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**TRAVERSING THE CONFLICT ZONE IN THE NORTH-EAST INDIA:
THE STATE, THE PEOPLE AND THE VIOLENCE IN TEMSULA AO'S
*THESE HILLS CALLED HOME***

Abstract

North-East India has been embroiled in controversies for ages due to its unique set of diversity which cuts across various communities and cultures and its resistance, often violent, to any attempts to challenge or manipulate this unique identity. This resistance has often resulted in mindless violence between the so-called protectors of ethnic identities and cultures—the underground army or the insurgents, and the Indian Army—the representative of the Indian State which posits these rebels as enemies of the state who threaten the integrity of the nation. Due to this conflict and the resultant violence, the inhabitants of this region have to pay a heavy price with colossal damage to life and matter on everyday basis. They find themselves in a situation where they can neither be loyal to the underground forces nor to the state forces. This dilemma about ‘Who will determine their identity?’ keeps haunting them which results in incidents like rape, mass murder, disappearance etc. both at the hands of underground and state forces. Thus, the paper in discussion addresses issues resulting out of this conflict and how the consequences of this conflict are borne by men and women alike through a critical study of four short-stories by Temsula Ao.

Introduction

The idea of the State cannot be discussed without referring to the violence it accompanies while affirming its legitimacy in a given territorial space. Coercion, as is popularly believed, is a means that is used in cases of extreme inevitabilities when the ideological apparatus has failed to achieve its desired objectives. But, what if the ideological apparatus cannot function in a particular territory as the inhabitants hold on to their cultural roots and identities so strongly? In this case, force is the only option left and the only way out to crush the enemy out of the way—a roadblock in the way of progress, development and nation-building.

The North-East India is faced with the same problem of state-sponsored violence where the mainland nationalist ideology finds itself at loggerheads with ethnic communities, their cultures and belief systems as they seem to resist all attempts of appropriation by the state. This violence is mainly directed against those who put up their resistance to existing perceptions of national unity and integrity and refuse to be co-opted into a wider homogenizing nationalist discourse which aims at subsuming them into a monolithic Indian identity by compromising on their indigenous cultural roots and specificities. This state-sponsored violence is perceived as “legitimate” because those resisting are primarily branded as the ones who pose a threat to the integrity and sovereignty of the nation as a coherent all-encompassing whole (Majumdar, 2009). To ensure that such resistance is tackled firmly and does not provoke others to do the same, the state machinery makes use of force and other barbaric means of violence to keep the nation and nationalist discourse alive and thereby subjecting an entire community to mindless acts of violence and brutality through arbitrary killings, rape, torture, and mass murder. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, an act of Parliament of India which grants the Indian Armed Forces some special powers to act on their whims and fancies with regard to the so-called “disturbed areas” or “conflict zone”, is a telling example of this kind of state sponsored violence which is utterly dehumanizing and undemocratic. The said act or law can be seen in contrast to the USA PATRIOT Act formed right after 9/11 which razed the World Trade Center in New York City to a heap of rubble in a matter of few minutes. The USA PATRIOT Act like AFSPA grants “sweeping powers to law enforcement authorities to enter private homes and conduct searches without informing the residents and leveling charges against them for crimes they never committed” (Majumdar, 2009). In this foul play of violence, we should note that the victims are not only women who are brutalized, maimed or killed, but also men who suffer equally when caught in this mire of senseless violence.

The paper attempts to explore this human tragedy occasioned by state-sponsored violence in the Northeastern states where the ongoing conflict between the two warring groups, the Indian Army and the underground army or the insurgents has resulted into the most inhuman and barbaric consequences for the people of this region. The text chosen for this purpose is Tamsila Ao’s collection of short-stories, *These Hills Called Home* (2007) where I primarily intend to focus on four short-stories namely, “The Jungle Major”, “The Last Song”, “The Curfew Men” and “Shadows” to explore this human tragedy and dehumanization of the entire population for

geopolitical reasons. In all these stories, the state can be seen as having a phallic presence where it is out on a rampage to destroy and kill anyone who challenges its power and legitimacy. I argue that though the state projects itself as a benign patriarch, as a protector and savior of its people in a given territorial space, ironically it appears to be the obverse—a predator, a mass killer.

Besides, the very term ‘North-East’ too demands some critical attention here. The term is purely a State construction to validate its power and authority. Despite the multiplicity of indigenous cultures and histories of the people in this region, the Indian state, by adopting the term ‘North-East’ which puts together Assamese, Manipuris, the Nagas, Mizos, etc. in a homogenized whole, seems to have consigned the people of this region into a subaltern and marginalized position where the dominant narrative of the state rules over those marginalized. The homogenization of various ethnic cultures and histories here can be interpreted as the Indian state’s tactic to represent itself as “one homogenized coherent whole” which, as Philip Abrams argues, is just an illusion that the state feeds to its people to exercise its power over them. In this sense, we can also contend that the ongoing conflict between the Indian army and the underground army in this region is a fight between these two narratives—one dominant and the other, marginalized or subaltern.

These stories seem to be offering a meta-narrative of the history of the region simmering in conflict against the Indian state. These stories have been written from a subaltern position and constantly question and challenge the dominant narrative of the state. These are stories which not only talk about the conflict between the state and the rebels or insurgents, but also of those who remain traumatized by the dilemma ‘who should I show my allegiance to—the state or the local underground army which is fighting for the rights and liberties of its ethnic people?’ This is the moment when the question of identity surfaces and poses pertinent questions like ‘Who will determine the Naga identity, the Indian state or the ethnic people?’ It is these questions that I would like to discuss in my paper through a close analysis of the four stories mentioned above.

The Jungle Major

It is a story about a newly-wed “mis-matched” couple, Punaba and Khatila, whose happy married life is haunted by the spectre of the state and its oppressive armed forces. Although both

came from different familial and economic backgrounds, the boy was of no match to the beauty of the girl and had the disapproval of the village clansmen as they did not see it fit that a girl from a major clan marry a boy who came from a minor clan. Despite the controversy, they went ahead with the marriage paying no heed to the popular voices and settled down in the village. Since Punaba was a driver and had to be away from home for longer periods, in his absence, “Khatila cultivated a small field on the outskirts of the village and grew some vegetables in her kitchen garden.” This not only kept her occupied, but also supplied with the food and other items to keep her life going while her husband was away. This points to her self-independent nature as a woman and her strong will in the time of crisis which becomes the focal point of the story in the end as she ends up saving many lives, including that of her village.

Meanwhile it is learnt that Punaba has joined the underground army and is earning well. The wife is not at all perturbed by hearing this news and handles the situation carefully knowing that it may not auger well for the village community. If some from the village ever joined or helped the underground rebels, it was the entire village which became the target of the state forces. The coming of ‘over-ground’ army and their threatening of the villagers at gunpoint that if they did not inform the state army of the movements of underground army, they would raze the whole village to the ground is a clear example of state violence against innocent people. As Temsula writes:

Some villages, to which the underground leaders belonged, were severely punished. The houses were ransacked by the security forces; the grain in their barns was burnt and the people themselves were herded into camps away from the village and kept in virtual imprisonment inside areas fenced in by bamboo stockades. This form of group incarceration was the infamous ‘grouping’ of villages which the Nagas hated and dreaded even more than bullets (Pg. 3).

It is clear from the above lines that the state-sponsored violence leads to collective pain and suffering. It is not just those whom the state has branded as ‘offenders of capital crimes’ are targeted, but the entire village. Besides, the burning and destroying of their grain and other livelihood items is something that can be interpreted as a collective punishment to all, signifying a sort of ethnic-cleansing by denying them the very access to food and other life-supporting

items. In such a pressing situation, Khatila's presence of mind and her insipid nature are important to note. She does not submit to the armed forces when she is threatened to be raped if she did not cooperate with the combining officers. "We know how to deal with women like you" says the captain. She does not even show any sign of fear or apprehension when confronted with danger in the form of the Indian army. Rather, she outwits the Indian army with an ingenious plan which not only saves her and her husband's life who is on Most Wanted list, but that of the villagers too. The ingenious plan was to smear the entire body of Punaba with ash and treat him like a stranger or an undesirable by shouting abuses at him while the captain and his battalion searched the house. As Temsula writes:

The young and inexperienced army officer did not realize that the beautiful but simple village woman had thus foiled a meticulously planned 'operation' of the mighty Indian army and that a prized quarry had simply walked away to freedom (pg.6).

This foiling of the "planned operation of the mighty Indian army" by a woman who is doubly marginalized—first being a woman and second, a Naga—suggests two things: one, Temsula Ao has provided the woman with unprecedented agency and intelligence which shields the entire village against state-violence. Two, the phallic presence of the state is rendered effeminate and emasculated by a subaltern subject. It is clear that the story is not only about the state-sponsored violence inflicted upon innocent people, but about gender bias that men hold against women that they are not capable of playing any important role in the underground resistance against the armed forces. Ironically, the story ends on the same gender bias where Punaba is given the credit for his "shrewd planning" for the narrow escape of himself and his party and is promoted to the rank of major by the underground bosses. But the reader is aware who the savior was.

The Last Song

"The Last Song" is a story which gives a shocking and disconcerting picture of women-directed state violence where a teenager and her mother are raped to death by a group of Indian army officers. Besides, the story also makes a reference to the Naga oral tradition of folk songs

and can be seen as a meta-narrative of history of the atrocities and violence meted out to ethnic people.

Apenyo, the girl, and her mother, Libeni, lived alone. The father was long dead. It is told that he too was a gifted singer “both of traditional folk songs as well as of Christian hymns at church.” The girl inherited this gift of singing and was a “singing genius” in the village, though the villagers and her mother did not take her singing expertise seriously as her songs mostly consisted of “loud shrieks and screams.” In the wake of the violence that follows, it can be argued that her “loud shrieks and screams” symbolize the violence perpetrated against women by the state and its oppressive forces which most of the time go unheard.

Since the underground army primarily depended on the “taxes” and other funds paid by the villagers who in turn promised them to protect them from the state violence, and since the underground army members too were going to participate in a Sunday Christian ceremony where the foundation for a new church building was to be laid, the armed forces had devised a plan to capture all the underground leaders on the same day and wipe them out, then and there. As Temsula writes:

...the government forces were determined to ‘teach’ all those villages the consequences of ‘supporting’ the rebel cause by paying ‘taxes’...to demonstrate to the entire Naga people what happens when you ‘betray’ your own government (Pg. 26)

What follows later is the mindless violence and genocidal atrocity on the villagers when the entire building of an old church where the people had taken refuge after the arrival of the over ground army is set on fire and the bodies charred to ashes, beyond recognition. Besides, the gang-rape of Apenyo and later of her mother in the old church building before it was set on fire raises certain questions on the state’s claim that it is a protector of the people and is by their side all the time. The state, as we can see, is not a protector but a spectre that everyone is afraid of. Its phallic presence is made clear by the kind of violence it inflicts on the populations who threaten the national unity or the discourse of the nation. The underground army here can be seen as a threat to the national unity in the political terminology and the state-backed Indian army as the sole protector of the nation’s unity. Further, we can also see the predicament of the people caught

in this conflict between the state army and the underground rebels where the punishment becomes a collective experience and utterly dehumanizing.

Also, as Kavita Daiya argues in her book, *Violent Belongings* (2008), that the nation is always feminized in Indian context and is ethnicized as a Hindu nation where “the Hindu woman embodies the Indian nation”, one can argue that the gang-rape of Apenyo and her mother is a fallout of this dominant discourse of ethnicization of India as a Hindu nation. Apenyo’s rape can be read in two terms: first, she is construed as a sympathizer of the rebel cause because she hailed from the village which funded the underground army. Secondly, her going to church is seen as her proximity to the British, the colonizer representing the Western culture and an archenemy of the East. Thus, her raping, in some sense, also signifies this Hindu-ethnic dominant narrative of the state where she is punished to death for resisting to be ethnicized as a Hindu woman.

The burning of the old church after the heinous crime can be read as an attempt to destroy all evidence of the barbarity and brutality by the armed forces. “The old church soon burst into flames reducing the dead and the dying into an unrecognizable black mass.” This line affirms the argument made in the beginning of the paper regarding the form of short-story as a meta-narrative of history in North-eastern context. It is through the story that one gets a glimpse of the past which has been largely written off and erased from the memory. Although the ravaged bodies of both the daughter and the mother are given a burial, it is a burial in no proper sense of the term. They are laid outside the graveyard with no headstones or any recognizable signs that confirmed their identity. “Their gravesites are two tiny grassy knolls trying to stay above the ground.” Their such a state after their “unnatural death” on that black Sunday when the state horrors swallowed the whole village up can be read as an attempt to shut the very memory off to that dreadful Sunday killings; an attempt to forget and destroy the evidence of the violence inflicted upon them. It is the storytelling of that dreadful Sunday undertaken by Apenyo’s grandmother that brings back to the younger generation what had happened on a Sunday morning when a church ceremony was being held. It is through the storytelling only that the history is revived, a history which has no concrete record as such. It is through the storytelling process that the memories of the innocent who died that day are revived and re-ignited. Thus, it can be argued that through her stories, Temsula Ao is giving voice to those silenced histories and

cultures of the Naga people which have been swept under the carpet or destroyed or marginalized by the dominant narrative of the state. Hers is an attempt to bring out those marginalized and subalternized and give them a rightful place that they deserved.

The Curfew Men

This story sheds light on the predicament of the people torn between the two warring groups: the Indian army and the local rebels. The story foregrounds the dilemma that almost all the people in this so-called “disturbed area” have to live with on everyday basis.

Satamba, an ex-policeman in the Assam Police, is a victim of this tension between the Indian army and the underground army of Nagaland. His services to the SDO as an informer after he took premature retirement as he had injured his leg so badly during a football match that he could not hold office as an asset, and the momentary freedom that he is granted to carry out the “secret activities” in the night, clearly suggest that he is caught between the hammer and the anvil. If he did not assist the over-ground army or the government officials about the location of “the enemy” that is his own people, there is danger to his life, and if his own people got to know about his betrayal to his community people, he would meet the same fate. The words of an underground rebel to Satamba capture this threat succinctly where he is warned not to “carry tales”:

He gripped Satamba by the neck and hissed in his ear, ‘Go back home curfew man, and if you value your life, never again carry tales.’

Such a plight of Satamba makes us question the very discourse of the enemy. Who constitutes the enemy? Is it Satamba and people like him who have no way out but to keep themselves alive at any cost? Is it the state army and other allied forces who perpetrate violence upon innocent people to bring them into the hegemonic discourse of the nation? Or is it the underground rebels who are putting up resistance against the state forces to claim sovereignty over their land? Such questions abound in the narrative which primarily lead us to violent ends as we have seen in the earlier two stories discussed above.

Here we can also observe a sense of “un-belongingness and being ‘unhoused’” on part of Satamba within a space that he calls home. Esther S. Narjinari argues that “when average north-

easterners decide to move away from what they know a place they belong to, to the larger 'Indian' cities for a better education, jobs or even to escape from the politics of terror back home, they often experience a sense of being 'unhoused' once they come in contact with other Indian cultures and languages outside the north-eastern part of the country." I argue that the very home that people like Satemba belong to ceases to be a home for them in such pressing situations where they are torn between the state and the underground army. The inner turmoil that Satemba goes through when he is tasked with snooping on the movements of the rebels by the SDO which results in the killing of an innocent village pays testimony to the above argument. His predicament is such that he does not feel home in his own village. It is no safe haven.

Shadows

"Shadows" is another short-story by Tamsila Ao in the same collection which highlights the violence on male bodies. This story can be read in context to the argument put forth by Kavita Datta that it is not just women who become the site of violence, but men too suffer in the same manner when the idea of the nation circulates.

Imli, against the will of his father who holds a high position in the underground army, joins the underground army and is part of the group being sent to China for training to learn guerrilla warfare skills. The father tries his best to dissuade him saying, 'You will regret it one day', but Imli goes ahead with his decision to join the underground rebels thinking it his 'patriotic' duty towards his people and community. Soon this optimism is shattered when he gets caught in the rivalry between his father and his commanding officer, Hoito, who takes revenge upon Imli for a public humiliation he had to suffer under his father during a similar training session in the past. Here, Tamsila can be seen pointing out at the fissures and holes in the discourse of separate statehood of the underground rebels who claim to be driven by 'patriotism' for their land against the Indian state. Besides, she also seems to be questioning the discourse of heroism in the postcolonial nation-states where it has been hijacked by a group of powerful people sitting higher up in any system or organization. What appears heroic to the public view is a distorted picture to keep the discourse of heroism alive even if the soldier or the fighter did not commit any heroic deeds on the war front. Veena Das, a US-based anthropologist and scholar, argues in her article, *Violence, Gender and Subjectivity* (2008) that there is "great disparity between what is held as acts of heroism on part of soldiers and their actual experience on the war

front.” She adds that the state continues to present the acts of soldiers as heroic—a masculine virtue—to the public who in turn vow to kill and die for the sake of the nation’s security, integrity and sovereignty. But, in situations where there are any deviations from the idealized masculine behavior in the soldier, that is kept hidden or not reported to the public. These unreported or hidden incidents in the life of a soldier reveal the violence committed upon his own body and self which could be voluntary or otherwise. Das supports her argument by citing examples from the two World Wars where soldiers’ deaths were celebrated as heroic and hurled with accolades even though the injury caused to their bodies was self-inflicted or due to reasons for desertion of duty or not following the orders.

The kind of barbaric and inhuman death that is meted out to Imli by his own fellow-men is a clear reference to violence on male bodies. The cause he had picked arms for swallows him up in such a brutal way that he does not even get a proper burial. Since Imli had been killed by his own team-mates, it brings back the earlier argument about ‘Who is the enemy?’ Here, the lines between the enemy and friend get further blurred and suggest that there are no winners in violence as Temsula herself writes in the preface to the collection of stories:

What the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life—their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scared both in mind and soul (Ao, x).

Conclusion

On a concluding note, one can say that violence be it state-sponsored to save the nation from disintegration or any potential sub-division or the violence used by the rebels for their own notions of sovereignty and governance, it is the common people of North-east who suffer the most and face the brunt of this conflict. Violence in any form, in any region is condemnable and cannot be justified. There are no winners in acts of violence. Violence breeds more violence and the label of “disturbed area” on certain parts of North-East India asks for more militarization of this region which guarantees that there will be more violence in the time to come. Those who die at the hands of the state forces, die a brutal and dehumanizing death. Those who survive are no more survivors in the real sense of the term but those who live under constant fear of their lives. It is not just

women who become the targets of state violence who suffer physical as well as social death¹ but men too are victims of violence whether it is state sponsored or sponsored by underground rebels. The state's self-image as the benign patriarch, as the guarantor of peace and harmony, as the harbinger of progress sounds hollow. In its attempts to impose the dominant discourse of the nation upon minoritized ethnic groups, cultures and peoples, the state employs coercive means to achieve its objectives and brands others as enemies of the state if they don't comply, and unleash violence which is far more systematized and deliberate. As a result, people of the region just face the brunt of the conflict between two warring parties. If they don't act as they are told to do by the state forces, they are branded as the enemy of the state, hence liable to be killed. If they don't follow the orders and instructions of the underground forces, they eventually become the enemies of their own people or community, hence ostracized or killed in the same manner. Thus, we see a cycle of unending violence from both sides which translates into the most horrific tragedy imaginable.

¹ According to Veena Das, social death can be interpreted in terms of forcible abduction or disappearance of women as well as forcible assimilation of one person of a community into another, for instance, forcible assimilation of Tibetans into Chinese communities. To her, this is another form of genocidal or ethnic cleansing practices. Das, *Violence, Gender and Subjectivity*. 2008.

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