



Gendered Subalternity in Temsula Ao's "These Hills Called Home" and "Laburnum for My Head"

Hari Narayan Deka

Assistant Professor at Charaibahi College & Research Scholar at Centre for North East Studies,
Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva, Viswavidyalaya, email- dekaharinarayan@gmail.com

Prof. Gajendra Adhikary

Head, Centre for North East Studies, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the representation of gendered subalternity in Temsula Ao's short story collections "These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone" (2005) and "Laburnum for My Head" (2009). Drawing upon feminist postcolonial theory-particularly the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Judith Butler, and Ranajit Guha - the paper analyzes how Ao's narratives give voice to women silenced by insurgency, patriarchy, and state violence. By integrating oral traditions and domestic spaces into her stories, Ao reconstructs subaltern womanhood as both victimized and resistant. Through close readings of key stories such as "The Last Song," "The Jungle Major," "The Curfew Man," and "Laburnum for My Head," this paper argues that Ao redefines subalternity through an ethics of care, memory, and narrative resilience. Her women characters, while bound by silence, articulate agency through cultural continuity and storytelling.

Introduction

Temsula Ao's fiction situates itself in the violent historical and cultural landscape of Nagaland, a region entangled in insurgency, militarization, and the politics of belonging. As one of the foremost literary



voices from Northeast India, Ao brings to visibility the lived experiences of Naga women who endure both gendered and political marginalization. Her short stories present intimate accounts of war, trauma, and endurance, revealing how women's bodies and voices become sites of both oppression and resistance. Spivak's question - "Can the subaltern speak?" - resonates deeply with Ao's project (Spivak 271). Yet Ao's women do not simply speak; they remember, sing, mourn, and resist through the everyday practices that sustain life in a war-torn landscape.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist and Subaltern Perspectives

The Subaltern Studies collective, led by Ranajit Guha, foregrounded the erasure of marginalized voices from colonial and nationalist historiography. Spivak's critique in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) extends this discussion by interrogating how even well-meaning intellectuals reproduce structures of silencing. For Spivak, the subaltern woman is doubly muted - by colonial power and patriarchal discourse. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's feminist intervention in 'Under Western Eyes' (1984) warns against the homogenization of 'Third World women,' calling for attention to specific historical and cultural contexts. Judith Butler's concept of performativity, meanwhile, allows us to understand Ao's women as agents who perform resistance through acts of memory, song, and domestic care. Combining these frameworks, this paper reads Ao's fiction as an effort to restore subjectivity to the Naga woman whose existence is defined by intersectional subalternity.

1. Gender, War, and the Politics of Representation

In "These Hills Called Home", Ao chronicles the impact of decades of armed conflict on the Naga people. The stories are set against the backdrop of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations that have rendered civilian life precarious. Ao's female characters, such as Apenyo in "The Last Song," embody the silenced subaltern who nonetheless asserts agency. When Apenyo sings even as soldiers violate her, her voice becomes 'a defiance that neither fear nor pain could extinguish' (Ao, "These Hills" 85). Her song functions as a metaphor for women's resistance through cultural expression. Similarly, in "The Curfew Man," the unnamed women who wait behind closed doors symbolize how fear infiltrates domestic spaces, transforming the home into a site of both refuge and confinement. Ao's attention to the rhythms of daily life under curfew - women boiling rice, mending clothes, and whispering prayers - reframes the domestic sphere as a terrain of quiet endurance.



2. Patriarchy and Cultural Memory

Patriarchal hierarchies within tribal society further complicate women's status as subaltern subjects. In 'The Jungle Major,' a story that juxtaposes militarized masculinity with women's vulnerability, Ao exposes how violence reproduces gendered hierarchies. The titular character, a self-proclaimed protector, embodies the ambivalence of male authority - both as oppressor and as a symbol of failed guardianship. The women in the story, meanwhile, perpetuate oral tales of ancestral spirits as a counter-discourse to militarized modernity. As Ao notes in her preface to 'The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition,' 'the oral tale is the woman's domain, where the memory of the tribe is nurtured' (Ao 5). Through such oral practices, women preserve collective memory, thereby asserting a cultural agency often overlooked by patriarchal historiography.

3. Domestic Spaces as Sites of Resistance

Ao reclaims domesticity as a political category. In "Laburnum for My Head", the protagonist Lentina's obsessive care for her laburnum trees symbolizes resistance against both the decay of community values and the invisibility of aging women. 'Each year, the blossoms remind her that beauty endures even in the face of death' (Ao, "Laburnum" 14). Lentina's domestic rituals—tending to the trees, hosting visitors, recalling her youth—become acts of survival and self-assertion. By contrast, in 'A Simple Question,' Ao portrays a young woman confronting the hypocrisy of religious and social norms that regulate female sexuality. These narratives articulate what Butler calls the 'subversive repetition' of gender norms (Butler 187), where women negotiate power through seemingly ordinary acts.

4. Silence, Mourning, and Testimony

Silence in Ao's fiction is not merely absence of speech; it is a deliberate aesthetic and ethical strategy. In stories like "The Letter," women's silences are imbued with political meaning. The protagonist's refusal to speak about her husband's disappearance is an act of mourning that resists closure. Spivak warns that attempts to 'retrieve' the subaltern voice often impose a false coherence (Spivak 284), but Ao allows silence itself to speak. The pause, the unsent letter, and the unfinished song all become signifiers of trauma and endurance. Through these narrative gestures, Ao transforms the subaltern woman's silence into a space of agency and ethical testimony.



5. Reimagining Subaltern Agency

While Ao's women inhabit a world structured by violence and loss, they are not passive victims. They perform what Mohanty describes as 'the politics of everyday life' - small, sustaining acts that challenge domination (Mohanty 56). Cooking, storytelling, caring for the dead, and maintaining gardens are reimagined as forms of political agency. In "A New Chapter," a widow's decision to educate her daughter despite social ostracism signals a reclaiming of future possibilities. Such acts complicate the binaries of resistance and submission, suggesting that subaltern agency can manifest within intimate, domestic, and spiritual practices.

Conclusion

Temsula Ao's fiction thus articulates gendered subalternity through layered representations of voice, silence, memory, and endurance. Her narratives challenge both nationalist and patriarchal discourses that marginalize women's experiences. By grounding her stories in oral tradition and domestic life, Ao redefines the boundaries of subaltern agency. In doing so, she offers a feminist re-reading of Spivak's question, demonstrating that while the subaltern woman may be unheard in dominant discourse, she continues to 'speak' through embodied, cultural, and narrative practices. Ao's storytelling transforms everyday survival into a form of resistance, making her fiction a vital contribution to both subaltern and feminist literary studies.

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