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## A Thematic Study of Tamsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

**Suresh Kumar**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. College Indora, 176401

Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, India

Email: vijaysuresh8890@gmail.com

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Research Paper

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper undertakes a thematic study of Tamsula Ao's select short stories in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* published in 2006. It acquaints the readers with Ao's chief concern i.e., the depiction of the clashes and conflicts of the Naga tribe with the government of India, naga youth's joining the underground army for training so they can confront the national armed forces or the state authorities, people desiring no interferences in the Naga geographical and cultural territory leads to rebel against the forced rules of the government and government policies of practicing oppression and atrocities during 1950s and 60s Assam, India become the focal point of the anthology. Besides, tradition versus modernity, people's reaction towards newly wedded couples, nostalgia, aspirations of parents towards their children, freedom of the individuals as well as the Naga land or preserving their identity are the other concerns Ao projects in her short fiction.

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Ruma Ahmed focuses on the portrayal of women in Ao's short-story collection under consideration, amidst the clashes between the Naga army and the national forces and how the women experience society's reactions to Khatila's wedding, her childlessness absurd speculations, and many lewd comments from the villagers. Her life's getting caught in the web of the political instability of her



homeland, and the news of her husband joining the underground Naga rebel army is widespread contributing to Khatila's fear and suspicion from all sides. The government security forces barged into her house, interrogating and threatening her if she withholds any information from them to punish her especially. (Ahmed pp. 15-18) In this respect, K B Veio Pou also analyses the condition of women in her article "Women in Conflict Areas: Insights from Temsula Ao's These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone" (Pou pp. 62-69).

Dhriti Sunder Gupta in her article presents a way of life that is under constant threat of violence. She describes how ordinary people cope with violence perpetuated by various militant outfits and the armed forces as well. The stories capture the voices of common Naga people who are trapped and wounded in the tussle between the State and Naga ethnic insurgency groups. Ao registers her protest against such atrocities through her stories. (Gupta p. 140)

Bamaniya Jeetendra Kumar Dahyalal and Dr. Vipul Bhavsar in their research article "Historical and Political Context in Temsula Ao's These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone" trace out the political and historical aspects of the 1950s and 1960s North East India through Ao's fictional work under consideration. (Dahyalal pp. 165-170)

I Watitula Longkumer writes that North East literature brings a fresh perspective into writing and however it falls under Indian English literature it stands itself different with its rich and complex exploration of themes. He mentions the state of Nagaland as mainly tribal, where each tribe is distinct in character in terms of customs, language, dress, and festivals. Living in a society inhabited by people speaking different languages, and practicing their own cultural and traditional beliefs, there are writers such as Temsula Ao who have successfully brought together the existing sixteen tribes of the Naga society as a whole in their books. These writers incorporate along with the political unrest the intimations of the history and culture of the state - issues that have held the state together despite such vehement forms of violence in the post-independent era. (Longkumer pp.119)

The writer presents the conflicted ideologies of the native Naga people and the contemporary government of India during the 1960s that resulted in endless clashes and encounters proving disastrous to humanity, the discipline of armies whether it is the underground Naga army or the national Indian army and state forces, nepotism, and a sense of jealousy that instigates an individual for revenge at the cost of someone's life through the characters of the short-story, **Shadows**. The writer writes about the



Naga people's commitment towards their land which pictures their preparations for their liberation and the acknowledgement of their distinct identity:

These twenty-one volunteer were chosen to travel through the jungle guided by a relay band of scouts who would escort them from territory to territory until they reached Burma. From there, a Kachin guide would take charge of their progress into China and then they would be in the hands of their Chinese handlers during the entirety of their training period. The mission of this particular group was to learn everything about guerrilla warfare and the use of sophisticated weaponry while they were in the designated training camp. The soldiers belonged to the underground Naga army...The selection of the recruits for such a mission was done with meticulous care. Only those men who had displayed extraordinary courage in encounters with the Indian army were considered. But this was not the only criterion; tribal representation had to be balanced so that when these men came back from training, they would be able to teach the different units located in their respective tribal areas. (Ao 71-72)

The only exception in this respect was Imli who was the son of second-in-command of the underground army. His selection symbolizes nepotism which was disliked by the men of the underground army. Moreover, he was not accustomed to the ways and lifestyle of the jungle. The group marched under the leadership of Hoito. However, the Kachin leader does not permit the group's entry into the territory of Burma as per the orders of his heads. In this scenario, Hoito feels compelled to take shelter in the jungle with the group and decides to send Roko and Lovishe to the headquarters to receive the orders regarding the newly developed situation from their chief commander in four days. As the group waits for the orders, they hear some whispers and they move to a cave in the deep forest where Hoito conspires against Imli by announcing that on the fourth day, Imli will go to the spot from where Roko and Lovishe had departed to bring them back to the present shelter or cave. He assures the group that he is capable; he will surely perform his duty with utmost care to which Imli agrees. Without the knowledge of others, Hoito sends two most trusted recruits to the spot and murders them there brutally. Roko and Lovishe accidentally are brought to the spot by the noise of flies where he was killed (Ao 80). Both of them understood to link it with the internal rivalry but they had not seen anyone involved concretely. Although they perform his funeral with proper Naga ritual, they do not reveal it to anyone in the group. On their arrival in the cave, they hand over the letter of orders from the headquarters that instructs them to come back. At this point, Hoito informs his group that Imli has not returned yet so it cannot be assumed whether he is alive or dead or lost the path in the forest, but as per orders of the high command,



the group needs to move back. The strictest interrogation is held after reaching the headquarters for every soldier of the group and everyone replies as Hoito had told them, but Roko hands over Imli's wristwatch to his father and narrates the circumstances in which he had found him. Suddenly Hoito disappears from the camp without informing anyone. The writer very deftly showcases conflicting interests, love for the motherland, the sentiments of revenge, inter-regional cooperation based on a common ethnicity, and parents' helplessness before their ward's adamant attitude (In the case of Imli) just for the sake of asserting a distinct identity and individuality.

**The Pot Maker** reveals gender roles, the conflict between tradition and modernity, the moral pressure of society, and parents' undying efforts for the better future life of their wards through the character of Santila, a nine-year-old girl, and her parents. Santila wishes to learn the skill of pot making but her mother does not wish that her daughter learn this art because it does not pay well as compared to the hard work rather she wishes her daughter to learn shawl which takes comparatively less time with good return, but Santila has no interest in this. The following conversation between her parents shows their worry for the future of their daughter as she was unwilling to learn weaving:

She [Santila's mother] said, 'I don't know what will happen to our daughter when she grows up, she seems so reluctant to learn the craft, she won't ever pass a yarn bowl properly when I am at the loom. She will grow up to be a useless girl and no man will want to marry her.' The father kept quiet, while the mother went on in this vein for quite some time. Eventually, he answered, 'She can learn pottery from you or your mother can't she?' 'Never', the the mother's voice rang out, 'I shall not teach this craft which has brought no joy to me and only a pittance for my troubles. Do you know how far that wretched place is from this village? Sixteen kilometers and a sheer drop to the riverbank; still we have to climb down because it is only there that you get both the grey and red clay required for making pots. You don't know how difficult it is to dig the clay from the hillside because you have never come there to help me saying that no man can be seen meddling in anything to do with pot making. It is women's work. (Ao 58)

Besides, Santila's mother tells her husband that pottery is a painful work having numerous hardships. As Santila hears this conversation of her parents about her, She finds a way, despite learning pottery from her mother or grandmother who are renowned pot makers, she chooses to learn from the elderly women in the nearby village on the hill visiting every day taking her ten months old brother along with her parents leave for work and fields. When this news spreads in the village, the village elders call Santila's



father and enquire why her mother does not wish to teach her the skill of pot making. The elders remind him that the pot makers must teach or train not only their daughters but anyone desirous to learn in the village. The elders assert that it is the responsibility of the villages to preserve the cultural heritage well and pass it on to the upcoming generations. Thereafter, Santila's mother starts training her in this skill though unwillingly. The writer also reveals the gender roles in practice in the Naga community as Santila's father says that pottery is a women's work. He prefers to sit idle than helping his wife or mother in pot making.

The short story **An Old Man Remembers** offers the realization of the truth of self, land, and history of an individual through the lifelong experiences shared by Sashi, an old man, a rebel for the Naga army during his youth. Sashi presently lives alone in an old home and he is accompanied by his grandson for the nights. In the opening, the old man is shown sitting near the hearth warming his right leg that got damaged during an encounter with the Indian National Army in his youth. A neighbour informs him about the demise of Imli whose funeral will be held in the afternoon. Sashi had only true companions in his life i. e his wife who has already passed and Imli. He feels heartbroken and goes to bid a final farewell to his friend from this world and facing his friend lying in the coffin begins to speak, "So, after all, you've decided to leave me and go ahead, ha. When we were young, I could outrun you any time, but today you have overtaken me. But no matter, such time is not of our choosing. Go in peace, my friend and don't look back. I, too, shall cross the water soon and join you" (Ao 90). People notice that the Old man's voice sounds young and firm and there remains no shivering that was normal in his voice due to old age. He also stood straight despite the pain in his right leg. After reaching home he becomes nostalgic about his life and experiences and memorable scenes start fleshing on the larger screen of memory. All the adventures with Imli are recollected like catching fish from the stream (Ao 94), seeing the nude women and their hoping breasts after their bath (Ao 95) and sharing the same incident with his wife after marriage to learn a women perspective on the same (Ao 95), in school teachers telling the students to run away into the jungle when the soldiers of Indian army started firing in the village and school (Ao 98), joining the Naga army at the age of sixteen (Ao 100), strategies for survival in the jungle like changing location of the camp randomly (Ao 109), killing five soldiers of Indian army with bamboo spikes with the support of Imli (Ao 107), and Imli's saving and taking care of Sashi when his leg got injured with a bullet in last encounter with the Indian army (Ao 108). The old man Sashi says that after running from the school into the jungle:



We were told that we had been recruited into the Naga National Army and that we would be given proper training there. We had to take an oath to remain loyal and if at any time we attempted to run away or betray the others, we would be shot. We stayed there for nearly a year during which time we learned to forget family, friends, and everything to do with our former life. Soldiers we were made into and that's what we resolved to remain. (Ao 101)

The writer depicts the hardships for survival and education respect of the hill people of Nagaland in the short story, **The Journey**. The writer projects the long journey of a young orphan girl, Tinula from a home located in the hills to a boarding school in the plains accompanied by her brother, Temjenba along with other villagers who were going for their work. The route this young brother and sister traveled begins with the crossing of a stream, climbing up and then down the hill to reach the railway station, and even after the train they were to travel about four miles distance to reach the school (Ao 118). Teamwork, empathy, cooperation, a brother performing fatherly responsibilities, women empowerment through education, and desire to overcome dreams are some of the traits of the hill people of North East that come to the fore through this text.

**The Jungle Major** highlights the two significant aspects of contemporary society i.e. social reputation and the conflicts of the Naga army with the Indian National Army. When the wedding of Khatila with Punaba gets fixed, relatives and villagers react term this betrothal as a complete mismatch. "The girl's father was soundly berated by his clansmen, who said he was lowering the prestige of their clan by agreeing to the match. Why was he condemning his beautiful daughter to life with such a man, they wanted to know" (Ao 01). As Khatila belongs to a prestigious major clan, she is tall fair, slim, possesses a charming smile, and has a noble family background, Punaba, on the other hand short, dark, and has buck teeth. He has studied up to fifth class and could speak some Hindi and a few English words in the course of his journey. He is a driver who also knows some mechanical work and works for a rich man in the town. After the wedding, the couple settles in their home and starts leading a normal life. People start commenting when the couple does not have a child for two years like, "the man was either impotent or sterile, or the woman was barren. Some even went to the extent of saying that she didn't allow her husband to touch her" (Ao 02). One day Punaba does not return from his usual trip. After some months the news of Punaba's joining the underground Naga army spreads, and the forces start visiting the home in search of him and warn whereas some express their lewdness at his beautiful wife, Khatila. He manages to meet his wife secretly at night and disappears in the jungle. For exhibiting



extraordinary courage in the underground Naga army in clashes with the national forces, he is promoted to the rank of jungle major (Ao 8) and the couple lives with each other happily.

Through **Soaba**, the writer presents how the orphan and mentally restarted children suffered during complicatedly tense circumstances between the Naga people and Indian armed forces in the 1950s and 60s in the North-East Naga regions of India through the experiences title character. The writer writes about him, "No one knew who his [Soaba's] parents were or which village he came from. He grew up as the town orphan living on people's charity, often doing odd jobs like fetching water and splitting wood in various households. Even though many people tried to domesticate him as their permanent unpaid servant, he would not stay in one place for more than a week or so" (Ao 09). Soaba's real name was Intimoa. People started calling him Soaba which meant idiot in Ao language. He knew some simple sentences like 'I am hungry', 'Give me more' and used to express his feelings with grunts and gestures. He was not aware of the realities of life except hunger, thirst, extreme cold, and rain, he becomes the victim of conflicting fervor between the Naga army and government authorities and is killed at the hands of the drunken boss (Ao 19) at no fault of him where no one is there to claim his body.

**The Curfew Man** reveals how the atrocities of the National armed forces on the native Naga villagers led to an atmosphere of mutual distrust, insecurity, and unrest towards each other. Ao writes:

There were stories about how people carrying the sick to hospital or in search of doctors were stopped and subjected to humiliating searches causing unnecessary, and sometimes even fatal, delays. Often these helpless people were sent back with abuses and threats completely disregarding the urgent needs of poor patients. There were several incidents where civilians were shot dead by patrol parties after curfew and their deaths were reported as those of underground rebels killed in 'encounter' with the army. (Ao 35)

In addition to this, the writer showcases how the life of an Assam police constable changes after his knee got shattered making him unfit for the job and compelling him and his wife to make a decision to move to their ancestral village for survival by producing crops and vegetables in the ancestral piece of land.

Through the above short stories, Ao deftly represents the native Naga people's aspirations i.e. recognition of distinct Naga Identity, to assert themselves on the subjects under the territory of the Naga



tribe, assertion of individuality, preserve the primitive cultural heritage of the Naga Tribe, Rebelling against the forces daring to encroach the Naga rituals, cultural practices, geographical territory and existence. Therefore, Ao appeals to the governments of India not to adopt repressive policies against the Naga tribe of North East India but rather ponder over their genuine causes so that India can be free from internal turmoil that has always proven the biggest hindrance to peace, prosperity, and growth of any nation.

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