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Women's Empowerment : Social and Political

Dr. Deepak. M. Buktare
Dr. Heeru Rathod

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Silenced Voices in Temsula Ao's *Three Women*

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Abstract: This paper explores the theme of gender-based violence in Temsula Ao's *Three Women*, emphasizing her perspective as a Naga writer and the cultural contexts she engages with in her work. Ao skillfully examines the connections between gender, trauma, and societal expectations, bringing to light the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. Through her evocative prose and rich character development, Ao captures the emotional complexities of her protagonists—Martha, Medemla, and Lipoktula—each representing different facets of gendered experiences.

In *Three Women*, Ao addresses the omnipresent nature of gender-based violence and its emotional ramifications, revealing how cultural norms sustain silence and stigma around women's suffering. Her writing clarifies the psychological scars left by emotional abuse, societal beauty standards, and the trauma of betrayal, all of which echo deeply within her characters' lives. Furthermore, Ao's exploration of maternal bonds emphasizes the societal expectations placed on women to seek validation through motherhood, often despite their own pain.

A significant aspect of Ao's approach is her ability to blend personal narratives with wider societal critiques, creating a compelling commentary on the structures that uphold gendered violence. Her characters' journeys toward empowerment and self-assertion showcase the importance of breaking the silence surrounding these issues, encouraging a dialogue about strength

and resistance.

Ultimately, this paper emphasizes the need to elevate voices that have been silenced by societal norms, calling for empathy and structural reform in response to gender-based violence. Ao's poignant storytelling not only serves as a powerful reminder of the emotional scars women bear but also celebrates their strength and capacity for transformation within a patriarchal context.

Keywords: Three Women, Gender-based violence, silenced voices, maternal instinct, resistance, cultural norms,

Introduction

Temsula Ao is one of the most distinguished writers from Northeast India. Born in Ao Naga tribe, she focuses on the lives of the Naga community, particularly highlighting the complex emotional narratives of women within a patriarchal society. Her short story *Three Women* is part of her acclaimed collection "Labumum for My Head," which delves deeply into themes of gender-violence, identity, and cultural constraints.

Temsula Ao's *Three Women* offers a deeply moving exploration of gender-based violence through the intertwined lives of its three central characters—Martha, Medemla, and Lipoktula. Set against the backdrop of societal norms that shape women's experiences, the short story critiques the myriad forms of violence—emotional, psychological, and physical—that women endure in their daily lives. Gender-based violence is a far-reaching issue affecting individuals across cultures and societies, manifesting in various forms such as domestic abuse, sexual assault, and psychological manipulation. This violence often arises from long-standing societal norms and power imbalances that prioritize male dominance, creating a culture of silence and stigma around the experiences of victims.

This paper aims to explore the complexities of gender-based violence depicted in *Three Women*, focusing on the emotional landscapes of its three female protagonist. By analyzing their experiences, we can gain a deeper understanding of the

wider implications of gendered violence in society and the crucial need to break the silence surrounding it. *Ao*'s work stands as a powerful critique of patriarchal structures while also celebrating the strength and empowerment of women in their ongoing struggle for dignity. In doing so, it invites us to reflect on our roles in promoting empathy, dialogue, and change in a world that often overlooks the voices of women.

Martha's Experience: The Subtlety of Emotional Violence

Martha, the youngest protagonist, embodies the deep psychological effects of gender-based violence, shaped by the weight of societal pressures that often lead to bullying and self-doubt. She recalls,

The taunts of the boys and girls began once again when I was enrolled in school. They did not want to sit near me or play with me. Everytime I stood up to ask for permissions to go out, they would giggle. Sometime even the teacher could not control their behavior and that added to their amusement. (*Ao* 64)

From a young age, Martha contends with feelings of inadequacy, constantly reminded of her perceived flaws by those around her who cruelly label her a "coolie" because of her dark skin and curly hair. This hurtful verbal abuse serves as a painful reminder of how rigid societal standards of beauty can inflict emotional wounds. *Ao* captures this experience poignantly: "She had heard of people being called coolies and seen the look of contempt on their faces. It hurt her deeply." This moment reveals the deep emotional scars that can result from societal expectations, illustrating how violence against women can manifest not just through physical harm, but also through insidious psychological trauma.

As Martha navigates her internal turmoil, her world becomes even more complicated when she faces an unplanned pregnancy before marriage. This revelation fills her with shame and anxiety about societal judgment. When she reveals her condition to her mother, Medemla, she responds with distress,

Martha! Martha! What have you done? Why couldn't

you have waited? I was going to arrange a grand wedding for you. Instead, you have brought shame upon the family by becoming pregnant before the wedding. There will not be a proper wedding now, only a small gathering of relatives and the Pastor to formalize your wedding to Apok. (Ao 77)

Medemla's reaction reflects the internalized patriarchal norms that dictate women's worth and the importance of marital propriety. Martha's unplanned pregnancy is not viewed as a personal crisis, but rather as a familial disgrace, highlighting the stigma surrounding women's sexuality and reproductive choices. The emphasis on shame reveals how women are often held accountable for societal expectations, while men may escape similar scrutiny. This dynamic perpetuates cycles of violence, both physical and psychological, as women like Martha find themselves navigating oppressive societal structures that dictate their worth based on adherence to traditional roles and norms.

Martha's fear resonates with many women who experience shame for situations beyond their control, drawing attention to how societal violence not only imposes external pressures but also inflicts deep emotional and psychological abuse. This leaves lasting scars, as women are made to bear the weight of societal judgment, reinforcing the trauma of gender-based violence and its enduring impact on their lives.

Medemla's Narrative: The Weight of Rape and Betrayal

Medemla's life story is marked by the trauma of abuse and the emotional devastation it leaves behind. Her rejection by Imsutemjen, the man she loved, forces her to confront deep feelings of abandonment and loss. As she reflects, "It took better part of a year for me to come out of the depression which set in." (Ao 67)

After Imsutemjen betrays her trust, Medemla adopts Martha, a child disowned by her father solely because of her gender. Upon learning that the newborn was a girl, the father's entire demeanor shifted into fury. He lashed out at the nurses, the hospital, and even cursed God for denying him a son. When

asked about his plans for the baby girl, he retorted with bitterness, "What will I do with another girl? Do whatever you want with her; I don't want to see her ever again—she killed my wife." (Ao 68) This reaction reflects the pervasive gender-based violence, where the value of a female child is diminished, and women are blamed, even in death, for circumstances beyond their control. It reflects a societal misogyny that devalues women and perpetuates the cycle of emotional and psychological abuse.

Medemla's decision to adopt Martha following the betrayal by Imsutemjen represents a significant act of determination and empowerment in the face of personal trauma. By adopting a child who has been similarly rejected due to patriarchal values, Medemla challenges the societal norms that sustain gender-based discrimination and devaluation of women. This act symbolizes a reclaiming of control over her life, as Medemla not only provides care and protection to Martha but also disrupts the cycle of marginalization that both she and the child have experienced. In this way, her adoption of Martha reflects a larger critique of the patriarchal structures that underpin the rejection and abandonment of women. As Sithara P.M. observes, "even while reflecting the pathetic pictures of women who are relegated to the periphery, Temsula Ao's characters do not remain doomed victims" (Sithara 132), allowing Medemla to transform her own emotional suffering into an act of resistance and self-assertion.

The disappointment Medemla feels towards Martha's unplanned pregnancy accentuates the pressures women face in balancing their aspirations with societal expectations. As she confides in Lipoktula, she laments that she wanted to give her the life she never had, to see her go to medical school. Medemla's aspirations for Martha become a projection of her unfulfilled dreams, showing how women often carry the weight of their own disappointments while simultaneously striving to protect the next generation from similar fates.

Lipoktula's Burden: The Cycle of Silence and Violence

Lipoktula's story delves deep into the heart of gender-based violence, revealing the historical trauma that has shaped her identity. Her rape by Merensashi, a powerful man in the village, is a defining moment that not only alters the course of her life but also casts a long shadow over her descendants. Reflecting on her experience, she recalls sitting in the water for an extended period, as if attempting to wash away the overwhelming sense of shame and guilt that consumed her. This poignant acknowledgment demonstrates the profound emotional and psychological scars inflicted by sexual violence, emphasizing how such acts strip women of their dignity and strength.

Lipoktula's silence regarding her trauma is emblematic of the societal stigma surrounding sexual violence, which often forces women into isolation and silence. The legacy of her trauma extends to Medemla, who is unaware of the violent circumstances surrounding her conception. This generational silence perpetuates cycles of violence and emotional distress, emphasizing the idea that trauma is not merely an individual experience but one that reverberates through families. Ao writes, "What was unsaid lingered like a shadow over their lives," conveying the weight of unaddressed trauma that impacts their relationships and identities.

Breaking the Silence: Confrontation and Resistance

A pivotal moment arises when Lipoktula decides to confront Merensashi, thereby breaking the long-standing cycle of silence that has burdened her family. In a courageous effort to prevent an incestuous marriage, she tells him, "If you do not stop it, I will publicly announce that you fathered Medemla that day in the hut." (Ao 76) This act of defiance signifies a critical shift in the narrative, as Lipoktula reclaims her self-determination and confronts the man who embodies the violence that has haunted her. She boldly proclaims, "I will not be silent any longer; I will face the truth of my past." This assertion not only challenges societal norms regarding women's responses to violence but also sparks a wider dialogue about the necessity for empowerment and resistance.

Through Lipoktula's confrontation, Ao highlights the importance of breaking the silence surrounding gender-based violence. It serves as a powerful reminder that speaking out can be an act of liberation, not only for oneself but for all women who have suffered in silence. By choosing to confront her abuser, Lipoktula not only empowers herself but also paves the way for Medemla and Martha to find their own voices in a world that has historically silenced them.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Gender-Based Violence

In *Three Women*, Tamsula Ao masterfully explores the enduring impact of gender-based violence through the intertwined narratives of Martha, Medemla, and Lipoktula. Their experiences reveal how violence takes on various forms—emotional, psychological, and physical—shaping their identities and relationships. Ao's poignant storytelling serves as a critique of the societal norms that enable and sustain such violence, shedding light on the emotional scars that women carry. According to Shilpi Priya Saikia, "Tamsula Ao, a Northeastern Indian writer, has raised many issues related to the feminist consciousness and the experimentation of an innovative feminist parole" (Saikia 552). Ultimately, Ao's narrative is not merely a reflection of despair; it is also a celebration of women's strength and the power of maternal love. The moment when "the mother and the grandmother come to the bed where she is resting and ceremoniously lay the baby next to her, in a ritualistic acknowledgment of her motherhood." (Ao 79-80) highlights this bond. As Dr. Cheryl Antonette Dumenil observes, "The women in Tamsula Ao's world give each other warmth, nourishment, security, sensuality, support, trust, and above all, love wrapped in the mantle of motherhood." (Dumenil 211) This connection among the three women illustrates how love can act as a sanctuary from the brutal realities of gender-based violence, enabling them to draw strength from one another.

By confronting their histories and breaking the cycle of silence, they reclaim their strength and challenge the societal

structures that have long oppressed them. Through this narrative, Ao advocates for a deeper understanding of gender-based violence, calling for empathy, dialogue, and systemic change within society.

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