

# Redemption of the Naga Historical Consciousness: An Analysis of Temsula Ao's These Hills Called Home – Stories from a War Zone

Lekha Rai and Dhananjay Tripathi

National Institute of Technology Sikkim, India

## Abstract

Entangled in the web of national identity, the Northeast has been struggling for sovereignty and ethnic reformation. The dispute between the centre and the ethnocentric movements in the Northeast during and after the British rule is evident in Nagaland's historical past. The influence of British colonialism and the advent of Christian missionaries reshaped the Naga cultural identity giving rise to plurality and a state of disorientation. Temsula Ao in her collection of short stories "*These Hills Called Home- Stories from a War Zone*" rises above the stereotypical notion about North-eastern literature and its preoccupation with the ideas of violence, terror, bloodshed and homogeneity. She does it by pining for unanimity amidst disintegration through the Naga historical consciousness vibrating with the essence of myths, storytelling and many more. She wishes to reunite the loss Naga identity through their reliance to their ethnic past. Therefore, the paper would highlight the role of the Naga historical consciousness to redeem them from the ongoing turmoil of terror, violence and identity crisis.

**Keywords:** colonialism, ethnocentric, homogeneity, identity, myths

## 1. Introduction

"Truth about the self, the land and above all, the truth about history". ( Ao, 2006, p.112)

Northeast India is entangled in the web of national identity as it seems to exist in isolation with mainland India. This region is thrown into a state of disarray and alienation with a series of separatist and sovereignty movements. The construction and depiction of Northeast as the "other" in the pre and postcolonial times has posed a serious threat to their long cherished culture and tradition. The Naga identity has been found to be constructed and fluid leading to a debate on its historical stability as a race and community. Existing as a thicket of tribes and sub-tribes, it is difficult to assess the Nagas as a singular category. This situation gets more chaotic as apart from the segregation within the Naga tribes, there is a debate regarding their coexistence with the Indian union. The Naga identity is bound by

varied identity articulations springing from the existence of tribes and sub-tribes along with the political and national rhetoric on their conformity with questions of being Indian. The Naga identity contradicts to the historical and cultural sketch of India. A Naga nationalist leader Angami Zapu Phizo (1930-1990) opined that “The Nagas have nothing to do with India.” (Wouters, 2018, p. 39) The Nagas consider themselves as having a unique cultural identity advocating secession from India on the basis of self preservation as an independent nation. Today a Naga seeks for political and economic salvation through socialism and spiritual through Christianity somewhere forgetting the historical consciousness which define their origin and their identity. During the British occupation of India, Nagaland underwent a metamorphosis in terms of their ethnicity and culture. Pressurised by the burden of a tumultuous past the Nagas today are found struggling for their identity and have even resorted to violent means “but it somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome.” (Ao, 2006, p. x). Temsula Ao seeks for cultural recovery as she considers it the only means to revive the lost glory of their existence. She cherishes the hope that the rich Naga tradition of collective creativity and humane values will triumph someday. “It is only when the Nagas re-embrace and re-write this vision into the fabric of their lives in spite of the compulsions of a fast changing world, can we say that the memories of the turbulent years have served us well.” (Ao, 2006 , p. xi). Temsula Ao in her collection of short stories “*These Hills Called Home- Stories from a War Zone*” rises above the stereotypical notion about North-eastern literature and its preoccupation with the ideas of violence, terror, bloodshed and homogeneity. She does it by pining for unanimity amidst disintegration through the Naga historical consciousness vibrating with the essence of myths, storytelling and many more. She wishes to reunite the loss Naga identity through their reliance to their ethnic past. Therefore, the paper would highlight the role of the Naga historical consciousness to redeem them from the ongoing turmoil of terror, violence and identity crisis.

## 2. Historical consciousness and revisiting the lost past

Historical consciousness means an awareness of the past which enables us to interpret the present. “Historical consciousness implies a trans-generational mental orientation to time. Such an orientation is based on the human aptitude to think back and forth in time. Moreover, historical consciousness means an interaction between making sense of the past and constructing expectations for the future. Time is regarded not only as a technical measure but a substance loaded with human-given meanings and moral issues” (Ahonen, 2005). In her notable collection of short stories “*These Hills Called Home – Stories from a War Zone*” (2006) Temsula Ao pines for the lost era of peace in the unconscious psyche of the Naga historical past. Her work marks the quest for the untainted, uncorrupted self lost in the winds of the colonial era and demands of the contemporary age. In trying to uphold this dictum, we would reflect on the lines from “*These Hills Called Home*”, “For those who know, /What we have done,/ To ourselves.” In a dirge like manner she aspires to awaken the original consciousness of her people, sleeping in the slumber of their illusory selves. She strives for such a state of being amidst impossibilities and inconsistencies resulting from the impact of British administrators and Christian conversions in the past and globalisation in the present. Such influences made them question their own identity and worth. Today a Naga finds himself battling with the other self born out of such alien methods of enlightenment. “With

the globalisation of capitalism, both rural and urban life has become extremely complex since unprecedented global processes affect local lives and environments and break down cultural specificities.” (Chakravorty, 2015, p.2)

There are varied reasons in aspiring for an eternal union with the past but the most prominent one could be traced in the words of Tilottama Misra in her editorial note in, “The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India”, “Fiction An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with ‘other’ cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the seven north-eastern states. Each small community or linguistic group has responded through its oral or written communication to the majoritarian cultures from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country, in its own distinctive manner.” (qtd. in Kakoti, 2017). Temsula Ao laments at the paradoxical existence of Naga identity swaying between rural and urban ethos. This is clearly reflected in the writings of Temsula Ao where she tries to evoke the historical consciousness of the Naga people by describing the culture and customs existent prior to the advent of British colonialism. The real essence of the Nagas lies in the village which is believed to be the heart of the land “Without land it is difficult to claim that you belong to a village. And without belonging to a village, it is difficult to claim that you are a Naga.” (Wouters, 2018, p. 60). In the short story entitled “The Pot maker” Ao stresses the importance of the art of pot making within the Naga community. The village elders persuade Arenla to teach her daughter, Sentila the skill of making pots. The village elders tell Sentila’s father that “skills such as pot making which not only catered to the needs of the people but also symbolised the tradition and history of the people did not ‘belong’ to any individual.” (Ao, 2006, p.61) The Nagas lived in a collectivist society where community interests preceded individual aspirations.

Further, the acceptance of statehood has narrowed the Naga consciousness by breaking the myth of recovery as they are subjected to an irreparable loss of their ethnic identity. The problem lies when the racial Naga image is forcibly clubbed with images of modernity. Temsula Ao maintains that Naga identity should transcend all superficial differences powered by the impact of colonisation and globalisation. It appears that the Nagas cherished unified singular identity is a myth since they were never a single tribe nor united. The Naga Historian Horam (1935-2019) writes, “Whosoever first called the Nagas by that name and whatever the word may mean, the Nagas themselves knew each other by the name of the tribe to which they belonged ....the present awareness of being one people was understandably absent among them till very recently.” (Wouters, 2018, p.44). What they have embraced today is a superficial reality about their enforced identity. However this has resulted in making us realise what is common in them and where they vary. Their commonness lies in their adherence to nature and village life and their differences springs from the varied dialects and languages they speak. Historian Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) wrote, “the basic interest of every Naga is in his family, the clan, the khel, the village. This is what he regards as his culture which must not be interfered with” (Wouters, 2018, p.59).

### 2.1 At crossroads: Naga Identity and Naga Culture

The legacy of colonialism and globalisation tarnishing the Naga identity and culture is evident in the story “Soaba” which unfolds villainy of grouping system where the villagers were uprooted from their traditional habitat and grouped together like herds so that the security forces could have an easy eye on them. Like the Nazi concentration camps the Nagas were defamed and as Temsula Ao says “de-identified” robbing them off their unique ethnic and linguistic space “The word ‘grouping’ had a much more sinister implication; it meant that whole villages would be dislodged from their ancestral sites and herded into new ones...” (Ao, 2006, p.11). But on the contrary there are many who have accepted their new found identity at the cost of cultural loss. The turbulent years of the 1950’s of Nagaland gave birth to “...a band of self-seeking entrepreneurs” (Ao, 2006, p.2) who placed their individual interests above everything else. One such character is Boss who personifies a new being and who surprisingly neglects the tenets of his own culture and acts as a traitor to his own community. Boss symbolises the sinister designs of authority as the ambience of his habitat resonates with savage cries and howls of damned souls “then the night would erupt with the unearthly screams 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, 2006, p.16).

In one of the short stories entitled the “Curfew Man” the main protagonist Satemba goes around the town beyond the curfew hours, so that he can spy on his Naga brothers and sisters on behalf of his employers. He is forced to take up the profession of a spy, at the same time he cannot not betray the Naga endeavour for freedom; this is the crisis of Naga identity thrown in a state of in-betweenness which perhaps makes Temsula Ao to seek redemption in creating a space which would make them overcome such crisis. Satemba is torn between his love for his fellow Naga brothers and his enforced duty. He couldn’t sustain his job because of the sense of betrayal to his ethnic community. In the words of Temsula Ao, “The real trouble was his heart, for the first time in two and half years, he was beginning to question himself and his so called job” (Ao, 2006, p. 40).

Temsula Ao considers cultural memory a tool to help them revolutionise their psyche and save their culture. She believes that voices can be raised by falling to their roots thus overturning the image of the Nagas as barbaric and their revolution as violent. A statement by Khaled Hosseini (1965) published in the Indian national daily “The Telegraph” on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019 page no.10 says, “But it is important to know this, to know your roots. To know where you started as a person. If not, your own life seems unreal to you. Like a puzzle.” Temsula Ao focuses on the forgotten past of the Nagas which breathed with the essence of Naga wit and knowledge. Perhaps, she hints on the use of such wits to bring change and peace within the state.

For restoration of their lost culture she believes that memory and culture is primary as it ensures cultural continuity by preserving its cultural knowledge from one generation to the next helping the future generations to reconstruct their identity. Creating a shared past is nonetheless creating a historical consciousness, “For without memory of the past there is no history, in the sense of the events that are meaningful to the collective events experienced by a collective that is aware of them.”(Funkenstein, p. 5)

Temsula Ao harbours the necessity to create a new space which would resist the winds of modernity inimical to their identity and culture. Resisting the onslaught of such

offensive forces would help in disrupting the misuse of history and the malicious interpretation of the Naga historical past in the present. Temsula Ao tries to restore the past not through hateful narratives of terror but by developing a narrative which is introspective and abounding in primeval truths of the Naga psyche. Ao rises as an optimist as she celebrates the fact that this tumultuous situation helped them realise where they stand and what they have become. She knew that by reconstructing their cultural identity they would be supplied with a shared historical consciousness of their unity in time and space. This would help them redeem their displaced selves provided they prove as patrons of their lost cultural past and not mere offenders. Probably a new approach of resolution could be launched in assimilating their tradition with incorrupt engagement.

Temsula Ao writes, "I hear the land cry/ Over and over again/ 'Let all the dead awaken/ And teach the living/ How not to die'" (Ao, 2006). These lines resonate with her faith in the past to restore the loss of peace in the ongoing terror and violence that wrecks the state of Nagaland. In the garb of a humanist Temsula Ao upholds the Naga consciousness which has stood for peace rising above the propagation of terror as she says that, "...in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms" (Ao, 2006, p. x). Colonial discourses on the Naga historical past have narrowed and misinterpreted the Naga identity condemning them as head hunters genetically inclined to bloodshed and terror. Gavin Young, a British journalist with the "Observer" had visited Nagaland in 1961 where he meets a flight lieutenant and his colleagues who were held captive by the rebel Federal Government of Nagaland. One of the flying officers comment to Young reflects the stereotyping that Nagas are constantly prone to "when we climbed out of the aircraft we didn't know how we would be received. I believed we might be eaten" (Bhonsle, 2016). Perhaps the same can be evinced in the centre periphery relationship where the periphery has to face a similar condescension. But the writings of Ao deconstructs such stereotypical notions as she considers the Nagas as preservers and in possession of a tradition which exemplifies the harmonious essence of nature. The works of Ao mirrors the urge of her people to recover such harmony as it truly defines the origin of Naga self and sensibility. This urge is identified in the character of Lentina in "Laburnum for my head: Stories" who is obsessed with this extraordinary wish to be buried under a laburnum tree to glorify her immortality "And every May, this extraordinary wish is fulfilled when the laburnum tree, planted on her gravesite in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town, bursts forth in all its glory of butterfly-yellow splendour" (Ao, 2009, p.20). Her wish marks her preference for a natural resort for burial which stands in opposition to the demands of civilization symbolised through the man made tombstone.

Our identities to a large extent seem to be determined by our positions through the narratives of the past. Such ideas seem to foster a paradoxical nature of Naga identity as the glorious past of the Nagas has been overshadowed, making them appear as an epitome of violence and nothing beyond that. One could see this reality throbbing and thriving in a question which a young grandson asks his grandfather in the short story 'An Old Man Remembers' "Grandfather, is it true that you and grandfather Imli killed many people when you are in jungle?" (Ao, 2006, p. 92). At once the grandfather gets transported to his past bedimmed by the heart renting question posed by his grandson. Engulfed by its impact he is once again confronted with what he seemed to have buried completely. What is even more disheartening is failure of the present generation to overcome the hollowness which the preceding generation had to undergo due to the impact of such movements, "for a whole

generation of people like old man Sashi, Imli and all their friends and relatives, the prime of their youth was a seemingly endless cycle of beatings, rapes, burning of villages and grain-filled barns” (Ao, 2006, p. 93). To explicate, the grandson’s question does not dwell on the loss created by the movement as much as it focuses on the atrocities generated by such upheavals. In the entire assessment made by the present times the victims are held responsible more than the source which spurred such shortcomings.

Cultural Memory as defined by Jan Assmann is “the outer dimension of human memory. Through cultural memory, a society can preserve its knowledge from one generation to another, making it possible for the future generations to reconstruct their cultural identity” (Assmann, 2011). It would be not justifiable to keep the youth away from their historical past not that it could be kept away from them either. But the point is how exactly their past has been interpreted to them or rather misinterpreted “But where would he begin? Should he begin by saying, ‘When I was young like you?’ But had he ever been given a chance to be like them?” (Ao, 2006, p. 93). Not getting a chance to be young raises the question of a breach in human values and more specifically the loss of humanity. What the youth of today fail to understand is that they are forerunners of a past which has already been deceived, exploited and lacerated “The inheritors of such a history have a tremendous responsibility to sift through the collective experience and make sense of the impact left by the struggle on their lives” (Ao, 2006, p. x). To validate, the discussion opens up another facet of the manipulation of such cultural values at the hands of opportunist who proclaim themselves to be leaders and a true patriot “Even years later, older people recalled that the sight of the legendary birds stirred something elemental in their racial memory and they fancied that the birds had descended from their lofty perches in the deep and dark jungles and had come to participate in the political parade with a clear message for the people” (Ao, 2006, p. 140). Leaders like Nungsang in “A New Chapter” have used the ancestral symbol in their political campaigns to win votes as those ethnic symbols glorify their past bearing cultural connotations. One could sense their cherished past being ransacked at the hands of patriots who pretend to be true to their primeval selves but in reality are oppressors in the guise of the cultural torch bearers of the past. Nungsang, fails to live up to his promise of buying pumpkins from Merenla, a village woman who hopelessly pines for the day he would. In doing so he proves to defy not her but the essence of the long cherished Naga family ties and values. What becomes significant is one who professes to be an upholder of the long cherished Naga tradition is himself void of its values.

The new literature from some of the states of the Northeast in general and particularly from Nagaland is not about existential angst as it investigates the endeavours of the people to overcome crisis and their failure to do so. Temsula Ao’s writings probes into the truth of the youth being displaced from a world of placidity to a world of turbulence. She wishes to re-embrace the Naga psyche and explore the vision of their benign past which if instilled in the youth could perhaps redeem them from their turbulent present. By doing so they could boast of its divine impact and not detest it for opening up a world of torment and torture. Considering the Nagas past heritage as an integral part of their present reality makes her literature contemporary and relevant to the present times.

“as circumstances were forcing innocent, peace-loving people to turn to means that they would not ordinarily employ, just to stay safe and alive” (Ao, 2006, p. 39). These lines explore the basic human feelings in trying to unite to a greater universal truth of oneness transcending the limitations of geographical boundaries and thoughts. Ignorant of being

captivated by the false charm of the oppressor, the Nagas are compelled to adopt an identity which has no allegiance towards their own people. “It was as though a great cataclysmic upheaval threw up many realities for the Nagas within which they are still struggling to settle for a legitimate identity” (Ao, 2006, p. x).

In the light of the above statement Temsula Ao’s narrative about the life in Nagaland is to delve into their real selves. Through her writings she makes an assessment of the ingredient which would grip the loosening effect of their cultural values. She never tries to speculate things beyond the humane and her writings are in collaboration with the basic and essential truths of life. Nevertheless it is a voyage which cannot be sailed alone but through a goal of a common pursuit towards the essential meaning of life.

The stories in her book capture the real cause of the violence in the hills. She considers her responsibility to unravel the truth of the plight of the people plundered to its core. In the entire episode of brutality the foreign authority and militant bureaucrats have created havoc in their lives due to an intriguing politics played by external forces. What is apparent is violence becoming synonymous with North Eastern region. But what is subjugated is the violence sparked due to the draconian laws like AFSPA (1958). Speaking against this law, Member of Parliament of Dhenkanal, Surendra Mohanty of the Ganantra Parishad speaks “[W]e want a free India. But, we do not want a free India with barbed wires and concentration camps, where havalgars can shoot at sight any man. If that is the concept of free India, I think I may as well be a traitor...” (Bhonsle, 2016, p. 39).

### 3. Conclusion

It would be unworthy to call Ao a North easterner or an Indian for that matter as she is one who personifies humanity and nothing more than that. Reading her would make any one connect to her humanist idealism and its glorification. The consciousness of the Naga psyche which she alludes to is significant for all races and communities as an estrangement from their long cherished past.

“The Last Song” from “These Hills Called Home” captures the plight of Apenyo and her mother raped by the Captain and his group of soldiers while she sang the last song till her last breath. Her song signifies diverse meanings. Firstly, it finds a basis in the longing for an era of innocence preserved in their primeval consciousness. It also highlights the pain in not being able to do so but what may seem woven in grief transforms into a tale of strength as she challenges the people who snatched away her innocence. Rising above the stigma of a meek being, she, through her song chastises the oppressors. The oppressors not ignorant of the realities of hell and heaven ingrained in their collective consciousness are made to feel the brunt of their sin. “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 voice raised to God in heaven” (Ao, 2006, p. 27). Apenyo voices the strength of the Naga consciousness to rise above the challenges of fast changing world as she has made the memories of the turbulent times her strength and not her weakness. Apenyo appears to strengthen the claim of Temsula Ao in taking refuge in the primeval past which becomes significant in the lines, “or they just become/ specimens from an exotic past? /But I refuse to accept/ this fatuous impression/ and stand firm amidst the treasures/of my heritage, to find the answer/in the depths of my soul/Where ancestral voices re-affirm:/They are my priceless past/ and also my insistent present” (Ao, 2009).

Temsula Ao has ventured on writing a new narrative which exemplifies the Naga's failure in living up to the consciousness of the past. In her essay "On Being A Naga" (2018), she writes about devising an identity for the Nagas that acknowledges their inherent oneness despite their 'tribal divide'. What we can perceive is the writer's concern for the loss of humanity. There is complete chaos today as men are in conflict with each other with no sense of concern for the morals and ethics which built their consciousness. Today quest for peace has been replaced by struggle of warring groups in the war zone. The story "Soaba" from "These Hills Called Home" pens such disturbing episodes where the Naga villagers were rendered homeless, being picked up from their traditional location. They were not only physically displaced but mentally forced to imbibe a new home and identity. The 'grouping system' in the context of the Nagas is an insult to their self respect as they are treated as outsiders within their own land. The Nagas uprooted from their homeland have been silenced by the powers that be "I view the various exhibits/ and wonder, whether they would respond/ if I spoke to them/ in the language of my birth./But artefacts wrenched from their origin/ must, by reason remain mute" (Ao, 2009). It is ironical that even after seventy two years of independence, the North-Eastern region still remains a "Terra incognita" for the mainland India. "In the old days, the unexplored areas of the world were left blank on maps, and cartographers wrote 'Terra incognita' to describe them so they officially remained 'unknown lands'" (Bhonsle, 2016, p.9). Last but not the least she leaves us with a very important question which Indians as part of the world's largest democracy cannot undermine. She raises a pertinent question "Is there any particular frame work to which we north-easterners have to blend, into and transform ourselves? Why can't we just be ourselves and still be Indians? Is it difficult to accept the other as they are and not treat them so differently?" (qtd. in Waten, 2010).

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