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Reinterpreting Women in Temsula Ao's Short Stories in the Light of New Woman Concept

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Abstract:

Temsula Ao is one of the prominent literary voices from Northeast India. She constantly tried to bring the issues of her native land to the limelight. Her short stories presented the violence and turmoil that engulfed her region. During the military operation, the Naga people, especially the womenfolk felt insecure. The present study attempts to portray how the women in the turbulent arena played their role in handling untoward situations. The writer tries to depict the Naga women who stood confidently against the rebellion and played a significant role during the Naga Movement. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to analyze three short stories by Temsula Ao—*The Jungle Major*, *A Simple Question*, and *The Pot Maker* from the perspective of New Woman.

Keywords: New Woman, Naga movement, Female voices, Role.

Introduction:

The phrase “New Woman” was invented by Sarah Grand in her article, *The New Aspect of the Woman Question*, published in the North American Review in March 1894. Henry James developed the phrase “New Woman” (Stevens 27) when he used it to describe American emigrants living in Europe. However, the roots of the New Woman can be found in the Feminist Movement of the 19th Century. The issues of women were raised on platforms like public debates, print media, or election rallies.

In the pages of history, it is noted that women from the upper and middle classes got little opportunities to participate in outside activities. During the Victorian era (mid-to-late 1800s), women enjoyed little to no freedom in terms of sociopolitical rights. They had to confine themselves within a limited boundary. The New Woman Movement was a kind of revolution against the restricted roles of womenfolk imposed by the patriarchal society.

At the end of the nineteenth century, New Woman ideology began to play a significant role. Consequently, the definition of gender roles, the rights of women, and the concept of masculine supremacy all changed. The New Woman Movement was the beginning of the push for female autonomy that would continue into the twentieth century and even the twenty-first. The New Woman movement emphasized independence and autonomy of one's self. (Bordin) The movement encouraged the women who tried to find economic and social stability without men.

Dramatists like Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw popularized the concept of the New Woman through their literary works like *A Doll's House* and *Candida* respectively. In the context of Indian Writing in English, several writers like Anita Desai, Amrita Pritam, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, etc. came forward and popularized the concept of New Woman through their literary pieces. The characters in these literary works are portrayed with a voice of protest, self-control, and an attitude of revolutionary zeal. In the present paper, an attempt is made to analyze three short stories by Temsula Ao—*The Jungle Major*, *A Simple Question*, and *The Pot Maker* concerning the New Woman Concept.

Reinterpreting Women in Temsula Ao's Short Stories:

Temsula Ao is one of the prominent literary voices from Northeast India. She is an academician, a short story writer, a poet, an essayist, and an ethnographer. She was born in Jorhat, Assam. Temsula Ao served as a Professor of English at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and retired in 2010. She served as the Director of the North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur from 1992 to 1997. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head: Stories* (2009) are Ao's collections of short stories. Through her short stories, she has presented some gripping narratives related to the Naga women. She was honoured with the prestigious Padma Shri Award by the Government of India in 2007. She has also received the Sahitya Academy Award in 2013 for her short story collection *Laburnum for*

My Head: Stories. Ao's literary works such as collections of essays, short stories, and poems can be used as an excellent tool to know more about the Naga society and their culture.

One of the eight sister states of India's Northeast is Nagaland. For many decades, the state remained isolated from the mainland India. The state was engulfed with political turbulence and agitations. The people of Nagaland experienced all kinds of violence and turmoil, the reflection of which can be found in the literary works of Temsula Ao. There was a constant conflict between the Naga rebels and the Indian armed forces, which resulted in the loss of innocent lives and their belongings.

Through her art of story-telling, Temsula Ao was constantly trying to bring the issues of her native land to the outside world. She tried to bring the prevalent social unrest of her motherland to the world's notice. During the military operation, the Naga people, mainly the womenfolk, felt insecure. The present study attempts to portray how the women in the turbulent arena played their role in handling adverse situations. The writer, through her stories, tries to depict the Naga women who, during the Naga Movement, stood confidently and courageously against all odds.

The pathetic social reality of Northeast India is well narrated through the stories of Temsula Ao. In a trouble-torn society, women had to face inexplicable situations and how they tackled them is well portrayed in her stories. Namrata Rathore Mahanta says:

“The women of the Northeast have been at the receiving end of all the experiments done in the name of modernization, governance, autonomy, dissent, rebellion, and struggle for power. With their men joining the underground rebel forces, the women have had to bear the burden of raising the family, and face the onslaughts of the interrogation squads.....The constant fear of the rebel forces on one hand and of the armed forces on the other has gripped the lives of women. The cracking up the traditional societies has further added to the violence.....Marginalized in every possible way, the women of these regions have demonstrated an indomitable spirit and agency in coping with the multi-faceted violence that surrounds them at all times.” (Mahanta 108-9)

The Jungle Major is a significant story of Temsula Ao, where women are projected differently. The story is about an ugly person named Punaba and his beautiful wife, Khatila. Khatila was not only beautiful but also intelligent. People passed comments on their incompatible physical match and relationship. But Khatila and Punaba ignored all these and kept themselves busy with their household duties. (Ao 2) Subsequently, Punaba joined the Naga rebels and it became a talk of discussion. Government officials and forces tried to trace and track Punaba. Even his wife, Khatila was summoned to enquire about Punaba. Khatila was threatened by the government forces that if she were lying, they would uniquely punish her— 'we know how to deal with women like you,' the officer said giving her a lascivious look. (Ao 4) After this incident, the village elders came to her house and advised her to send a message to Punaba asking him not to visit her. Khatila knew that her husband would surely be apprised of the incident by the informers of the rebels, but she knew that she could never offend the village elders by disobeying them.

Khatila regularly got information about Punaba through the messengers. In just three years, due to his leadership qualities, Punaba became a captain of the rebel army. He periodically visited his wife. This time, keeping himself away for five months, Punaba came home to meet his wife. He was injured with a bullet wound on his right arm. With rest and care from his wife, Punaba started to come to health. However, the Indian army got this information, and one morning, they came to his house to arrest him. Khatila was pondering how she could save Punaba from the Indian army. Khatila tried to pretend and talked to Punaba as if she were talking to her servant. She shouted and said, "You no good 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) In this way, Khatila sent Punaba to fetch water in disguise. Khatila's witty handling of the situation and presence of mind saved Punaba. A moment later, Khatila opened the door and started shouting at the captain. In an irritating voice, she asked the captain, 'What do you want?' (Ao 6) The captain was not expecting such an attitude from Khatila. He was anticipating a fearful, cowering lady who was trying to save herself along with her husband, but whom the captain confronted was a different one. He was also wondering how Punaba could escape after such a tight vigil. If Punaba had been killed or captured on that morning then the whole village would have been punished as they were protecting a notorious rebel. The entire village was saved by this courageous act of Khatila. The brains and brawn of women are beautifully portrayed through the character of Khatila. The spirit of the New Woman sparked out of her character.

A Simple Question is another story by Temsula Ao, where the role of a woman handling adverse situations is well narrated. The story is about an intelligent lady, Imdongla. Temsula Ao describes her in the following way:

“Imdongla was barely literate, able to read the Bible and the Hymn book only. But, she was otherwise a worldly-wise woman, knowledgeable about the history and politics of the village”. (Ao 81)

Tekaba was the husband of Imdongla, who was a *gaonburah* (the village headman). As he was the headman of the village, armed groups always targeted him. In normal situations, the village elders joyfully led their lives, but during the hostile situation, they became most vulnerable. They had to face burns from both sides. “On the one hand, they were held responsible by the government if any young men from their villages were reported to have joined the rebel forces; on the other, the underground forces ordered them to identify young men representing each clan to join their army, failing which they threatened to burn down the village granaries.” (Ao 81-2)

The village headmen were in a dilemma. They were ordered by the government officials to inform the activities of the rebels and to report their movements. At the same time, they were also under the close observation of the underground rebels. There were instances where the village elders were awarded capital punishment by the rebels on charges of government agents. The underground rebels demanded every household to pay a tax initially of Rupees one for the travel expenses of the rebel leaders going to foreign lands to plead for Naga independence from India (Ao 82). These demands increased bit by bit. Later, taxes were in the form of money, rice, and livestock. Any resistance would be awarded with a beating or other kind of punishment by the rebel group. The fear-stricken villagers had no other choice but to remain silent. On such an occasion, the rebels were beating a villager for not bringing the quantity of rice they ordered. Imdongla was watching the incident from her house. Then, the leader of the group asked Tekaba’s comment on this. Imdongla realized that if she did not intervene, her husband would also be awarded beating and physical assault. She came out shouting with a basket of rice,

“Hey, Toshi, why don't you tell this man that I could not return this rice to you this morning as promised. Remember you lent it to my son for the age-set feast? Here it is.” (Ao 83)

Then, she told the collector it was much more than what they demanded and told them to take the rice and leave quickly as the weather was getting bad. The leader then instructed his men to gather the rice and they left the village. The whole village became dumbstruck. A glimpse of New Woman can be seen in the role played by Imdongla here.

Tekaba had to face a lot of anxiety and stress with every passing day. He could neither disobey the government forces nor offend the rebel groups. If any village failed to comply with government orders, each able person in that village was forced to work for the government forces without any wages or food. On the other hand, if anyone complies with the government orders, the whole village would be levied with taxes double as a punishment by the rebels. Imdongla observed that Tekaba gradually started talking less and could not sleep at night. His hair also turned white due to constant stress and anxiety. At last, he thought he would resign from his post of the village headman. But it was Imdongla who thought sensibly and said, “if he so much as mentioned it to anyone the government would suspect him of being a sympathizer of the rebels and arrest him. Besides, she pointed out, everyone would call him a coward; how would he like that?” (Ao 84) Thus, Imdongla gave the much-needed timely advice to Tekaba and encouraged him to confront the challenging situation.

The Indian army came to learn that the villagers were helping the underground rebels by supplying the necessary things they required. Subsequently, all the village elders, including Tekaba were brought to the army camp. Here, one can see the New Woman in the character of Imdongla when she took the courageous step to save the villagers and her husband. “She sat in front of Tekaba's enclosure and when the captain approached her, she stood up and made as if to take off her waist cloth which he knew was the ultimate insult a Naga woman could hurl at a man signifying his emasculation. He turned round and went out of the room.....Outside, the captain was mulling over the other things the interpreter had told him. Imdongla had said, ‘Look at them; aren't they like your own fathers? How would you feel if your fathers were punished for acting out of fear?’” (Ao 86-7) The captain was affected by one question of Imdongla which she repeatedly asked, “What do you want from us?” (Ao 87) For the first time, Imdongla made the captain see the impossible situation faced by the

villagers. (Ao 87) The captain immediately ordered his adjutant to release Tekaba. Through the story, Temsula Ao tries to focus on the bravery and courage of women who can withstand and tackle any adverse situation. Imdongla was an ignorant and illiterate woman born and brought up with limited facilities. However, she was instrumental in saving the lives of the villagers. The spirit of New Woman can be seen in her character, too.

The daring attitude to challenge the traditional norms of a society is one of the qualities of a New Woman. This quality can also be seen in the character of Arenla in the short story, *The Pot Maker*. This is a remarkable story where Arenla raises her voice against the patriarchal structure of the Naga society. The story portrays the traditional Naga society. The village of Arenla was famous for its pottery work and had a historical background. During the head-hunting era, the village was spared on many occasions due to its expert pot makers. This art was carried forward by the mothers and they passed it to their daughters. Arenla was a renowned pot maker; however, she did not want to teach this art to her daughter. She knew that pottery making was a low-paying but back-breaking job. So, Arenla did not want her daughter to adopt this art as a profession instead she wanted her to learn weaving, a high-earning job. This decision of Arenla was against the customs and traditions of the village. She took a bold step against tradition when she protested the gender division of labour in Naga society. She knew that pot making was an excruciating work where women needed to dig clay from the hillside. Arenla said to her husband,

“.....you do not know how difficult it is to dig the clay from the hillside because you have never come there to help me saying that no man can be seen meddling in anything to do with pot making. It is woman’s work.” (Ao 58)

Arenla’s daughter had a keen interest in pot making. As her mother never took any initiative to teach her the art, she used to visit other pot makers in her village when her parents were busy in the fields. Soon, it became a hot topic of gossip. The village elders also learned that Arenla was reluctant to pass her legacy to her daughter. They summoned her husband, Mesoba, to inquire about the matter. Mesoba knew that revealing the truth would attract an immediate fine on Arenla for going against the tradition. So, he denied the charges, gave some excuses, and somehow convinced the village elders. The village elders believed him and let him go but cautioned him that it was his wife’s duty to pass the legacy to the next generation.

They said ‘.....Your wife should be willing to pass on the gift to her daughter.’ They also added, ‘Anyone refusing to do so will be considered an enemy of the village.’ (Ao 62)

Though the women could not protest openly against the tradition, Arenla dared to speak within the limited space and freedom and asserted that her daughter would not do the low-paying job like her. Arenla said,

“I shall not teach her this craft which has brought no joy to me and only a pittance for my troubles.” (Ao 58)

Arenla never openly revolted against society, but she neither taught her daughter the art she was so at home nor praised her for her quick learning abilities. Instead, she always discouraged her daughter or tried to get her to feel that she was not fit for that job.

Conclusion:

The resilience and resistance of women can be seen in Ao's stories. They have the true Naga spirit who never bow down in any situation. They always face the danger and their indomitable spirit cannot be deterred. Ao, in her stories, has portrayed that the household women never openly protested the armed forces or joined the rebellion group. However, at an individual level, they supported the Naga rebels as they were fighting for the cause of the Naga people. Here, we can quote the words of James Scott who says in his book *Weapon of the Weak: Everyday Act of Peasant Resistance (1985)*,

“Resistance need not be always overt and collective struggle against power, it can be individual, disguised and everyday act that challenge power at a micro level.”

Through the characters in her stories, Temsula Ao shows the struggle of the individual characters who skilfully exhibit their challenge within their limited spaces. Thus, Temsula Ao tries to portray an authentic picture of her region, Nagaland. The characters in her stories are nothing but the voices of the women who had to suffer a lot in their lives. They were the victims of insurgency and sociopolitical unrest. They had to undergo physical and mental torture, yet they were the real fighters who never gave up. They always tried to overcome the life's hurdles and stood as the New Woman.

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