurgency and punishing those who support the separatist tendencies. Very few stories succeed in making it to the headlines in national media. The grand static narratives of the centre have ensured not only the silence but also the erasure of such narratives from public memory. However writers of the region like Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Robin S. Ngangom, Aruni Kashyap etc. have challenged and resisted these homogenizing discourses about the northeast by chronicling the predicament of their people in the form of prose and poetry. Ananya S. Guha writes how several writers of this region through their response to violence have emphasized the syncretistic nature of the different literary cultures and have also rejected the homogenizing tendencies which tend to categorize their writings as manifestations of their violence-prone existence alone. Alf Gunvald Nilsen and Srila Roy in their introduction to *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualizing Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India*, notes how dominant and subaltern groups engage in complex processes of negotiation and contestation which reveal the need for understanding subalternity and hegemony in dynamic terms- constituted along several axes of power (1-4). It thus becomes necessary to engage with the writings from northeast India for developing a critical understanding of the oppositional agency that subalterns groups develop to negotiate and resist dominant ideology.

Temsula Ao in her short story collection, *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone* documents the violent history of the state during the 1950s and 60s. The book is a collection of ten short stories set against the backdrop the Naga insurgency movement. The stories tells us of women raped, men tortured, families destroyed, villages burned and people forced to negotiate between insurgent groups and state sponsored machineries. In the Introduction to the book she writes:

“...the thrust of the narratives is to probe how the events of that era have re-structured or even ‘revolutionized’ the Naga psyche. It was as though a great cataclysmic upheaval threw up many realities for the Nagas within which they are still struggling to settle for a legitimate identity.”

In the moving short story “The Last Song” Ao tells us of the brutal rape and killing of Libeni and Apenyo, the mother-daughter duo because they dared to challenge the hegemony of the Indian army. Apenyo since her birth was a gifted singer who inherited her love for singing from her father who died when she was very young.

Her father Zhamben who was a teacher was also a gifted singer of folk songs and Christian hymns at church. His sudden death brought immeasurable hardships for Apenyo's mother Libeni, who had to struggle hard to raise her daughter single handedly while also continuing to work in the fields. However despite such hardships Apenyo never lost her love for singing and gradually people in her village realized that she not only loved singing but also had an exquisite singing voice. Soon she was inducted into the church choir where she became the lead soprano. By the time she reached the age of eighteen years she had blossomed into a beautiful lady and had earned the nickname 'singing beauty' which brought immense joy to her mother. Very soon she gets the opportunity to be the lead singer in the inauguration of the new church building which the villagers had planned meticulously for many years. However, these were troubled times for Nagaland. The separatist movement was gaining momentum and simple innocent villagers were caught in the crossfire between the Indian government and the armed rebels. Villagers were forced to get involved either through facilitating new recruits or paying taxes to the armed militants. The Indian army unearthed records of such collections and decided to punish such 'betrayers' of the government by arresting all the leaders. On that fateful day when all the villagers gathered in front of the new church and the choir began to sing, suddenly gun-fire shots rang out and very soon Indian armed forces surrounded the crowd and commanded the pastor to come forward along with the village headmen. But Apenyo oblivious of the dire situation continued her singing as if guided and inspired by some unseen presence which also prompted the choir to sing along. Enraged by her defiance the soldiers resorted to violence, kicking and assaulting the villagers and committing all sorts of atrocities on the people. However Apenyo continued her singing in spite of her mother's efforts to stop her. Finally the army leader grabbed her by the hair and dragged her away towards the old church building. Amidst this mayhem Libeni searched for her daughter and finally when she discovered her she saw "the young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn (28)". When Libeni tried to prevent a soldier grabbed her and pinned her to the ground. What followed was a horrible ordeal of brutal violence and gang-rape:

"...he 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 (28)".

The army then proceeded to kill and shoot people who tried to flee or take refuge in the old church and annihilate all eye witnesses by setting the church on fire where terrified villagers were hiding. Soon the fire engulfed the new church, the granaries and the entire village was reduced to ashes. Many people went missing and piles of charred bones were discovered in the old church along with the remains of the mother-daughter duo. They were buried outside the perimeter of the graveyard of the village as the Naga villagers reasoned that they had both died an "unnatural death". Thus they became victims both of patriarchal forces of the Indian State machinery and their own society.

This tragic episode was based on a real life incident, the Oinam (Senapati district of Manipur) incident of 1987 also known as Operation Bluebird where all kinds of unspeakable atrocities were committed on a Naga village by the Assam Rifles. The Indian army protected and emboldened by the draconian AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) 1958 unleashed a reign of blood-bath, terror and vengeance unparalleled in the history of counter-insurgency operations that further alienated and marginalized the people of northeast India. Dr. Nunglekham Premi Devi in her article "Warfare or Welfare: Women in the shadows of Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 and unsolved massacres (Special focus on North East State Manipur)" writes how the AFSPA that granted special powers to the Indian army/armed forces has been rampantly misused by the state machinery to violate human rights in the form of illegal detention, extra-judicial killings, rape, torture and disappearances. This has led to public anger and disillusion with the Indian government and demands for its repeal have been made in many parts of the northeast particularly in Manipur. In Manipur there are everyday newspaper reports of innocent civilians being killed, youths arrested and later killed in fake encounters, women tortured and raped and people killed in cross-firings by either state or non-state actors. Women are the worst sufferers during such times of insurgency and counter-insurgency as their bodies become the inscribed sites for contestation by the warring factions. Women are tortured, raped, murdered and their husbands killed which

force them to bear heavy responsibilities and bring untold miseries. Manipur has a high percentage of female-headed households with mostly widows as the main bread-earner of the family. Thousands of people have lost their lives, many have been tortured and maimed and many more have disappeared. Many counter-insurgency operations like Operation Blue Bird (1987), Operation All Clear (2004), Operation Tornado (2005) and Operation Dagnet (2006) have resulted in rampant human rights violations and have fueled the demand for autonomy and secession. Horrified at this brutal failure of the state machinery, Irom Sharmila Chanu, 'the iron lady of Manipur' has staged a fast unto death to repeal this draconian law. She has been on hunger strike for more than 14 years making it the 'world's longest hunger strike'. Louis Althusser, the eminent Marxist in his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' discusses how the state makes use of two mechanisms to ensure that subjects behave according to the rule of the state, even when it is not in their best interests. The first is the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) which enforces behavior directly, such as the police, the army and the criminal justice system. The second is the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) which 'interpellates' people into accepting the ideologies of the state and acting in accordance with it, such as the schools, religions, the family, legal system, politics, sports, art - organizations that generate systems of values and ideas which people internalize and accept.

Thus the conscientious writers of northeast India chronicle the subjective realities of their region torn with bloodshed and violence. The writers of this region by focusing on violence, ethnicity and identity in their writings, uses them as a strategy to reconstruct history and create new spaces of opposition to the dominant ideology. They also use their folklore oral tradition to contest the mainland master narrative. Temsula Ao's use of the folklorist oral tradition to recount the story of Apenyo in "The Last Song" can be seen as an act of resistance to the hegemonic mainstream written culture of the Indian mainland. Further Apenyo's singing constitutes an act of defiance and articulates protest and dissent and in doing so she tries to reclaim the voices of the marginalized by restoring to them their agency. M. Sajjad Hassan in his paper *Understanding the breakdown in North East India: Exploration in state-society relations* asserts that instead of seeing the conflicts simply as rebellions of the marginalized it is necessary to explore issues around power in societies. Weakening of modern political institutions to deal with local religious, linguistic and regional concerns and poor performance of political institutions has led to secessionist tendencies. Further the region with its late colonization and divergent colonial and post-colonial state formation policies and state leaders' political strategies has further confounded the problems. According to V.Bijukumar the root cause of ethnic assertion is to be found in the identity crises of various tribal communities and their desperate attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. The writers of this region therefore express a strong sense of place and political awareness by addressing issues such as identity and ethnicity and by interrogating the violence that has ravaged their home state. They seek to contest and interrogate the elitist historiography by decoding biases and stereotyping in records, territories and narratives of the dominant class. Writers like Dhruba Hazarika, Mitra Phukan, Aruni Kashyap, Manoj Goswami, Imran Hussain, Atulnanda Goswami, Manorama Das Medhi, Yumlembam Ibomcha, Tayenjam Bijoykumar, Thangjam Ibopishak, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, L. Biakliana, Mona Zote, etc. have all described stories of rape, murder, custodial deaths, fake encounters, arson, looting etc. in a society besieged by collective fear and insecurity. The writers of the region seek to reconstruct the spaces for marginalized groups of society and thus engage in the creation of a site for ideological contestation where various voices find utterance. This serves as a scathing critique of the post-colonial nation.

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