

Power, Politics and the Issue of Gender Based Violence Vol-1



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Violence and Identity: The Experiences of Marginalized Communities in Temsula Ao's Narratives



Hawaibam Loiyumba

Introduction

Marginalized communities around the world have unique experiences shaped by their exclusion from mainstream society. In India, the Northeast region, particularly the Naga community, has faced historical and socio-political marginalization due to their distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity. Violence has been a central feature of the Naga experience, primarily due to their longstanding struggle for self-determination and a separate homeland. This violence, often perpetrated by both insurgent groups and state forces, has left an indelible mark on the Naga community, shaping their identities, aspirations, and everyday lives.

Temsula Ao, a prominent voice from Northeast India, captures the complexities of Naga society, who finds itself caught in a cycle of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Her works provide a nuanced portrayal of how violence impacts marginalized communities and how they navigate their existence in a militarized society. Through her stories, Ao brings to the forefront the deep-seated struggles of the Naga people, illuminating the unique experiences of a community that has faced systemic violence for decades.

Historical Context of Naga Insurgency

The roots of the Naga insurgency can be traced back to the early 20th century with the formation of the Naga Club in 1918, a group that sought to preserve the identity of the Nagas in the face of British colonization. The club later transformed into the Naga National Council (NNC), which became the driving force behind the Naga struggle for independence from India after the country gained its freedom from British rule in 1947.

The movement for a unified Naga homeland gained momentum after the Indian government delineated territorial boundaries that divided Naga-inhabited areas across different states. This led to widespread discontent and a sense of loss among the Nagas, who viewed these divisions as an affront to their cultural and ethnic identity. Over the years, the Naga insurgency became a full-blown conflict, with various factions fighting for independence, while the Indian state imposed harsh counter-insurgency measures, including the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958, which granted sweeping powers to the military.

The introduction of AFSPA aggravated the situation, as it gave the Indian armed forces the authority to use violence with impunity, often targeting innocent civilians under the guise of countering insurgency. As stated, "In the name of combating unrest and terror, draconian measures like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Disputed Areas Act, etc., have been imposed, reaping little benefits or results." (Kalita) This act led to gross human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, rapes, and torture, which further alienated the Naga population and fueled the insurgency. In this climate of violence, the Naga community found themselves forced to navigate a precarious existence, caught between insurgent groups and state forces.

About the Author

TemsulaAo, a prominent literary figure from Northeast India, has carved a unique space in Indian literature by shedding light on the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly the Nagas, within the larger context of violence and conflict. Her works delve deeply into the socio-political struggles faced by her people, with a strong focus on identity, insurgency, and cultural resilience. Ao's literary career, spanning multiple genres, includes five volumes of poetry, a critical work on Henry James, a memoir, and two celebrated short story collections: *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum For My Head* (2009). Her contributions to literature have earned her accolades such as the Padma Shri, the Sahitya Akademi Award, and the Governor's Gold Medal from the state of Meghalaya.

In *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, Ao presents a compelling exploration of Naga insurgency, a conflict that has left an indelible mark on the region's history and its people. Through her stories, Ao gives voice to the unique experiences of marginalized Naga communities, whose lives have been shaped by years of political unrest and violence. As Duo states, "This sad state of affairs has invisibilized the experiences of people from the Northeast and refused them the power and agency to control their own narratives." (Duo) In the preface titled "Lest We Forget," Ao acknowledges that many of the stories in this collection are rooted in the tumultuous period of Naga insurgency, which began in the early 1950s with the demand for independence from the Indian state. Drawing on personal and collective memory, Ao skillfully revisits these times, capturing the profound emotional and psychological scars left by years of conflict. In this light, Ao's portrayal of people living their lives with their own aspirations and emotions makes those at the 'center' question their ingrained prejudices towards them.

Duo's assertion accentuates the critical need to amplify marginalized voices and reclaim narratives often overshadowed by dominant discourses. By illustrating the lived experiences of Naga individuals, Ao challenges

prevailing stereotypes and encourages readers to engage empathetically with their struggles. This narrative reclamation not only emphasizes the fortitude of the Naga people but also urges a wider societal reflection on the complexities of identity, agency, and belonging in the face of systemic oppression.

What sets Ao's work apart is her ability to depict insurgency not just as a political movement but as a deeply personal struggle that affects the everyday lives of ordinary people. She focuses on the human cost of the conflict, particularly on how marginalized communities bear the brunt of violence and instability. Through her evocative narratives, Ao sheds light on the complexities of life in the midst of conflict, showcasing the resilience of her people even as they face immense hardships. Her stories stress that for the Naga community, insurgency is not merely a historical event but an ongoing experience that continues to shape their identity and cultural landscape.

One of the central themes in Ao's work is the exploration of identity in the context of insurgency. Her stories provide a poignant reflection on how insurgency influences the lives and identities of Nagas. Ao portrays the Naga people as being caught between their desire for freedom and the violent realities of their environment, where political unrest becomes a defining force in their lives. These stories delve into the complex process of identity formation in a community where violence and marginalization are ever-present, showing how the generation of Naga people grapples with issues of belonging, loyalty, and survival.

Temsula Ao's stories, such as "The Jungle Major" and "The Last Song," focus on the profound impact of insurgency on marginalized Nagas. Through these narratives, Ao illustrates how people are often compelled to participate in political struggles, balancing the desire to defend their homeland with the personal sacrifices and trauma that come with it. Her works explore the dual pressures of cultural preservation and political survival, showing how insurgency shapes their identity and forces them to navigate complex moral terrain. By centering the experiences of people of Nagaland, Ao provides an intimate portrayal of the human cost of conflict, emphasizing the resilience and strength of marginalized communities in Northeast India.

The Role of Violence in Shaping Identity

In Temsula Ao's stories, the Naga people emerge as central figures grappling with their identity in the midst of violence and chaos. Her portrayal of these individuals reflects the broader challenges faced by marginalized communities in conflict zones, where the lines between insurgency and state violence blur, leaving them in a constant state of fear and uncertainty.

In "The Jungle Major," Ao highlights how Naga people are drawn into insurgency, often out of a sense of duty to their homeland. The story

centers around Khatila's village, where "the subject of independence became public talk; young people spoke of the exploits of their peers in encounters with government forces and were eager to join the new band of "patriotic" warriors to liberate their "homeland" from "foreign" rule." (Temsula Ao, "The Jungle Major"3) This fervor is driven not only by a desire for independence but also by the injustices they witness daily, as armed forces commit atrocities against their fellow villagers. The story illustrates how insurgency becomes an attractive option for them, offering them a sense of purpose and a way to resist the violence imposed by the state.

At the same time, the story reveals the harsh realities of life as an insurgent. The protagonist, Punaba, husband of Khatila, finds himself separated from his wife, constantly on the run from the military. "One day Punaba did not return from his usual trip, but Khatila did not seem unduly worried by this. A month passed and then another, but there was no sign of this quiet man.... Punaba had joined the underground army.... She became more reclusive, and her visits to her parents' home also became less frequent than before." (Temsula Ao, "The Jungle Major"3-4) His decision to join the insurgents means sacrificing his future and his relationship with his family. In this way, Ao shows how violence not only compels people to take up arms but also tears apart their personal lives, leaving them isolated and vulnerable.

Similarly, in "The Last Song," Ao focuses on the plight of Apenyo, a young singer who becomes a victim of state violence. The story depicts how the Indian army targets Apenyo's village, arresting leaders and terrorizing the villagers as part of their counter-insurgency strategy. "They pushed and shoved the paster and the gaonburas, probing them with the butts of their guns towards the waiting jeep below the steps of the church. Some of the villagers tried to argue with the soldiers, and they too were kicked and assaulted." (Temsula Ao, "The Last Song" 27) Despite the violence around her, Apenyo remains defiant, continuing to sing even as the soldiers close in. Her strength and resilience in the face of overwhelming brutality serve as a testament to the indomitable spirit of Naga people, who refuse to let their identity be erased by the violence that surrounds them.

However, Apenyo's fate is tragic, as she is brutally raped and murdered by the army captain and his men. "He grabbed Apenyo by the hair and, with a bemused look on his face dragged her away from the crowd.... The young captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn." (TemsulaAo, "The Last Song" 28) This act of violence serves as a stark reminder of the vulnerability of Naga women in conflict zones, where their bodies are often used as tools of war. Ao's depiction of Apenyo's ordeal highlights the gendered nature of

violence in marginalized communities, where women are doubly marginalized—both by the conflict itself and by the patriarchal structures that view them as dispensable.

Marginalized Communities and the Cycle of Violence

The stories of Naga people in Temsula Ao's works reflect the broader experiences of marginalized communities in conflict zones around the world. Violence becomes a defining feature of their lives, shaping their identities and dictating their choices. For the people of Nagaland, insurgency offers both a means of resistance and a path to self-determination, but it also comes with immense personal loss.

The cycle of violence in marginalized communities is perpetuated by a combination of state repression and insurgent activity. In the case of the Nagas, the Indian state's heavy-handed approach to counter-insurgency, exemplified by the implementation of AFSPA, has only served to deepen the sense of alienation among the population. The indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the military, coupled with the failure of the state to address the legitimate grievances of the Nagas, has led to a situation where insurgency becomes the only viable option for many people.

At the same time, insurgent groups often exploit the vulnerability of individuals, drawing them into a cycle of violence that is difficult to escape. For many Nagas, joining the rebellion is seen as a way to gain independence in a society where their voices are otherwise silenced. However, as Ao's stories illustrate, this agency comes at a great cost, as they are forced to sacrifice their personal relationships, their safety, and, in many cases, their lives.

Conclusion

The unique experiences of marginalized communities, particularly in the context of violence, are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors. In the case of the Nagas, their struggle for self-determination has been marked by decades of insurgency and state repression, leaving individuals caught in a cycle of violence that shapes their identities and their futures.

Temsula Ao's works provide a powerful lens through which to examine the impact of violence on marginalized communities. Her stories offer a nuanced portrayal of how insurgency and state violence intersect to create a reality where individuals must constantly navigate uncertainty and danger. At the same time, Ao's stories celebrate the resilience of the Naga people, who refuse to let their identities be erased by the violence that surrounds them.

Through the lens of literature, this paper has sought to highlight the

their unique experiences in the face of violence serve as testimony to their strength. In doing so, it underscores the importance of understanding the specific historical and cultural contexts that shape the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly in regions affected by conflict. The Naga experience, as portrayed in Ao's works, offers valuable insights into the broader dynamics of violence, identity, and resistance in marginalized communities around the world.

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