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Surrogating Silences: Reading Trauma in Tamsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

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Abstract

Aim: *The Northeast is one of the most contentious regions in India, which has witnessed unprecedented violence and conflict, causing atrocities against people, especially women. Despite the six-decade-long violence against women in the form of molestation, sexual harassment, and rape, little literary attention has been paid, which the paper aims to foreground.*
Methodology and Approach: *The paper will employ a qualitative approach to provide a descriptive analysis of the selected text through the lens of Trauma Studies.*

Outcome: *The study will provide a robust understanding of Trauma through the women's perspective, which has not been a part of academic discourse so far. The female experiences of trauma can be different from the male experiences, which have been deliberately undermined, so that the paper will bring out such marginalised voices.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The study will reiterate the voices of women from the margins, as expressed through the writings of Tamsula Ao, which have, for decades, survived the pangs of silencing and erasure.*

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Northeast India is one of the most troubled regions in India, with a protracted conflict that has spanned over six decades. The Northeast has experienced a plethora of violence under a six-decade-long militarisation in the past few decades. The initial wave of discord, rooted in a sense of sub-nationalism, can be traced back to the Naga crisis, widely regarded as the origin of all subsequent insurgencies, which began as early as 1952. This is followed by the Mizo rebellion of 1966. The region had witnessed unprecedented violence, but the crisis has been deliberately concealed by censorship of news for several decades and has undergone a sea of silence.

Trauma fiction often tries to foreground pain. The women writers from troubled regions tend to create characters caught between horrendous traumatic experiences. It provides a surrogate through writing to locate trauma as a way of healing from traumatic experiences. As literature has a therapeutic effect, we try to heal our broken selves in juxtaposition to those who are not just broken but damaged; thus, the literature of trauma is written to retell the traumatic experience. “The rise of trauma theory has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualizing trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered” (Whitehead 3). So, literature is considered one of the safest outlets that is efficacious in communicating the silenced voices of pain. Similarly, the literature from the Northeast captures the most convincing glimpses of the silenced voices of trauma, as in Martin Buber’s term “hallowing the profane”. Thus, widespread desire “among various cultural groups to represent or make visible specific historical instances of trauma has given rise to numerous important works of contemporary fiction” (Whitehead 3). So, the fictional narratives sufficiently give us a glance at people living in troubled situations which encompass their everyday domestic struggle, violation of human rights, mutilation of women’s bodies, etc, with ease of reading. The brutality on people was promulgated with the introduction of the most arbitrary law in the land, AFSPA, on 22nd May 1958. This draconian law was imposed in different parts of northeast India on the pretext of the maintenance of ‘law and order’:

The Bald Act, consisting of six clauses, does not contain any rules established during its passage or through subsequent amendments. It gives

the power of inflicting death, without trial, detention, or interrogation, to a non-commissioned officer. The power to inflict death can be instant, for the officer has the power to open fire on a person or persons, to the extent of causing death, upon mere suspicion, without knowing whether the person is armed or not. (Hazarika 25).

This arbitrary law provided unfettered powers to the army personnel, as per Baruah, ASFPA lies in the ‘history of imperial policing’ (Baruah 155), which has adversely affected the lives of people in the northeast. Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is one of the strong voices from Nagaland. The collection of short stories in this anthology presents a poignant representation of the Naga struggle, offering a glimpse into the violence inflicted on innocent civilians. Different stories in the collection depict the atrocities inflicted upon the Nagas by the Indian army in the name of peace-making. Such military expedition directly takes women who, during conflict, find themselves on the receiving end of violence. The military expedition in Nagaland records the extremity of human brutalities inflicted on women when women’s bodies become a thriving battlefield for conflicting male egos to contest. The story, named *The Last Song*, is a narrativization of trauma inflicted on an entire village through the brutal murder of a girl named Apenyu with the nickname of ‘singing beauty’ (Ao 25). Apenyu holds the centre of the storyline and becomes a traumatised female exposed to brutal armed forces. In this story, Ao offers insight into trauma through Apenyu, highlighting the trauma women experienced during the conflict. Apenyu, a young singer, was appreciated by everyone in the village, who leads the centre stage in the church choir. Her villagers were in an exceptionally joyful mood for the inaugural celebration of the village’s new church. However, it was also a turbulent time for the Naga as the army forces were harshly coming down on the Naga people. The armed forces suspected that Apenyu village was aiding rebels underground by providing them with funds and aid. They entered the town on the eve of the inaugural ceremony of the new church building in the city. They enter the city with gunshots and open massacre of the villagers, dispersed congregation of the villagers gathered there, “to demonstrate to the entire Naga people what happens, “when you betray your government.” (Ao 26) The armed forces then exhibited open firing on the gathering, including the goanburas. The

sacred Sunday gathering turned into chaos and mayhem. Apenyu alone burst out with her solo singing to retaliate against the violence. All the members of the crowd left the floor to save their lives. A few ‘goabouras’ (Ao 27) tried to settle the precarious situation. Eventually, they too subsided, leaving Apenyu alone as “The pastor and the goanburas were tied up securely for transportation to the army headquarters and whatever fate awaited them there” (Ao 28). Apenyu continued to sing her song as a divine direction to assert the power of spirituality over military brutalities. Amid the chaos, Apenyo’s melodious voice was reigning as a protest against the anarchy inflicted by the Indian military force against the unarmed villagers. Her song attempts to soothe the sighs and sobs of the villagers and eradicate the noise of gunfire. Ao writes:

Some members of the choir left their singing and were seen trying to run away to safety. Only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her. Her mother, standing with the congregation, saw her daughter singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns with her indomitable voice raised to God in heaven. (Ao 28).

The military officials remain crestfallen, witnessing the courage of the young girl, which enraged the captain of the troop. Lebini, Apenyo’s mother, sensing the precarity of the situation, attempted to reach out to her daughter, who had been dragged away inside the old church by the leader. The leader of the army, ‘grabbed Apenyo by the hair and with a bemused look on his face dragged her away from the crowd’ (Ao28). Lebini followed them and saw “the leader of the armed young captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn” (Ao 28). Lebini, in the frenzy, jumped with the animal’s haul and attempted to get the men off her daughter’s exposed body. The soldiers grabbed her too and bashed her to the ground:

...and he too began to unzip his trousers... she spat on the soldier’s face and tried to twist herself free of his grasp...this only aroused him, he bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her conscious and raped her limp body, the small band of soldiers then took their turn,

even though by the time the fourth one mounted, the woman was already dead (Ao 28).

The captain, afterward, to convince himself to leave no witnesses left of this despicable act, orders to open fire on the people trying to lift the mutilated bodies of these two women. The captain was overtaken by fear at last and felt hallucinated by the sound of a song hummed by a virgin girl when she was being raped to get rid of this frenzy, he eventually set the entire church on fire to reduce the witness into an unrecognisable black mass. (Ao 29). Ao's *The Last Song* resonates with a real traumatic incident that occurred in the past and finds a mode of expression through this story:

This story 'The Last Song' could also have been the outcome of a similar real incident that happened way back on 27th December 1997, when the Assam Rifles and Manipur Light Infantry (MLI) entered Mokokchung town and committed a mass rape of women and set a building on fire during their offensive operation against NSCN(K). (Pou 65)

The peaceful protest of Apenyo with her song was taken as a challenge to the masculinity of the army captain, which was met with brutality on her body. Her rape was a way for a captain to exhibit his strength. The narratives from the northeast with their all-potential violence and disturbance trace rape as a potent medium to humiliate the opponent group. It is a tool to dishonour the rival group, where women get trapped between the warring forces. Susan Brownmiller, in her book *Against Our Will*, describes rape as "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear." (Brownmiller 15).

The story recounts the atrocities inflicted upon Naga women by the Indian military force during the time of the Naga struggle. The story chronicles how women were exposed to physical brutalities and eventually became active sufferers of conflict. The story attempts to recreate the lived experiences of the northeast during the time of violence, which did not find a place anywhere. Such a fictional story inadvertently brings to visibility incidents from the past that were previously hidden. The heart-wrenching story, *The Last Song*, can be seen as a recreation of many such stories from the land. The shame and ugliness of the arbitrary laws imposed on the people of Manipur in specific and the northeast in

general were exposed with “a group of women walking towards them. The famous Manipuri women’s unrobing of clothes in Kangla Fort, Assam Rifles Headquarters Gate on 15th July 2004, still lingers in the collective memory of the region with:

A group of women was walking towards them. Moments later, their faces flushed with horror, embarrassment, and helplessness, they averted their gaze. For the women, several middle-aged, a few elderly, some young, most of them activists and veterans of many protests, had ripped the clothes from their bodies and now stood naked, with sagging breasts and flowing hair, some thin and others heavy-hipped, before the stunned soldiers, and unfurled banners abusing the army. ‘Indian Army Rape Us, Kill Us’ read on the banner. (Hazarika 1)

The Jungle Major is another story from the same collection, which recounts the plight of a woman named Khatila, whose husband is involved in the underground militant forces. Khatila and many of the other militants have to undergo torture by the armed forces daily. Her house is ransacked frequently, and she falls victim to the lewd surveillance of the army offices. Punaba’s wife Khatila has been constantly threatened by the officers who have a ‘lascivious look’ on her. She has been traumatised by the frequent visits of these officials. Her private space was turned entirely upside down. The army officials could enter her home at any odd hours and traumatise her by saying that if they get hold of any information then, “She will be punished in a very special way” (Ao 4) and the officer would add with his lascivious look saying, “We know how to deal with women like you.” (Ao 4). The families of the suspected underground militants were exposed to all sorts of torture, which Ao puts in the following words:

The houses were ransacked by the security forces, the grain in the barn was burnt...Numerous stories proliferated of women being molested by the security forces and the obstinate ones who refused to give information being severely beaten; not only that, sometimes they would be hung upside down and subjected to unspeakable tortures like chili powder being rammed into their extremities. (Ao 3)

Ao, in her other anthology, *The Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone*, presents a wide array of stories about the faces of ordinary people in times of

conflict. The story *Jungle Major* depicts the plight of village people whose men choose to join the military forces. Their families were interrogated, women abducted, and children killed as punishment for their disobedience. The lives of the people turned inconspicuous. “The people were herded into camps away from the village and kept in virtual imprisonment inside areas fenced in by bamboo stockades.” (Ao 3). In this story, Katila, the wife of underground major Punaba, is constantly under surveillance by the military. They would enter her house at odd hours and threaten her that if she did not tell them about her husband’s wear, then they would punish her. However, the captain keeps his lewd gaze on her and tells her that if they find out anything suspicious, then they will punish her in a very special way. He hints at his promiscuous desire to engage himself in sexual activity with her and adds, “We know how to deal with women like you” (Ao 4). The villagers feared Punaba’s visit to Katila, knowing that even the slightest leak of information to the army could lead to severe consequences for the entire community.

Ao’s *The Jungle Major* foregrounds the difficulties of people who were crushed between two conflicting forces. The people in the Naga village suffer the adversities caused by the underground militants against the government. The armed forces, on the other hand, try to compensate for their losses by looting and killing innocent civilians. Sometimes the entire village was burned down on suspicion that they were paying taxes and sponsoring the militants. Whereas, the ordinary people fall into the cusp of power. Uddipana Goswami records the plight of women who were traumatised by the armed men, “Sometimes at night, militants enter their houses demanding to be fed and sheltered, and the women have to comply for fear of their lives and the well-being of their families. They thus become unwilling and unwitting actors in political conflicts.” (Goswami 5). The *Jungle Major* recounts the horror of one of the most infamous cases in the Oinam area of Senapati District, Manipur. It is on one of the foggy mornings of July 9, 1987, that underground militants launched an attack on the Assam Rifles outpost located near Oinam village. A considerable number of arms and ammunition were robbed by the militants, causing the injury of many, including the death of nine soldiers. It was hard on the part of the Assam Rifles Officials to endure the humiliation of being looted and killed by the militants. To address this

offence and to retaliate against the losses that occurred, they decided to launch ‘Operation Bluebird’ in 30 villages around the Oinam to mitigate the loss. Although the innocent villagers have no active participation in the raid, they become the passive recipients of the armed outrage. Operation Bluebird was one of the most brutal operations directed towards civilians:

In a few weeks, the Assam Rifles shot dead fifteen people after subjugating them to inhuman torture...Hundreds of villagers were beaten and subjected to the third-degree methods of torture; men were hanged upside down, buried alive, and given electric shocks. Women and girls were sexually assaulted. Two women were compelled to give birth to their babies in the open ground in full view of the jawans. (Beard 23)

Ao’s stories are the recreation of such traumatic experiences of the Nagas who have survived a ‘reign of terror’, under militancy. *The Jungle Major* entails the story of lines blurred between public and private space, which no longer represents any sense of security to women. The civilians were subjected to inhuman torture, especially women, who were targeted to dishonour the insurgent group and to teach a lesson to those who were allegedly paid taxes to the underground. Many of the militants’ families were ostracised with the fear of backlash in their lives.

Another short story in the collection, *Shoba*, explores the challenges and hardships experienced by villages when military forces take control of their area. The entire region was then enveloped in a strange air of discomfort. They were constantly under surveillance while walking the pathways or working in the fields, and even their house could not provide them with security. They feel trapped in the strange circumstance where words like “grouping, curfew, and ‘situation’ began to acquire sinister dimensions between the government and underground armies.” (Ao 10). With the army occupation, the mode of transportation changed, and people were required to travel in convoys for both personal and official purposes. Travelling in a convoy was difficult and hazardous, involving long stretches of army vehicles. Accidents were common due to poorly maintained roads in the hilly terrain and low visibility caused by frequent fog. Despite these dangers, “convoys were also frequently the targets of ambushes from the other side, often resulting in not only the army but civilian

casualties as well” (Ao 11). If any village is suspected of having an affliction with the underground forces, it would have been dislodged or burnt down. They were then kept under strict surveillance and often shifted to concentration camps with makeshift settlements known as ‘grouping’, “the word ‘groupings’ had a much more sinister implication; it meant that whole village would be dislodged from their ancestral site and herded into new ones, making it more convenient for the security forces to guard them day and night.” (Ao 11). In the grouping, villagers were inflicted with restrictions and torture, and eventually lost their lives. To the Nagas who live in unison with nature and the fields, it is the most brutal punishment for them. Once the villagers were removed from their ancestral land, they were then known as ‘errant village’, which they took as the most humiliating insult, causing deep psychological trauma to them. Ao writes,

It was the most humiliating insult that was inflicted on the Naga psyche by forcibly uprooting them from the soil of their origin and being, and confining them in an alien environment, denying them access to their fields, restricting them from their routine activities and most importantly, demonstrating to them that ‘freedom’ they enjoyed could easily be robbed at gunpoint by ‘invading’ army. (Ao 11)

The villagers were always under suspicion, from both underground and military forces. Those who were under suspicion, and when taken for interrogation, undergo acute physical torture. If anyone goes under interrogation, “then the night would erupt with the unearthly scream and cries of the victims, and even though the record player did its best to muffle the sounds, the walls of the house seemed to reverberate with their agony. (Ao 16).

The ultimate precarity of the situation, where the land and its people were enveloped in terror amidst two conflicting forces, is also recorded in other stories. *"The Curfew Man"* is another story in the collection that tells the tale of people who find themselves caught in unavoidable circumstances. As the title itself suggests, Curfew had been the order of the day during the conflict, which also violently changed the course of people’s lives. The land got caught up in “a state of hostility between two warring armies, the one overground labelling the other as a rebel fighting against the state and the other, operating from the underground hideouts and calling the Indian army illegal occupiers of sovereign Naga

territories.” (Ao 34). The Curfew which is imposed generally to maintain peace and stability for the security of people would turn against the people. There are stories, “about people carrying the sick to the hospital or in search of doctors were stopped and subjected to humiliating searches causing unnecessary and sometimes even fatal delays.” (Ao 34). The mechanism helped the army officials to add a few inglorious medals to their chests. Those are inglorious because “there were several incidents where civilians were shot dead by patrol parties after curfews and their deaths reported as those of underground rebels killed in ‘encounters’ in an army.” (Ao 34). The story narrates the life of a married couple, Satemba and Jemtila, who, under some circumstances, end up working for the SDO of the area. Jemtila worked as a house help in SDO’s household, but Satemba, who limps on one foot, was compelled to work as a secret informer to SDO. The work assigned to Satemba was harsh for his ill-equipped body, which had to roam around the town during curfew at night, gathering information. Satemba was forced to do the work of an informer, which he is unhappy about, and his wife is unaware of it. Satemba had been told that if he declined an offer to be the informer, his wife would also lose her job.

Another story, *"An Old Man Remembers,"* is part of the collection. The story recounts memories of a past innocence that was lost. It is the story of an older man who tells the trauma of his days in the insurgency. The older man does not want to become a reminder of his dark past to his grandson. He is narrating the stories of his past, but was reluctant to bring in the legends of his old days as a militant. He thought that the narration of these memories was very traumatic, and he did not want to break the ‘sanctity of the traumatic past’ (to borrow Freud’s words). However, eventually, he decided to recount the story of the past, with heart-wrenching lines, “I should tell you these stories because only then will young people like you understand what has wounded our soul” (Ao 98). Initially, the older man does not want to burden his grandchildren with bitter memories of the past; he soon realizes that accepting the present, in the context of understanding the past, is also crucial. The crisis that he experienced during his adolescence and the decisions he took have distorted his entire life. He reckons the gone by days and says, “We too were young and carefree like you once, but all of a sudden our youth was snatched away from us, and instead of schoolbooks

we were carrying guns and other weapons of destruction and living in jungle-like wild creatures.” (Ao 98). These are the painful memories of the past that the older man has harbored within himself for a long time. It has a deep sense of loss intensified by the death of his childhood friend Imlikokaba. He is the same friend with whom he has survived those murky days of the past as a militant. He recounts how the village fire burned their dreams and their future into ashes. It was that black day when they chose their path as a militant after witnessing the utter helplessness of their people in front of armed militants, he said:

The last peal of the school bell was dying; we heard a great roar of women and children shrieking and crying and trying to run away from the balls of fire which seemed to be chasing them. All school children rushed out, and we saw the most horrifying sight of our lives...the gun-toting soldiers were picking out easily and shooting like animals running away from the forest fire. (Ao 98)

Many school-going children like the narrator lost their parents and homes in this raging war against humanity. They too picked up weapons, leaving them with utter frustration and a sense of emptiness. The idea of crisis is predominant in almost all of Ao's stories. Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* also gives a bleak view of the world order during the conflict in Nagaland. When the region suffered the disturbance caused by the constant tug of war between the underground and military forces. The ordinary villagers were caught between the cusp of two conflicting forces, whose lives were crippled in the crisis. The stories, set against the backdrop of Nagaland during the crisis, showcase the stories of Naga people whose entire lives were disrupted by unseen forces. This story collection offers a poignant glimpse into the conflict-ridden landscape of Nagaland, leaving its people with an overwhelming sense of trauma. Therefore, Caruth rightly states that:

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our actions and our language. (Caruth 4)

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the paper titled Surrogating Silences: Reading Trauma in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. This is an original piece of research work conducted by me. The matter in this paper has not been submitted for publication anywhere else. I further declare that I have cited and given due acknowledgement to any research work I have referred to in the course of my research.

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