



“THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SPACE IN TEMSULA AO'S WRITINGS”

Dr. Prakrithi Gowda¹

Assistant Professor, Dept of English (MA)

JYOTI NIVAS COLLEGE AUTONOMOUS,

BANGALORE

ABSTRACT

The emergence of north east writings is interestingly marked by issues of cultural nationalism and decolonization due to shared historical paradigms. Recent studies have concentrated on studying the construction of cultural spaces and cultural identity in marginalized lives. Mastering space again calls for domination which in turn leads to the formation of ‘us’ and the ‘other’. Transgressions and subversions work to cross boundaries of gender identity and culture. The essay scrutinizes the ongoing politics of identity-construction in relation to the Nagas. Temsula Ao’s narrative exposes the mainstream construction of the Nagaland culture and identity. Temsula’s prevailing discursive strategy endeavors to subvert the colonial cultural framework to illustrate how the European invasion has resulted in the erasure of the authentic ethnic space and ethnic identities. The formation of new identities and new notions of cultural spaces by the state present fresh problems while negotiating with state and the guerilla. Temsula’s stories show how the regional conflict in Nagaland has made the region a disenfranchised area. Her stories mark out a tentative mapping of the complicated reality of indigenous India.

Key words; Identity , Transgression, Cultural Space, Ethnicity

Recent studies have concentrated on studying the construction of cultural spaces and cultural identity in marginalized lives. Mastering space again calls for domination which in turn leads to the formation of ‘us’ and the ‘other’. Narratives about cultural identity is a compelling means of establishing recognition. In the short stories of Temsula Ao we see how selves and communities

¹ Email: hnp14sept@gmail.com

are imagined and the boundary between the two is likely to be permeable. Her stories raise epistemological questions regarding history, experience and truth. Her stories as she says are neither about 'historical facts' nor about rationalizing the events that traumatized the life of the Nagas but about conflicts that displace people of their identity and fails to bring peace or security. It shows how such conflicts do not have winners but only victims.

The paper scrutinizes the ongoing politics of identity-construction in relation to the Naga community. The narrative strategy of Temsula Ao evinces how her narrative exposes the mainstream construction of the culture and identity of Nagaland. Her effort lies in capturing someone else's memory where she has to "revisit the lives of those people whose pain has gone so far unmentioned." (Ao, 7) She attempts to capture stories of the victims and the victorious. The emergence of north east writings is interestingly marked by issues of cultural nationalism and decolonization due to shared historical paradigms. Temsula's prevailing discursive strategy endeavors to subvert the colonial cultural framework to illustrate how the European invasion has resulted in the erasure of the authentic ethnic space and ethnic identities. The formation of new identities and new notions of cultural spaces by the state present fresh problems while negotiating with the state and the guerillas. Her stories show how the regional conflict in Nagaland has made the region a disenfranchised area and mark out a tentative mapping of the complicated reality of indigenous India.

The Nagas' struggle restructured the cultural space wherein the traditional culture seems irrelevant to the survivors. Political and regional disputes have always affected the north east region of India armed groups are fighting for their independent private and public space. Politics of identity in relation to the traditional Naga culture and the physical environment in relation to the present context of changing cultural landscapes have been the subject of discussion in many writings. Ao's narrative examines the local struggles of the Ao-Nagas with modernizing forces which disturb the traditional culture and their resistance to those forces in order to preserve their traditional culture. The Naga insurgents are so dreadful to their own people that ordinary Nagas are terrorized to raise a dissent against such forces and this eventually ends in internal suppression, oppression and intimidation.

Temsula's short story collection titled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* portrays the disturbing life endured by the Naga people and their search for identity. Her works represent the wearisome life of the Naga people torn in between terror and violence burdened between the diverse groups for power. Upsurges in the region have been a common phenomenon since the attainment of Indian independence in 1947. Subjectivity embodies culture in the sense that people live in a distinct phenomenal world. Clifford Geertz (1963) has described ethnicity as an activated primordial consciousness not grounded in the demand for sovereign statehood. Ethnicity expresses a basic human attachment, a primeval bond to one's ancestors and one's cultural roots. Ethnicity as a social phenomenon converges, by imperceptible steps, with related yet distinct phenomena. And it is here that it lends itself to a dual interpretation of ethnic groups, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture.

Identity and subjectivity are important ideas of the nation as it encompasses intense subjective feelings and the question of identity. Clifford Geertz articulated a cultural approach to subjectivity "Subjectivity does not merely speak as resistance, nor is it simply spoken or silenced by power. It continually forms and returns in the complex play of bodily, linguistic, political and

psychological dimensions of human experience.” (42) This seems relevant to the Naga subjectivity as seen in the narrative. The idea of a shared culture, inheritance and a mutual language binds a nation and this according to Benedict Anderson is largely grounded on the collective identity consciousness that a group of people have. Literature of the north east region abounds in examples of aggressive assertions of identity and protection of the nation. Characters in the fictional works display aggressive identity concerns and the desire to zealously safeguard the ideals.

The Nagas are recognized more for their ethnicity though language also connects them. The ethnic and linguistic space that they occupy that creates identity formation which again is structured by the dominant groups i.e. the state and the underworld. The social and cultural milieu forms the central focus of her short stories. The cultural and ethnic space that the Nagas occupy is subject to ethical debates which develops a counter argument as to what forms the true ethnic identity of the Nagas. Her stories also show how identity formation has further pushed them to accept their dual identity leaving them confused about their own cultural and political identity. It describes how the Naga's struggle with the armed forces to occupy a separate political entity and the search for free and independent space bereft of politics, violence and terror is myth.

In so doing Tamsula's writings like much of the contemporary North East fiction deliberates on violence as a thematic interest. The new ontology and cult of violence has drawn the attention of many in recent times. Main stream publishing houses have capitalized on such trends. Her stories in *These Hills Called Home: A Story from a War Zone* viz., 'The Jungle Major' "The Curfew Man" "Soaba" illustrates that the Naga problem is not clearly political but economic, cultural, social, linguistic and psychic as well. In a nutshell, it makes us aware of the fact that the Nagas must change their old attitude so that they can recuperate their historical magnificence of freedom, and to love people with the changed circumstances of the world today. The stories deliberate the social realities of Nagaland during rebellion and counter-rebellion phase. The stories portray commoner's oppression, ferocity and the politics of the state and defilement of human rights by different militant organizations and security forces.

In all these confusions one has forgotten the true purport of the significance of the Nagas which means that which is immovable. They are immovable like the tree, mountains, hillocks but the Nagas have been subjected to change and revisions because the Nagas as a group of people were within the British Empire. Even today the fact remains that they are helplessly within the Indian union and within the Myanmar union. Cultural and political space that they occupy signifies the divide. The divided identity only means that the struggle is an ongoing process. Like most of the fictions from post-colonial ethnic cultures, the short stories of Tamsula Ao originate from a land still in turmoil. Tamsula Ao's stories placed in the initial tumultuous decades of the Naga insurgency portray the lives of the Naga people striving to come to terms with their identity. 'Soaba' describes clearly how the state oppresses the commoners owing to its power to exert its 'right' to inflict violence on the people. 'Soaba' literally means 'idiot' and the story depicts how the character gradually accustoms himself with the fabricated identity made accessible by the state. What is exclusive about the book is that it does not overtly state the political struggle; rather it captures the voices of common Naga people who are trapped in the struggle between the state and the Naga ethnic insurgency groups. It portrays the lives of the Naga people who are stressed to come to terms with their identity.

“The Nagas, who had struggled for decades together against the Indian State and experienced long suppression, argue that the over-riding concern for ‘nation-building’ has silenced their (Naga) voice, history, culture and capacity of self-rule.” (Dutta, p 5)

The stories are essentially rooted to the issues of Naga separatist battle for autonomy which started since the end of the British Raj in 1947. In her stories the strategies of the state politicize the life of the individuals and locate each individual to exact space with exact rights, the individual’s intended servitude to the state ultimately formulates his or her identity. Transgressors of the state or the underground are penalized. The stories take a transgressive mode when it exposes the atrocity of the state in the name of power. And the narrative seems to confirm what Allen Guttman, an American writer in an interview stated “when I am extremely happy I don’t cry “ but sometimes I feel so wretched that I have to laugh” this is the kind of situation that Tamsula’s stories present about the experiences of the Nagas who are on the run in their search for a space. The differences in term of history, politics, culture, language, and ethnicity gets represented in ‘The Jungle Major’ “The Curfew Man” "Soaba" but we observe not a counter-narrative but an alternative which can open a space of less intense intervention and an interchange because the predicament is not just politics, but also identity. Madness, rape, disruption become the subject of her discourse which clearly focuses the pathos of the common people who are victimized by the conflicts, violence and politics of the state and about the violation of human rights by different militant organizations and security forces.

“The Jungle Major” is the first story that recounts the dispersal of militancy and its consequences. After marriage, Punaba, the protagonist, is connected with the underground activities, during insurgency period to combat with the army personnel owing to which it invites loss of innocent lives, loss of the time and dignity. In “The Last Song”, Tamsula describes a young girl, Apenyo, who was brutally gang raped by the Indian army this evidences the sufferings of women during social and political upheaval. In another story “The Curfew Man”, Ao narrates how innocent villagers became captive in their own villa.

Her stories also show that the subjects occupy an in-between space and have been so much infiltrated and encroached from the Government force and the underground militants they are twice oppressed and find it arduous to elude from both forces and they are pushed into an between space. This in between space is always a threat and it's so unsafe. “it is evident that the state’s controlling measure does not simply consist of violence; rather it puts in circulation certain strategies of normalization.” (Ao ,11) it evidences how the state’s art of governance exercises such policies which include every sphere of Naga life. It also points out how the identity of the individual can only be realized through the strategies of the state mechanism.

‘The Curfew Man’ ‘The Jungle Major’ ‘Saoba’ illuminate how both, space and identity have become very fluid. The identity of the so called common people is very fluid because often people are related to one of the sides of the government force or militant or even both. It becomes difficult to define a family because a government force and an underground militant come from the same family. The narrative not only exposes the hollowness and deception of the "state forces" but also show that the struggle is not just between the centre and the state but also between the states and other communities, and ethnic groups. Tamsula initiates that her stories are not about "condemnations" or "justifications", one cannot deny that a sense of condemnation is inherent. But

the denunciation should not affect a conscientious discourse. She wants to look at, the past as a way to redeem the present and look forward to the future. She is also revisiting the past and engaging to explain how nationalism was built up, and how the Naga psyche was "transfigured" with so much disenchantment and oppression overtime. Therefore she is suggesting how history and memory can be inculcated as a way to liberate the present and to be optimistic of the future.

She endeavors to attain linguistic transformation; it is seen in the use of English at certain junctures. She is quoting words like "convoy", "emergency", "curfew" and "situation" and telling the readers how they became part of the imagination of the people over long period of violence despite their newness in the beginning. People have helplessly been living their lives in the midst of such military tension. Her narrative elucidates that commoners are in search of a safe space but is there one? If one asks if there is an in-between space is that safe? The stories show how an attempt to define the in-between space as the space that is occupied by the shared community, poses the problem of defining, who they are and whether they suggest a collective consciousness and so on.

Her style is objective wherein she exposes the hollowness and fraudulent manner of the so called "state forces". This technique is to alert people about the precarious position of the commoners and but she does not aim to right it, doesn't undermine the oppression and criminality of the Army and Central forces either. Instead presents a realistic depiction of culture and politics that surround them to subjugate. "The Last Song" a moving story examines the nature of violence and crime against female in a place of tension. In so doing she depicts the extremely pitiable condition of law and order in these places and the manipulation of power and law by the Army. She mixes the personal and the political. She also engages and questions the very notion of "nationalism" in the context of Nagaland.

The transgressive mode that she adopts illustrates how breaking the rule actually forms a vital and necessary part of the game of fiction because the boundary is then acknowledged. The 'boundaries' and 'limits' also connote ideas of rigidness and fixed places, separate zones which are disconnected. Thus the repeated undermining of these constraints through respective portrayals of persona and mental processes contribute in different ways in each of the stories to present contemporary reality with a keen and insightful eye. As Chris Jenks defines transgressive behaviour:

Does not deny limits or boundaries, rather it exceeds them and thus completes them. Every rule, limit, boundary or edge carries with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey. The transgression is a component of the rule (7).

The cultural identity that the stories identify seems to be riddled with ambiguous or contrary values. The portrayal of ambiguous position shows how the state or the underground are reveling in their own fascination. Ao's stories show how writings in English which have emerged from the region in recent times are significant because they are not just voices from the margin but also tend to negotiate the centre-periphery relationship. The agenda in her stories is not to deconstruct stereotypical views about the people of this region as "Northeast" or "Chinky" which is an overdose of generalisation but to represent the very cultural ethos of the region. Writers in English from this region had to face diverse obstacles but have managed to face the challenges with indomitable spirit this indicate an increase in the repertoire of the literatures produced in the region

and also it is hoped that these writers would bring about some positive influence. Tillotama Mirsa, recognizes that awareness about loss of their ethnic culture and the aim to recover is one of the features that recurs in most northeast narratives and Temsula's writings are no exception. The writings of Temsula Ao, (like Easterine Kire (Iralu), and Monalisa Changkija) are entrenched in the struggle of Naga separatist battle ; they attempt at a kind of cultural renewal.

Conclusion

To conclude Ao' writings and her fictional characters present to us how this area has acquired the notoriety of being a "disturbed" region because of various inter ethnic struggles for self determination. Her stories create an awareness that such disturbances are due to Insurgency, illegal migration, ethnic clashes coupled with natural calamities like flood, drought etc. which have paralyzed the socio-economic and political side in the region. This may also show that regional identity of the Naga is continually being constructed. Her writings are replete with so many diverse and multifarious issues which make us understand that narratives such as these whether they come from survivors or victims of ethnic or cultural conflicts threaten the larger society because they reveal the truth and it has the power to make us realize cultural politics of the region. It would not be an exaggeration but a realization to state that Temsula's stories opens up new ways of study and surveillance among thinkers and general masses alike and most importantly it makes us feel.

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