

Reading Terror in Literature: Exploring Insurgency in Nagaland through Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

I Watitula Longkumer

Literature and terror have a long and complex history in the North Eastern part in India which is sometimes synchronised with general remarks such as “literature that is too conflict ridden,” “literature that depicts violence and rage,” “violence as a thematic interest” and so on. Although the picture has changed quite much in the present day with a considerable number of its works being read, translated, and studied, there was a time when such writing would consistently fail to gain exposure. The broadcasting media was also helping in a larger sense in stereotyping a land and its literature and culture, and thereby retaining to a large extent the controversies over the term “the North East”. Easterine Iralu, a well-known Naga writer comments “Let media stop defining the NE by the conflicts going on there. Let media focus on ordinary people and their lives. Let exoticisation of the NE stop” (2004). This concept of “exoticisation” can be seen in the light of two extreme impressions: the region being represented as violently explosive and it being called the lands of festivals which lead to sweeping statement on any matters that has to do with “North East.” There is also the problem of “homogeneity” and resistant public misconceptions. In spite of the region being home to eight different states that differ greatly from each other in terms of culture, tradition, language, festival and food habits, they are usually looked at as one and the same. The failure to understand the land's heterogeneous character has been largely responsible in foolishly homogenizing the geographical, cultural, social and political differences. This problem of lumping together eight disparate states leads to a situation where the regions no longer “evoke cultural or historical memory...and cannot easily become the emotional focus of a collective political project.” (Baruah 2007, 5). I will use the term the North East with an implied critique.

However, the complexity of the theme often ventures into some production of a ‘new’ kind. The term “terror” will be studied and defined in this article as an act of terrorism and

insurgency. These terms “terror,” “terrorism” and “insurgency” have their common traits which involve deeds of brutal, violent, inhumane actions, loss of home, and keeping an individual life at stake. Literature of the North East mostly accounts to fictional writings that depict actual events recorded in history. The work portrays a raw intensity of events and situations of the past which still haunt us with their contemporary presence in many avatars. Cut off from the nation at length, the region has become a place of bewilderment and external myth-making. One can give many reasons as to why the place itself or the literary works of the region for that matter remain unexplored. One important reason however could be its remote geographical location or another in terms of exposure in the publishing and consumer world. Misconception and misrepresentation of the place by the outsiders has been one of the most damaging evils that the North-East, already fighting with many other evils, has to carry on with everyday life. This article thus would like to locate the terror-stricken life forms as represented in fiction and complicate in turn the concept and practice of terror both in actuality and literary imagination.

The seven states of North East India that constitute the North-East (save Sikkim) have gone through a tumultuous period in history. It can only be experienced painfully by those who sacrificed their life or lost their dear ones for the greater good of the people. The history of the region is one that not only preserves the culture and tradition but also involves the much talked of politics of the hills. The history of the politics of the North East is filled with a period of the rise of various insurgent bodies that came about initially to claim sovereign status but gradually led the states toward mass violence and destruction due to personality clashes and tribalism. These insurgent bodies that worked towards safeguarding the region from mass invasion of the outsider only created acts of terrorism leading eventually to brutal killings of their own clansmen.

In the light of such history, many writers of the region have dealt with such issues in their writing and most of the writings today are undeniably filled with pages of violence experienced in the past or encountered on daily basis. For the states of the North East, writing or raising voice in the light of some ongoing issues through any medium has always remained a challenge. One reason can be that most of the region’s social and political issues are constantly at stake. Another should be the highly sensitive nature of the public opinion that was largely forcefully kept within, both by the nation and the state media. However, in spite of emerging in the literary

world only recently, the region today has a good number of writers who have taken up bold steps against threats and tensions. Most of the writings from the North-East run through a common subject matter where they deal with topics concerning the state, terror, violence, memory and displacement, a literature of and in bondage.

This article in dealing with the topic focuses on a particular state in the North East, Nagaland – a region that spearheaded the movement among the rest of the North Eastern states towards claiming statehood. Nagaland has a long history of waging battles not only in its demand for statehood and sovereignty but also in acting as a battle ground for one of the turning points in history. Often referred to as the ‘Stalingrad of the East’ the ‘Battle of Kohima’ was fought in the home of Nagaland, a history that is often forgotten and ignored. This paper will study the stories of an accomplished writer from the North East, Temsula Ao whose collection of short stories written in English, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) echoes in a very sensitive manner the terror-ridden lives of the Naga people. The study focuses on all the ten stories of the book which reflect the period of insurgency, the unrest and turmoil that has ravaged the land. Apart from the representation of terror, the book compellingly portrays the cultural and traditional life forms of the tribal people through the memories that most often remain “unacknowledged” (Ao ix). Focusing on Temsula Ao’s short stories, the article will discuss how literature carries the potential to capture the history of a region that has undergone a time of terror, and also suggests possibilities of future peace.

Temsula Ao is a distinguished writer from the North East India. Preferred to be known as a poet, she has five collections of poetry: *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). She has also authored the book *Ao-Naga Oral Traditions* (2000). *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is her first attempt at story writing which was published in the year 2006. With this she has set her foot on another collection of short stories which was published in the year 2009, titled *Laburnum for My Head*. A recipient of Padmashree in 2007, she also received the Governor’s Medal (2009). Some of her select stories have been translated into Assamese, Bengali, Kannada and German. Temusla Ao retired from the North Eastern Hill University (2010) where she last served as professor of English and also as the Dean of Humanities and Education for two terms (Ovung). Her latest book published recently is a powerful memoir titled *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir* (2014).

Set in the initial turbulent decades of the Naga insurgency the stories in the book are inspired by the political turmoil that has ravaged the land with little promise of a peaceful solution. The book makes its study specifically of the life of the Naga people, a tribal community that inhabits one of the seven North-East states. It tells the story of everyday life of men, women and children of the society who struggle to make their survival and see the changes taking place around them. In the light of these issues the paper explores the loss of home, the failure of ideological basis of the leaders, and the conflict and fear-ridden lives of its people.

“The Jungle Major” the first story in the books tells of a man named Punaba whose physical features seemed rather incomparable to his otherwise beautiful wife Khatila. In the course of the story it is the wife's wits that save her husband from the Indian soldiers who have joined the Naga underground group. In another story, “Soaba” (meaning ‘idiot’ in Ao-Naga dialect), a mentally-retarded and “unschooled” (Ao 14) young boy from a village loses his life in the hands of Imlichuba who serves as a lackey for the Indian Army. The legend of a young singer Apenyo from “The Last Song,” who was brutally raped in one of the fights, becomes a tale of remembrance for the story tellers.

“The Curfew Man” has a character Satemba who is a government informant and who roams about the town beyond the Army-imposed curfew hours to spy on his fellow Nagas who have joined the insurgent group. Amidst the wars and the regulated life there are also issues that revolve around families as in “The Night.” Behind the guns and violence is the story of a young girl betrayed by a man who has left her with an unconceived child. The skilled labour of a woman suggests the security of not only the family but that of the village too, as in “The Pot Maker,” Arenla, a skilled potter refuses to pass on the art to her daughter. “Shadows” tells the story of the young Naga boys driven with the “romantic idealism” (Ao 76) of fighting for the cause of the state wake up only to the harsh reality of the situation of the tragic power struggle.

Everything concerning one's life lived in the hills is a story that is painful to recall and remember. “An Old Man Remembers” has an old man Imtisashi who belonged to the underground force and whose past was a secret kept between himself and his close friend. The story unravels the unwanted thoughts within him as he begins to explain his violent past to his grandson. A memorable journey to the past when one had to cross rivers and jungles to come to the city surrounds the story Tinula in “The Journey,” where the protagonist goes through hurdles

to receive formal education. The painful journey she undertakes is imprinted on her body as scars as she travels with her brother. “A New Chapter” includes a contractor whose position and influence helps him rise in the social ladder as he gradually joins the world of politics. However his honesty which helped him gain status soon gets replaced by corruption and compromise. The stories from the book tell us of a region that has been inflicted in wounds for decades. It also stages the cost of human life in the conflict, and throws at today's Nagas the importance of peace and cultural values.

This collection of Ao's stories portrays the history of a “home” through the lens of memory as she encapsulates the culture and traditional life of tribal people. Although there is a market-oriented demand for “exotic” writing, there is no lack of sincerity in the present generation of writers as they attempt to construct their roots through writing. The North East literature brings in a fresh perspective into writing and although it falls under Indian English literature, it stands itself different with its rich and complex exploration of themes. The state of Nagaland is mainly tribal, where each tribe is distinct in character in terms of customs, language, dress, festivals. Living in a society that is inhabited by people speaking different languages, and practising their own cultural and traditional beliefs, there are writers such as Temsula Ao who have successfully brought together the existing sixteen tribes of the Naga society as a whole in their books. These writers incorporate along with the political unrest the intimations of history and culture of the state - issues that have held the state together despite such vehement forms of violence in the post-independent era. But insurgency and Nagaland have been quite synonymous at times in reading the state's history.

What then is insurgency itself in the context of Nagaland? Various definitions have been given. Chandrika Singh in *North-East India Politics and Insurgency* has defined the term “as a discontent of a group of which uses violence to achieve its goal” (2009, 218). In his words, it is “not an association of armed robbers or dacoits. Rather it is born out of some committed ideologies of a particular group, a sect, a tribal or a community, religious or secular” (218). Talking of a region which is marked with agitations, ethnic riots and continuous bloodletting Sanjib Baruah states that the ideology of Naga insurgency is best defined as “based on a deep-rooted historical ethos of independence that developed into a struggle for secession from India” (2007, 7). Writing on the possibilities of the rise of a force Sajal Nag points out certain

objectives: “insurgency may break out against a particular regime, particular persons of a regime, particular structures and salient values a regime upholds, or particular policies or biases of a regime. In all such possible cases, the prime objective of insurgents would be to capture power and replace the political community” (2003). In the contemporary literature, on many occasions, terms such as insurgency, revolution, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and freedom struggle are often used variously interchangeably in the Nagas’ fights for sovereignty.

Insurgency turns out to be the motive of the marginalized group of people who have been neglected of their rights and “cherished political goals,” and hence act out through the means of violence with an attempt to overthrow the existing structure, to replace it with one of their choice. Insurgency has become like a “disease” of the contemporary world which breaks down the security of a nation. It has become a “tool in the hand of the powerless” (Lalthakima 2008) section of the society to use it as a means to work against the powerful by rebelling against the constituted government. From a political aspect Andrew M. Scott defines it as “an effort to obtain political goals by an organised and primarily indigenous group using protracted, irregular warfare and allied political techniques.” (1970, 5)

The reason for the emergence of insurgency in the North East can be its relative distance from the Indian mainland which has allowed the feeling of “ethno-nationalism, political isolation and psychological alienation” (Goswami and Das 2008, 271). The ignorance of the government of India in the political matters in this part of the region has been herculean, one severe example being the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958, amended in 1972 in the state of Manipur without any resolution to the conflict whatsoever (2008, 275). Identity crisis is also another issue for the people of the different states in the North East who are generally clubbed together under the category the North Eastern, as if from another part of the world. Being often tagged as a foreigner, in particular a Chinese or a Japanese, Indian people have not been generally acceptable of such people from the “North East,” often regarding them as “outsiders,” making them the object of suspicion, taunting, ostracization, and public insult, sometimes lynching to death too (as in the recent case of the boy, Nido Taniam, from Arunachal Pradesh beaten to death in Delhi recently in broad daylight). In a way it can be stated that the birth of insurgent groups and their aggression towards the central government have been an act of retaliation as the government has repeatedly turned deaf ears to the demands of the people of the North East from time past.

With the state of Nagaland inhabiting the far corner of the nation's geography, the concerns were not taken into the nation's administrative policy making during the independence. The Nagas' demand for an independent state began soon after India's independence as the area was still under the province of Assam. The claim for one's own ancestral home began with various social groups demanding for self-governance. Among the North-Eastern states from the colonial times, Nagaland has always been an active state for political demands and protests, and it was not very different for the practice of claiming statehood from the central government. The Naga people have often been termed as head-hunters, toughest, having war-like attitude which is the reason why they were adamant about their demand, expecting the solution immediately (Atsongchanger 1994, 1).

The statehood was finally achieved on December 1, 1963. The demands of the freedom fighters as well as the people were made however for a short time. What eventually gave way was the uprising of different political ideas among the Naga leaders who were trying to shape the future of the state according to their interests. What followed that was the birth of insurgency in the state which has continued for decades and is still prevalent within the society. Various rival groups were formed where misunderstandings and personality clashes rose between the parties. With the situation in mind, many rounds of peace talks took place between the insurgent groups, who were also known as the "underground" groups, and the Government of India. The historic event of Shillong Accord was signed on 5th September 1975 (Singh 2009, 249) that ushered in an era of peace and understanding, only to be turned down against the favour of various factional groups as they propagated to the common people of Nagaland that by signing the accord they were selling out "Naga's right to self-determination" (Singh 2009, 250). Under revolutionary means, the rival groups did not comply with the central government and hence the Indian armed personnel began mass raiding the homes unaware of the target. The state fighting for the sovereign status has caused irreparable losses and tensions that could little foresee a better future in near times. Kaka Iralu, an author from Nagaland, asks a question that many feel but can rarely put up: "Have we Nagas surrendered our life to these leaders and to their law of gun? Is the Naga army uniform a license for its bearers to abduct us, terrorise us and even beat us to death or shoot us to death?" (qtd. in Singh 2009, 270). The fear of the public has allowed the underground groups to gain confidence and mobilize the psychosis for bizarre self-interests.

Most of the stories in the book *These Hills Called Home* emerge from the hearth in the kitchen place. It deals with the everyday life of the Naga people who are caught in the pain-inflicted insurgent movements. Provided that the stories are born out of the conflicting period that the state of Nagaland went through, it gives a clear account of the situation of the state at the backdrop of the stories where the writer mentions the disposed “land and belonging” where “countless young men were killed and women ravished.” The stories of Temsula Ao are seen to be an “eloquent proof” for the memories of the “decades of strife, guerrilla warfare, plundering” (Philip 2006). In the wake of insurgency and the gradual moving away from its ideology towards attaining sovereignty, the factional bodies were divided into various independent bodies and among them were the “moderate and the extremist” Nagas who worked according to their ideology (Singh 2009, 164). Both the houses worked against each other with the former trying to bring about transformation in the state through peaceful means and the latter establishing the use of weapons and destructive arms to bring an answer to their problem. Temsula Ao brings out issues on how insurgency has caused problem not only towards the society but also for family lives in general. The stories document individuals, from young to old, regardless of gender, tribe or race, people that make up the different yet integrated society and live under the fear of turmoil and war for their lifetime. In describing the situation of the home, the place, the culture, the people, the identity, the author also pens down the need to restore peace and bring about a change in the state that has been experiencing insurgency for decades.

Each story in the book talks of how the characters got displaced with the conflict ravaging the homes and fields of the villagers, how some lost their prime essence of the youth by being forced to join the underground bodies, how young innocent girls became victims by being manhandled, or the rise of new groups that merged between the “two warring armies,” the third force which consists of the corrupt contractors (Ao 123). The stories also highlight that the Naga people have forgotten the fact that not violence but the use of wit and simple knowledge can bring about change and peace within the state. This is read through the witty dialogues and actions of the women characters in the stories: in “The Jungle Major” the woman saves her husband from the hands of the soldiers through the use of her presence of mind; in “The Curfew Man” it is the wife who helps her husband find a suitable job for himself though it eventually cannot favour him, or the young girl in “The Night” who has strong decision for a good upbringing of her children though she is neglected by the society.

In context of literature and terror, “The Jungle Major” becomes the most relevant which tells the tale of a couple Khatila and Punaba who lived in a land caught in the “new wave of patriotic fervour that swept the imagination of the people and plunged them into struggle” (Ao 2). With the strife unceasing between the Underground leaders and the Indian army, the people in the villages started joining the new band of “patriotic” warriors (Ao 3). In the midst of such tumultuous changes, Punaba too became a leader within the group which sent waves of news to the villagers and a suspicious ground for the armies. Search of his whereabouts began soon enough when on an unexpected morning the soldiers came to his place. Perplexed with the situation he had just enough time to act for his own survival when through the quick wit of his wife Khatila she dressed him up in some of his old clothes, smeared his face, hands and feet with ash and began treating him as a servant shouting at him to run the home errands. She yelled at the sound of the approaching soldiers “You no goof loafer, what were you doing all day yesterday? There is no water in the house even to wash my face. Run to the well immediately or you will rue the day you were born” (Ao 6). Astonished by her rather sour behaviour and in the midst of her treating her husband as a hapless servant driving him out of the house, the soldiers eventually left her home. This suggests how violence is not the only means to bring about peace in the story: we see how Khatila through her wit manages to save her husband from the band of enemies

To take another case, young people were often caught in the whirlwind of the Naga history. With time, there began massive deployments of the adults in such movements, leaving their jobs, schools, careers behind, and joining the band of nationalists in order to work for what they believed to achieve for Nagaland, “the free nation of the world.” Soon words such as “convoy,” “grouping,” “curfew,” and “situation” began to achieve an altogether different meaning which more than often meant a sign of warning to the people for something untoward. “Soaba” another story, discusses how during the troubled times of the Naga people, political groups of various kinds were formed, especially the one known as the “flying squad” where rebels were well equipped with vehicles and guns and given “free rations of rum to boot” (Ao 12). Carried away by his “glorious” image, Imlichuba, popularly known as Boss, led his force towards “harassing the public” and later paving for his own downfall by taking away the life of an idiot of the village for no reason. Unable to retain his position, he finds no more time for his wife or children who gradually become “receding blurs” (Ao 16). Listening to a foreign word by

the “unschooled ears” (Ao 14), Intimoa, who was known as Soaba within the village square (meaning “idiot”), falls for the word “stupid bastard” which was used by Boss in one of his arguments. Supiba or Soaba with his fascination for the squad vehicle finds his place under the roof of the Boss because of Imtila the wife of Boss who confides in him for the sake of humanity. However caught in the hazy maze of drinks and fury, Boss shoots Soaba dead accusing him of being a suspect.

The concept of “high idealism” created by the Naga people in their motive of achieving the notion of a free state witnessed the cost of many lives. It was not only the society that was left in utter chaos but, many families began to fall apart with the sudden disappearance of their men from home. Many joined the rebel groups to fight for the freedom of the nation, and some sacrificed themselves having caught between the two warring groups. Among the many that served to work as the mediator between the two parties, “some by choice and others by compulsion” Satemba, a former constable in the Assam Police was caught somewhere in between both the reasons for joining the group (“The Curfew Man,” Ao 35). The story talks of the period when the situation was getting worse and the civilians shot dead were reported as unfortunate ones killed in the act of “encounter” by the underground rebels or the army. Satemba in spite of his bad knee served to work as the curfew man who travelled at night to pass on important information. Knowing quite well the job he was handling and the risk in it, he did not wish to think of the future consequences, or the “reasonable payment” he was given elsewhere (Ao 40). In spite of all the trouble he went through to please his superiors, at the end when he decided to resign, he became “history,” unknown to all, and no longer the man who served his service loyally with his two smashed knee-caps.

Taking into consideration the general problem of insurgency in the North-East, the issue has become more like a commodity even within international borders and has assumed its position of being the “biggest business in North East” where “ideology has taken a backseat” (qtd. in Cline 2006, 128) The involvement of foreign support in the form of trade, business, and exchange of arms and ammunition has created unrest within the region. Further the individuals belonging to various insurgent groups have on many occasions turned into criminal gangs. The situation within the region in a way made its own path of destruction creating mass negative outlook towards the place and its people.

Various forms of writings from the North-East have found the creative abilities to register the experiences they have undergone in recent times. With the people of the North-East holding on the concept of “their” world as central to themselves, the area has often been looked down by the “mainland India” as a borderland. With the emergence of books such as that of Ao’s *These Hills Called Home* giving a vivid description of what happened in Nagaland in the 1960’s and 1970’s, there are chances and possibilities of more short stories and fiction. Some of the recent intervention have been promising, especially, Indira Goswami’s “The Journey,” Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi’s “He’s Still Alive,” Arupa Patangia Kalita’s “Someday, Sometime Numoli” and Rita Chaudhury’s novel *Ei Samay Sei Samay* (This Time, That Time, 2007). Apart from these older writers, there have also emerged a large number of young writers who have spent their childhood and youth growing under the shadows of gun and violence. Aruni Kashyap, an emerging writer has penned down his idea of excruciating pain and violence in his poems. More recently, in his first novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013) he has thrown the significant question why so many young ‘educated thinking young men’ had given away to guns. This kind of writing has opened up a new channel, providing not only more “essence” in the field of literature but also helping many young minds of the land brought up in more “urban,” “cosmopolitan,” “westernised” regions look back into their roots and construct what they have lost with time. (Gill 2009)

Although the cases of insurgency have narrowed down to a comparatively peaceful atmosphere today, there is still much that is needed to be done to bring in total harmony and peace. With a few writers who initially began to record the memories of a troubled Nagaland, many young people who never thought to recapture the roots have begun to question and raise their voices against the state. The question of the past has come to acquire its importance more meaningfully today as the question of “experience” in the older set of writers about the community is given value by the younger writers who more often show the desire to revisit the traumatised past and the military history, the effort to heal the wounds that are largely untold and thus uncared for, and breathe life out of them. Nagaland has produced writers who have provided a new literature which has “sprung from the staccato cry of machine guns” (Gill 2011). Writers like Easterine Iralu has gone ahead with courage to write the history of Nagaland through poetry, for she feels that the history of Nagaland and its conflicts could only be recounted in a creative and spiritual manner that the prose genre rarely allows: “the story of Nagaland is the story of the

Naga soul on a long, lonely journey of pain, loss and bereavement, a silent holocaust in which words seldom were enough to carry the burden of being born a Naga” (Iralu 2004). But in the hand of writers such as Temsula Ao, the prose becomes both spiritual and political. The only thing that remains now to be written with such end is the story of fostering memory, of remembering the shared history, of the difficult past and the struggles of life: of how the older “generation had lost their youth to the dream of nationhood and how that period of history was written not only with the blood and tears of countless innocents but also how youngsters (of those that were forced to join the group)... were transformed into what they became in the jungle.” (Ao 96)

The history of the state of Nagaland is documented today through various poems, short stories and novels, contributed by the regional writers. These stories will live to be passed on to the future generation as they live a life of contentment far away from the ravages of the battered Nagaland that once was. This article through the study of Temsula Ao’s collection of stories aimed to explore the political history of Nagaland, a state of the North East. It attempted to bring out the aspect of terror through the literary writings of the traumatised history. Written against the backdrop of a turbulent period of Naga history, Ao’s collection, it argued, brilliantly combines the cultural values of a multi-ethnic land and the raging political and insurgency madness. As the State continues to work towards peace, the “songs of yesterday” also continue to douse the flames that burned down the hills and the landscapes of the place that were once “called Home”.

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