



Women in Conflict Areas: Insights from Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

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Abstract

In times of war and conflict, sexual violence against women is often reported. Such measures are also used as weapons of war against the opposing forces. In the 1950s and 60s the confrontation between the Indian armed forces and the Naga undergrounds peaked, resulting in lots of deaths, including innocent civilians. Temsula Ao's collection of short stories entitled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* captures some of the poignant moments of the troubled times. This paper analyses two stories from the volume which deals with sexual violence against women. While on one hand the narratives recount the trauma faced by the Nagas in the hands of the Indian armed forces, it also highlights the universality of the subject of women's suffering in times of conflict in different parts of the world. Another thrust of the paper is also to argue that women in patriarchal society are doubly marginalized. In the case of the Nagas too, the patriarchal structures often silences the narratives of women from emerging to the fore. But the active campaigns of the Naga Mothers Association and other like-minded organizations have risen to fight for dignity and justice.

Keywords

Temsula Ao, Nagas, sexual violence, patriarchal society, conflict, trauma

Introduction

Perhaps, one of the most regrettable consequences of war, besides death, is the atrocities committed against women. And violence against women in the form of sexual harassment and rape is one of the most serious crimes. The *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (1993) defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." It is a wide ranging definition that condemns any form of violence, public or private, that demeans a woman of her being the person she wants to be. It also echoes the rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, on 10 December 1948, and proclaimed as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 3 of the Declaration says, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of a person" and "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." (Article 5).

In times of war or conflict, being mostly fought by men, women and children are often vulnerable. In many cases, 'rape' has been used as an important tool to humiliate the opponent group in wartime and militarized societies. Wars, large and small scale, have always victimized women by sexually harassing them. The World War II, Bosnia Herzegovina, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Vietnam, El Salvador, Peru, Myanmar are some of the well-known cases where most people would have heard of about the 'rape' of women. And these wars and many more, have used 'rape' or other forms of sexual violence against women as weapons of war. Elisabeth Jean Wood says, "While sexual violence occurs in all wars, it occurs to varying extent and takes distinct forms." (307). And after going into detailed study of different wars since World War II, on how women have been sexually harassed, she further goes on to say that;

Sexual violence in these cases appears to vary substantially in prevalence; in form; in who is targeted (all women, girls and men as well as women, or particular persons, perhaps members of an ethnic out-group); in whether it is exercised by combatants from a single party or more generally; whether it is pursued as a strategy of war; where it occurs (in detention, at home, or in public); in duration; whether it is carried out by a single perpetrator or by a group; whether victims are killed afterward; and whether its incidence varies with other forms of violence against civilians or occurs in a distinct pattern. (*Ibid.* 317).

This paper will look into the situations of women in an ongoing conflict, vis-à-vis the Indian armed forces and the Nagas, through a recourse to two stories from Temsula Ao's collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, namely, "The Last Song" and "The Jungle Mayor". Both the stories are based in the war inflicted areas of Nagaland during the early years of the Nagas movement for 'freedom struggle'. Hence, the stories are of the intense moment when both the 'underground' Nagas and the over-ground Indian armed forces are up at arms against each other.

Late in 1958, the Indian government promulgated a draconian Act called Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) to operate in the 'disturbed areas' of North East India (NEI) in order to curb insurgency movements. From then till now this Act has been

the tool for the Indian armed forces to unleash its vengeance on the innocent civilians in many part of the NEI. Under this Act, all security forces are given unrestricted and unaccounted power to carry out their operations, once an area is declared disturbed. Even a non-commissioned officer is granted the right to shoot to kill based on mere suspicion in order to ‘maintain the public order’. The Act has been contentious all through. In the aftermath of the alleged arrest and murder of Thangjam Manorama by the Assam Rifles in July 2004, Manipur went up in fire and the infamous pictures of women parading naked with the placards that read: “Indian Army Rape Us” and “Indian Army Take Our Flesh”. Soon after, Irom Sharmila became an iconic activist in the campaign to repeal AFSPA, yet despite the public criticism the Act remains.

Surrounded by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar, the entire NEI is geographically isolated from the rest of the country, connected only by the narrow strip on the north of West Bengal called the “chicken’s neck.” The largely egalitarian economy and cultural difference makes the region easily a ‘periphery’ to the ‘mainland’. Besides, the existing hostility created by the political flavor made the people feel quite disconnected emotionally or otherwise. To top it all, the various reports of human rights violation, custodial deaths, fake encounters, etc. mostly in the hands of the Indian security forces continue to create a distance from the centre at New Delhi where power is wielded. Of course, we hear of similar stories from various conflicts torn regions of the country.

“The Last Song” and “The Jungle Major”:

The two stories are about such atrocities of the Indian armed forces committed on the innocent villagers. “The Last Song” is the story of Apenyo, the young girl “who was born to sing” (23). She was appreciated by everyone in the village for her voice and grew up to play an important role in the church choir. One particular year, the villagers were in an especially expectant mood because there was a big event coming up in the village church in about six months’ time: “the dedication of the new church building.”(25). Unfortunately, it was also the “troubled times for the Nagas” (25). The Indian armed forces were coming down heavily on the civilians because they were paying ‘taxes’ to the underground ‘government’. It so happen that the armed forces were heading towards the particular village “to demonstrate to the entire Naga people what happens when you ‘betray’ your own government” (26). Suddenly, gun shots were heard in the village and “the congregation froze in their places unable to believe that their dedication Sunday was going to be desecrated by the arrogant Indian army” (27). Amidst the chaos, Apenyo burst into a solo number and she was followed by the entire choir. Infuriated, the soldiers took to action, “they pushed and shoved the pastor and the goanburas, prodding them with the butts of their guns” (27). Next, the leader of the army “grabbed Apenyo by the hair and with a bemused look on his face dragged her away from the crowd” (28). The next thing we saw was “the young Captain raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn” (28). When the mother Libeni “crazed by what she was witnessing, rushed forward with an animal-like growl as if to haul the man off her daughter’s body and but a soldier grabbed her and pinned her down on the ground... bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body... the small band of soldier then took their turn, even though by

the time the fourth one mounted, the woman was already dead” (28). Then the Captain ordered an “open fire on the people... he then ordered to take positions around the church and at his signal they emptied their guns into the building... seeing that it would be a waste of time and bullets to kill off all the witness inside the church, the order was given to set it on fire... the old church soon burst into flames reducing the dead and the dying into an unrecognizable black mass” (29).

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

“The Jungle Major” is a story of a mismatched couple, ‘a short, dark’ man called Punaba and a ‘tall, fair, slim’ women called Khatila. It was during the time when “the new wave of patriotic fervor” (2) of freedom struggle caught the imagination of the people. Soon Punaba too joined the ‘underground’ but unfortunately the news reached the Indian government authorities. That was the beginning of the ransacking of not only Khatila’s house but also the entire village. These forms of “atrocities committed by the armed forces on innocent villagers” (4) did not spare Khatila, she was even warned, once during the search operations, by the officer with a “lascivious look”, “we know how to deal with women like you” (4). The story went on to tell us of the married life of the loving couple despite the frequent tortures and harassment by the armed forces. We are also told of how once “the audacity of Khatila’s ploy” (7) saved her husband. And when ceasefire was declared, Punaba came over-ground to be more with Khatila.

Rape as a Weapon of War:

It is important that we look closer to these forms of violence against women as cases of rape are distinctly suffered by women alone. It is the women who are trapped between these warring forces. The armed forces often come down heavy on women as if it is the women who have created enmity between the two fighting groups. For women, being raped is akin to death sentence or like a condemnation to slow death. It is seriously hampers a person the right to be human. The Baguio Declaration of the 2nd Asian Indigenous Women’s Conference also condemn violence against women and noted the rise in such atrocities “perpetrated by state forces” and “rape continues to be used as a weapon of war by the military to humiliate and attack indigenous communities. Girls and even older women and children are not spared.” (9).

And when we look into atrocities in war, we cannot but pause and ask, ‘why is rape as a strategy/weapon of war a common phenomenon?’ On this account, Elisabeth Jean Wood asserts:

One reason often advanced for sexual violence based on increased wartime incentives that does account of targeting of enemy civilians is that of revenge. During war, combatants target enemy civilians with violence in revenge for the violence suffered by themselves, their family, or community members. However, why revenge takes the form of sexual violence rather than other violence should also be addressed (325).

This argument is applicable to the case of the ‘rape’ cases and physical torture cases as we have just related in the stories. One of the most infamous cases is the Oinam incident in Senapati District of Manipur. On July 9, 1987 the Assam Rifles Post near Oinam village, in the Poumai Naga area, was raided one misty morning by the Naga underground and walked away with a large quantity of arms and ammunition after killing nine jawans and injuring some. It was too much on the part of the Assam rifles to endure the fact for long that they were robbed of all their weapons without any retaliation. As an offensive, the Assam Rifles launched the “Operation Bluebird” in about 30 villages around Oinam village to recover the lost. What happened during the operation will always remain a scar in the mindset of the people;

... in course of a few weeks the Assam Rifles shot dead fifteen people after subjugating them to inhuman torture. The villagers were made to stand at the playground exposed to torrential rains and scorching heat for weeks. The Assam Rifles used the Churches as concentration camps. Hundreds of villagers were beaten and subjugated to third degree methods of tortures, men were hung 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).

For the record, there were so many who died later on because of the tortures suffered during the Bluebird Operation. What we can see is the echoing of what happened to the story “The Last Song”. It was sheer revenge on the part of Assam Rifles as a vengeance for the humiliation they suffered. Taking advantage of the power they were been given, they unleashed their ‘reign of terror’ of the poor civilians though they have not done anything to provoke the wrath of the armed forces. Stories are told of the notoriety of the jawans; how they sought ‘young virgin’ girls, as if the AFSPA and NSA (National Security Act), launched in the Naga areas after AFSPA, has empowered them to even harass women.

In the story “The Last Song” the armed forces were on armed forces was on its way to teach the villagers lessons because they were allegedly ‘paying taxes’ to the ‘underground government’. And their demonstration some in the form of ‘raping’ women in front of the entire congregation and torturing the leaders of the village and then firing at them. The armed forces did not even interrogate anyone; they just walked in and disrupted the congregation. That’s their way of showing who has the power! The behaviors of the armed forces are also clearly depicted in the story “The Jungle Major”:

The houses were ransacked by the security forces, the grain in their barns was burnt and the people themselves were herded into camps away from the village and kept in virtual imprisonment inside areas fenced in by bamboo stockades. This form of group incarceration was the infamous ‘grouping’ of villages which the Nagas hated and dreaded even more than bullets. 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 chilli powder being rammed into their extremities (3).

Sexual violence in wartime and in constantly conflicting areas also show that oftentimes, rape and other forms of sexual harassment are also instrumental in 'ethnic-cleansing' strategies adopted by the more advantageous forces, for instance, the Nazi in World War II Germany and the present day Myanmar (Burma). The Shan and the Karen ethnic communities suffer terribly in the hand of the Myanmar military junta:

From a global perspective, the 625 Shan girls and women are just a small fraction of the women all around the world who, over the centuries, have experienced rape as a weapon of war during international and internal armed conflicts (Hongthong 2002).

Myanmar's military is subjecting Karen women to brutal rapes, torture, murder and forced labour as part of its offensive against the ethnic minority, according to a report released yesterday. The report, by members of an exiles' organization working along the Thai-Myanmar border, cites in often gruesome detail the cases of 959 women and girls in Karen state from 1981 until last year (2006). But thousands of lesser cases of abuse involving women are also noted (*Asia News* 2007).

These forms of 'ethnic-cleansing' strategy are widespread even in other parts of the worlds and if often tend to direct against the entire population, a genocide (Wood 237). Most of these incidents happen in a situation where the stronger agency, in most cases the authority in power, launch its policy of terminating the lesser and weaker ethnic minority. The sense of the perpetrator with the weapon of destruction acts as the 'symbolic image' to incite a feeling of submission from the ones perpetrated upon, by which the perpetrators can demonstrate their victory over the men of the other group. But the question still remains, 'why should women be taken as the instrument to be demonstrated upon?'. Don't they have feeling? In trying to answer the question why women are most of the time raped or sexually harassed in other forms, while men are killed in times of war or in times of violent conflict, Kavita Panjabi says that it is multifaceted;

...the honour of the community is supposed to be vested in its women, so rape is a symbolic form of dishonoring the community; a woman and her sexuality are the implied property of man, so rape signifies an appropriation of property; or a woman's identity is presumed to be based on her sexuality. So rape denotes the unmaking of her very identity, a devastation greater than death itself (91).

What one needs to understand here is the fact that the women being dehumanized by 'rape' will remain stigmatized not so much because she has been perpetrated upon but more because she is the 'inferior' member of the community who has to remain 'stain free' to be able to find a suitor. And that stricture is a normal law established by the society dominated by men whereby she has to conform to, being the 'weaker sex'. What can be further said is that, by no choice of their own, they have been conscripted to war. Not to be the victor but to be the vanquished! Even her 'being' of the rape aftermath is often measured in terms of the patriarchal scale. By raping the woman, the rapist has dishonored the community of patriarchs, the 'supposedly' proprietors of the woman. But

what's ironic here is that the community might regain that lost 'honor' yet the victim has to live with the memory of the brunt that she has experienced. She will be forever stigmatized!

Perhaps, death would have been a more welcome situation for the raped Apenyo in "The Last Song". Is that the reason why she was depicted as a death figure at the end of the story? What would be the situation if she were to be left alive after being raped? Would she have preferred 'death' than live as a stigmatized girl? Perhaps death would have been more welcome. Alive she has to live with the memory of how she has been treated. Her dignity has been snatched away. Will any suitor come her way? Everything before the fateful incident was going well; she had a voice and she was recognized by the village folk. The armed forces did not expect rebellion, but to their surprise when Apenyo rebelled, they could not tolerate and that too the rebel is a woman, hence, she has to be taught a 'lesson'. Humiliating her was one way of dishonoring the whole villagers and 'death' was a symbolic end of the respect and appreciation that Apenyo received from the people. She has been muted. The consequences of being raped were costly for the girl.

Conclusion: Campaign for dignity

The sense of rights for women is further ignored in a society dominated by men. The women being physically weaker in strength succumb to the stronger and the 'macho' man who has the physical power. It is the domain of the home or the private corner where oppression first begins as she is taught that she is the 'predestined inferior'. While arguing that "though men are perpetrators of armed-conflict it is the women who are left to pick up the pieces and are burdened with running the household", Dolly Kikon further feels that Naga women have to fight on two fronts: "one, where they have to fight state violence and two, where they have to fight against patriarchal structures that disseminates against them" (14).

When brutal form of violence like 'rape' is committed against women, the unfortunate victims are left to experience the trauma for the rest of their lives. And there are also instances where cases of rape during the operations by armed forces which has been silenced because of certain moral laws like 'abortion' being termed 'illegal' by the community. Not only the 'victims' but the family also act together here because a 'dishonoured' person in the family means a bad image to the entire family. But the trauma is something that remains, and when everything that can be fought physically is done away with, there will still be something that remains: the memory. And it lingers on to tell stories of what has happened. It's a "tricky thing", as Temsula Ao would say because "it picks and chooses what to preserve and what to discard" (ix). Franz Fanon also argued in *The Wretched of the Earth* about how Colonial War causes mental disorder and social disorder. In one case, he showed how the rape of an Algerian wife of a man by French soldiers not only brought mental trauma only to the woman but also psychologically affected the husband always haunting his memory however removed he might be from time and space.

For a long time, though traumatized, women have been silenced in the Naga society. They stood mere spectator to men fighting with arms while they were left to keep the home in order and the children safe, hence she became the enforced scapegoat of

these armed conflicts. Unlike the beginning of the ‘freedom movement’ when there were no factions among the Nagas things stand more solid. Now it is in a sorry state. And the Naga women, not been able to bear it for long, finally came out in the open and on 18 February, 1984 formed the Naga Mothers’ Association (NMA), the apex body that has members representing every Naga tribes. This movement by NMA came at the right time for the Nagas, in general, and the women, in particular, because for the first time the Naga Women has emerged as a socio-political force that propagates the end of conflict. With their theme “Shed No More Blood”, they have so far being instrumental in its political involvement in the Indo-Naga Peace talk as well as in their call for reconciliation between different underground Naga factions. And it would be possible that the situation of Naga women will see an elevated stage if organizations like NMA continue their persistent struggle for an active involvement of women in politics as well as the social sphere. A peaceful political environment would help avoid state violence against women and a pro-active women role in the society will ensure social life. Both ways, the rights of women will be strengthened.

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