

# Changing Trajectories of the Conception of Home in Temsula Ao's Fictions

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## **Abstract**

*The paper strives to bring out the relative and fluid nature of “Home” in a conflict ridden space through the fiction of Temsula Ao. Temsula Ao is an academician and writer from the Northeastern state of Nagaland in India. Ao’s short stories bring out diverse connotations of the concept of “Home”. Nagaland as a geographic and emotional space for Ao reflects the characteristics of home. Ao’s Nagaland as a Home is a ceaseless dialogue between the stability guaranteed by the tradition of the past and the rather unstable present. Naga society since the end of British colonialism in India has found itself fettered to violence. This has diluted the stability of the past and has altered the nature of home as a closed space providing security and privacy from the outer world. In Ao’s stories Nagaland as a home for its inhabitants is formed by the ceaseless dialogue between a rich past and a present which is fraught with scars of violence and uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** Home, Space, Violence, Orality.

## **Introduction**

Temsula Ao, academic, folklorist and poet from Nagaland, finds in oral traditions from her homeland an “inherent instability” (Ao, 1999). Her poetic maturity stems from exploring the variables in human memory and performance she has witnessed in Nagaland – an Indian state inhabited by sixteen Naga tribes and fraught with deep scars of violence and extremism. Ao’s poems travel between her community’s pagan past and Christian present. In her collection *Songs from the Other Life* (2007), she meditates on her pagan inheritance and her Christian upbringing and regrets the rise of a cynical new generation who pays no respect to the rich tradition Nagaland represents. Perhaps, the new generation is overwhelmed by the semiotic instability of these traditions. Perhaps, they equate this semiotic instability with the political instability they have witnessed in Nagaland.

Nagaland as a political space do not have a pleasant past. Its formation as a political as well as administrative unit is marred by violence on the part of both the administration as well as the rebels who have been till date waging a war against what they call the injustice of the state. As recent as in the latter part of 2020, bitter verbal feuds between ultras belonging to NSCN (IM) and the government with

regard to the Naga Framework agreement and the occasional use of violence by NSCN(K) to pressurize the government emulate the trajectory of conflict which has been raging through the courtyards of Nagaland (Saikia, 2018). Nagaland, owing to such ceaseless conflict has been repeatedly featured internationally as a conflict zone (Bhaumik, 2015). Yet, in the midst of violence, there is a thriving diversity of people with diverse cultural coping mechanisms which help them in approaching this space marred by decades of conflict.

Temsula Ao in her work reveals the troubled relationship that she shares with her homeland. On the one hand her home is carved out of a rich tradition and on the other the reign of violence has been raging her home. Born in Assam and having spent most of her professional life as a professor of literature in Meghalaya, Ao has been witnessing the searing transformations in Nagaland. Nagaland in the works of Ao is a space which has been produced because of diverse social practices and their interaction with the material conditions. Henri Lefebvre, an eminent urban theorist taking into account the production of spaces through the interaction between social practices and material conditions writes that spaces are multivalent semiotic structures because they emerge through the dynamic of interaction between the way of life of a people in the form of tradition, rituals, myth and the physical reality (Lefebvre,1992). Nagaland too, as a home for Ao bears within it different spatial elements- on the one hand there is the consoling effects of a rich and vibrant culture but on the other there are elements like armed violence, that blight the brighter side of this space.

Nagaland as a home for its inhabitants as well as Ao is an emotive construct. Spatial theorist Kimberly Dovey writes that a home is a relationship that inhabitants share with the outer world or environment. It is an emotional relationship between the dwellers and the dwelling place. Being at home according to Dovey is a mode of being whereby we orient ourselves with the spatial, temporal and the socio-cultural order that we understand (Dovey, 1985). However if we take the case of Nagaland the relationship between the inhabitants and the space which we call home cannot be understood in a straitjacket manner. The present with its rather gory nature which is manifested in events like bomb blast, counter insurgency operations, killing of innocents and gross bloodshed nullifies the nature of home as a space that offers security, in such landscapes of uncertainty there is a blurring of lines between home and the outer world and as such there emerges a strong tendency on the part of the inhabitants to regress back to the stability of the past. The past with its memories of protection embody the traits of a home. Gaston Bachelard argues that we comfort ourselves by reliving the memories of protection. These memories of protection according to Bachelard have a tonality of home in face of the events taking place in the outer world and all individuals must come back to these memories to make their life meaningful. The past for Bachelard is not a mere repository of facts but it is a repository of memories and emotion. Bachelard argues that memories of the outside world never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams. Human beings he argues are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost (Bachelard,1958). For Mary Douglas Home is located in space but it is not necessarily a fixed space. She writes that a home does not need mortars and bricks, it can be a wagon, tent or a caravan but some notion of regularity of events (Douglas,1991, 289). The idea of home for the inhabitants of

Nagaland is carved out of their ceaseless struggle to decipher familiarity and order of the past in the conflict ridden landscapes of the present.

### **Violent Spaces and the Changing Dimension of Home: An Analysis**

In the preface to her collection of short stories titled *These Hills Called Home* (2005), Ao explains that most of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of the Nagas (Ao, 2005, x). For Ao who is a witness to the tumultuous past and an uncertain present, the concept of home is inextricably related to the diverse approach that people adopt to negotiate the trajectory of violence. In their attempt to negotiate these trajectories, the idea of home assume multivalent dimensions. Inspired by true events '*The Jungle Major*' portrays the shattering of the idea of home as a space that provides security and privacy. Punaba, the major in an insurgent and visits his home to meet his wife in the darkness of the night. However, his movements to his home and else is often accompanied by the surveillance of the Indian army. For Punaba his visits to his home is an act that is very seedy in nature. The fear that accompanies his visits to his home mirrors the atmosphere of terror to which a larger part of the Naga society is fettered. Therefore in such an atmosphere of terror the feature of home as a space which guarantees security nullified and the division between home and the outer world gets blurred. It is the forest from which Punaba comes to his village which provides a sense of security. The forest with its ability to shelter Punaba from the security forces comes to embody the traits of a home. Punaba, therefore with the help of his wife must return to the forest; "Soon he and his small party vanished into the jungle and out of the cordon set up by the soldiers" (Ao, 2005, 7). The forest on the other hand offers Punaba a safe refuge, offers him some pattern of regularity of events and more importantly a coherent identity. His name Punaba, the jungle major in a very symbolic manner bears within it a strong sense of space that he inhabits. Although towards the end of the story he leaves the forest and returns home yet his identity as the jungle major remains unchanged. Kimberly Dovey writes that we draw four identities from the homes we inhabit. Punaba's identity in the story draws heavily from the space i.e. the forest which he inhabited for a larger part of his life (Dovey, 1985).

Similarly in '*The Curfew Man*', Satmeba the central character is an ex employee of the Assam Police. Satmeba in search of better economic opportunities and a stable life leaves his ancestral village along with his wife Jemtila and moves to the city of Mokokchong. However Satmeba's search for a stability and a better life in the city is not free from the violence and the atmosphere of terror to which the city is gripped. In the city Satmeba must learn to negotiate the constant surveillance that surrounds him. The underground with its strong surveillance strategies keeps track of the ventures of Satmeba. Even inside his home Satmeba is not free from the prying eyes of the rebels. His movements in the nights of the curfew is noticed by the rebels and towards the end of the story a figure with his face covered with a black shawl warns Satmeba and tells him to return home; "Go back home curfew man, and if you value your life, never carry tales again" (Ao 2005, 41). There is a strong warning on not to carry tales. In traditional oral societies stories have cathartic effects in times of crisis and therefore in a very symbolic manner emulate the trajectories of home. The emphasis on censoring stories portrays a disjunction in the concept of home. Home in a traditional society are storehouse of life stories. The censoring of stories therefore alters the conception of home as storehouse of individual as well as collective memories.

### **Home as a Traditional Construct : Orality and Memory**

Oral tradition in indigenous societies like the Naga society is not mere absence of written records and propagation of knowledge through words of mouth. It is a “comprehensive and integrated network” of traditional knowledge systems, a fusion of art with reality, history with imagination, and the ideal with the practical (Datta, 1999). Ao in her short stories draws from the vibrant oral tradition of the Naga society and therefore uses memory as a potent motif in her stories.. Ao argues that her stories capture the ambience of the traditional Naga way of life which is becoming irrelevant in the contemporary times (Ao, 2005, x). Her stories strive to purge the harsh memories of violence that have shattered the rather peaceful fabric of the Naga society and as such she draws from the age old traditional knowledge system of the Naga society. This transmission of the racial wisdom to the inhabitants of the contemporary society is to portray the faith of the race in the virtue of peace and communion (Ao, 2005). In the story titled ‘The Pot Maker’ an immediate need to transmit the racial wisdom to younger generation emerges. The elders of the village in the story collectively opine that it is the duty of the parents to teach the young ones the skills which have been handed down from generation to generation (Ao, 2005, 61). Jan Vansina, Belgian oral theorist taking into account the importance of the memories of the past in oral societies opines; “No one in oral societies doubt that memories can be faithful repositories which contain the sum total of past human experience and explain how and why of the present day” (Vansina 1985, xi). Ao too in the story stresses the importance of community knowledge and the transmission of this knowledge to the younger generation. This transmission of knowledge is a process that involves collective memory. This collective memory with its ability to lead a fractured society to a healing effect of tradition embodies the functions of home. Tradition as a repository of knowledge functions as a home in times of crisis.

In ‘*The Death of a Hunter*’ Imchanok the hunter finds it difficult to incorporate his art in a society which is changing rapidly. Earlier for the hunter, his job brought with a volour. However with the transition of the society from traditional to modern, hunting began to viewed as a means of earning livelihood more than an art. The respect with which the profession was viewed in the past has been replaced by materiality. In the story Imchanok in appointed by the British administrators to kill an elephant which is creating havoc in the villages. Imchanok kills the elephant against the voice of his conscience. Imachanok is haunted by the episode of shooting the elephant. He begins realizing that his art in the materialistic modern world has no place and has been usurped by authorities to make him act against the dictates of his conscience. He finds himself “at the centre of the eternal contest between man and animal for dominion over land” (Ao, 2009, 29). He understand that the age old art of hunting which he had inherited from his ancestors has no place in the materialistic modern world. He after killing the elephant refuses to accept the gun which had been gifted by the authorities. Grief stricken, Imchanok decides to not practice the art of hunting and ;

“One day when he was alone in the house, he took out his gun from its sack, and dismantled it. The next morning, Tangchetla watched as her husband dug a hole in the backyard humming a tuneless song. And in the gaping wound of the earth he buried the boar’s tooth, the dismantled gun and Imchanok the hunter” (Ao. 2009, 40).

Imchanok's dismantling of the gun and its burial is symbolic of the vulnerability of cultural artefacts and ideas in a world rapidly changing (Ao, 2005 ix).

'*An Old Man Remembers*' is about a man named Shashi who took active part in the armed rebellion against the Indian army for a sovereign Nagaland. In the story Shashi has returned home after a futile fight for a separate sovereign homeland and is disillusioned by the life which he has led. In the society too he cannot cope with the indirect taunts which are directed towards him. The majority in the society views him as someone who has killed innocent people. His grandson too, after hearing about the violent pursuits begin to believe that his grandfather is a murderer. One day he confronts Shashi; "Grandfather is it true that you and grandfather Imlu killed many people when you were in the jungle?" (Ao 2005, 92). The grandson who has not seen the Naga movement cannot comprehend the plight of citizens who are caught in the quagmire of violence. Shashi who has never uttered a word to his grandson about his days in the rebellion realizes that if he does not tell his story to his grandson, the grandson would carry a false image of the rebels in his mind. Shashi tells him about the circumstances that forced him to adopt arms. As the story progresses we realize that the administrative machinery has committed violence in Shashi's village and there were murders and rapes and as a result several young men from the village joined the insurgent groups. Shashi act of telling stories about his life as a rebel points out an important role of memory in construction of the idea of home. The grandson's abode in the relatively peaceful present has in it scars of violence which Shashi and others of his generations have experienced. Speaking about the importance of the past in imbuing meaning to the present Vansina notes that memories of any society are rooted in the past yet they also penetrate the present because they are conjured up in the present. They reflect the past and the present in a single breath (Vansina, 1985, xii). The memories of the past, which the grandfather conjures up orally for the grandson provides him with new insights to the space which he believes to be his home.

### **Insurgency and the Nullification of the Idea of Home**

The underground network of the rebels in Ao's stories reflects the changing trajectories of the idea of home in a troubled space. In most of Ao's stories the underground is an all pervading presence. It functions like a parallel home which is insidious in nature. No one in the stories are free from the prying eyes of the underground network. As a parallel home, the underground intrudes into the lives of the inhabitants of the society. The underground like a home is a structure in time and it impacts the lives of people living in that particular time and space (Douglas, 1991). The all-pervading darkness of the underground in these stories intrude like the longings of home into the lives of those living in a conflict zone. Villages unknowingly become part of the underground network and are obliged to keep the underground supplied with food, information and arms (Ao, 2005, p. 3). In the story 'The Last Song' Apenyo a young Naga girl is raped by a army personnel. After several years the members of the underground network traces him to a psychiatric ward of a hospital. Similarly in the story "The Curfew Man" the underground network keeps an eye on the Satemba and intrudes his personal space in his home. Similarly in another story entitled 'Letters' the underground is shown as an institution which for its survival perpetuates violence on the ordinary villagers. In the story the changing dimension of the movement demanding sovereignty for Nagaland is portrayed. The high idealism and the commitment to

the Naga cause with which the movement began is shown to be losing its essence. The young members of the insurgent groups extort money from the innocent villagers and spent it to feed their drinking habits and personal expenditure. The young generation in the village resent such an attitude displayed by the rebels. They plan to retaliate against the exploitation of the insurgents. However the elders of the village caution the young generation to maintain restraint. As the story progresses we see that a rebel member is caught by the young villagers and killed. The killing of the insurgent as a sign of protest against the exploitation and atrocities committed on the innocent villagers point towards the dismantling of the underground network and the emergence of an attitude of hatred towards violence on the part of the young generation.

### **Woman, Conflict and Home**

Conflict as reflection of diverse forms of violence in all its subjective and objective forms defies easy categorization and goes beyond its physical form to impeach the consciousness of those fettered to it. It spreads itself in spirals and acts in complicity with other power structures like patriarchy, caste system etc. (Kongsong, 2017). In the context of Ao's stories violence in the subjective form takes into account the forces of patriarchy operating in the Naga society. Patriarchy as an objective form of violence emulates itself at times of conflict and further subjugates the feminine sex. However Ao's narration of the plight of woman is juxtaposed with tales of negotiation of the conflict and their subsequent survival. What emerges in these stories about woman caught in the quagmire of socio-political conflict as well as the power structures of the society is the idea of a home which is fraught with scars of conflict. Home for these women characters do not merely signify the typical character of home as private realm but a space which includes within its folds the larger socio-political realities. As a space which is symbolic of the erasure of the dividing line between the private and the public, the individual and the community, homes in a conflict ridden region become a site of contestation and negotiation of individuals with the radical socio-political conflicts.

In the "The Jungle Major" Punaba, the underground rebel is saved from being caught by his witty wife Khatila. In this contest between the mighty Indian Army on the one hand and Khatila, a woman marginalized in the society, there emerges an antidote to the violence. The Indian Army with its bullets and manpower is duped by Khatila through her beauty and wit, thereby preventing the entire village from being punished. In the story the only violence which comes to the forefront is the violence of words showered by Khatila at the young captain of the Indian Army. However unlike her husband Punaba, who because of his successful escape from the army is promoted to the post of a captain, Khatila must hold steadfastly to her space of domesticity. Yet it is this domestic space, her home which she appropriates as a counter space to subvert the forces of patriarchy and military force ( Kongsong, 2017, 67).

In another story titled "Saoba" highlights the plight of two marginalized characters: a village idiot and a house wife trying to make sense of their homes caught in the mire of violence and chaos. The story with insurgency in the background depicts the rise of a new semi-military group popularly known as the flying squad who aid the army in controlling the activities of the insurgents. The leader of this notorious

group is a man known as Imlichuba. Imlichuba because of his new found powers subjects ordinary citizens to brutal tortures by imprisoning them in his house. His wife and Saoba – the village idiot is terrorized beyond measures by the cruelty of Imlichuba. The house for them becomes a psychological freedom curtailing their rights to live a life peace. The violence of the outer world in the story intrudes the hearts and minds of these two marginalized characters. However towards the end of the story we see the emergence of the emphatic feminine spirit with the simple housewife emerging one fine day from her bedroom and challenging the cruel ways of her husband.

In '*The Last Song*' innocent villagers who had gathered to inaugurate a new church in their village are shot down by the army. Images of violence in the form of burning the church, killing of innocent men and women, raping of young girls pervade the story. In the story a young girl named Apenyo defies the violent nature of the Indian army by singing vehemently. At the inauguration ceremony Apenyo unlike other members of the choir is not frightened by the violent manner of the security forces, in the midst of the violence which is being perpetuated upon the ordinary villagers Apenyo bursts in a song. She sings her heart out as to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to heaven (Ao, 2005, p. 28). In the end she along with her mother is raped and killed by the army. Yet it is the last song which defies death and immortalize Apenyo. The villagers remember preserve the memories of her last song and equates it with the "voice of the earth and the wind" (Ao, 2005, 32). The story ends with the image of an old story teller recalling the last song of Apenyo and transmitting its essence to the young generation. Apenyo's last song is indeed a song of vehement resistance to the masculine might of the army. Although her body has been inscribed with the violence of the army yet her spirit remains undaunted. Storytellers therefore must tell her story and portray the sacrifices women have undergone so as to define their homes. "Youngsters of today have forgotten how to listen to the voice of the earth, and the wind" (Ao, 2005, 73) exclaims the storyteller recounting Apenyo's plight. Apenyo's song of resistance against the violence unfolding in the courtyards of her home is an inspiration for the young generation to follow.

The story "*The Night*" critiques social realities which subjugates women. Imnala in the story is an outcaste as result of giving birth to two illegitimate children from two different man. In her union with two man she becomes a symbol of rebuke while the two man with whom she had relationship walk away unconcerned. Ostracized by the society, Imnala decided not be dependent on any male and brings up her two children on her own. She aspires to complete her education and get a job.

What is remarkable about the story is the way Imnala's body becomes a site of contestation. Traditional notion of chastity and purity clash with the independent nature and inner desires of Imnala. Pushed to the extreme, the narrative provides Imnala with a resolve to work towards self awareness and independence. She takes the reins of her life in her own hands and even goes on the defy the dictates of the patriarchal village council and carve a space of her own which is free from physical as well as emotional violence.

## Conclusion

As a home, Nagaland therefore it seems is fraught with a socio-political tensions. It is on one hand a repository of traditional values and memories, on another home reveals the vulnerability of a culture in a world which is rapidly changing. Nagaland, as it emerges in the stories of Ao is a home formed out of a perpetual dialogue between the changing forces of modernity represented by events such as proselytization, modernization, insurgency and the past represented by its myths, rituals and art. Like Salman Rushdie who argues that writing about one's homeland implies conjuring up the memories of the past, Ao too revisits the binding memories of her homeland and constructs an idea of home by intricately linking it with the present (Rushdie,1991, 10).

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