

# Tribes in Transition: Representation of Conflict in Temsula Ao's Short Fiction

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore representation of conflict from the standpoint of history and aesthetics. Going beyond existing approaches, the need is to examine how Indian English literary expressions from conflict zones are as much works of art as they are political statements. For the purpose we shall examine the short fiction of Temsula Ao, a woman writer from Nagaland.

*Keywords:* Conflict, Short-fiction, History, Humanism, Aesthetics.

The phrase 'Tribes in Transition' is an entry point into the Indian English fiction of the Naga writer Temsula Ao. The process of transition of any society is crucial to understanding its contemporary predicament. Movement from past to the present and connection between the two time-frames is a source of many insights. Nagaland's past is characterized by conflict as is its present, though in different terms. A circumstance that had its beginning in the nineteen forties is still relevant and continues to find space in contemporary narratives; this establishes the significance of the particular aspect of Naga history.

While Ao's engagement with the dynamics of the violent phenomenon is primarily rooted in the twentieth century, the issues that first fuelled militarization in Nagaland continue to surface even now though in a changed form. Her short stories then, put in perspective a decisive part of the Naga reality, contributing to a complex understanding of the present. As we explore the political dimension of writings from militarized societies, it is equally crucial to address their aesthetic aspect. The latter being an underexplored facet, this paper seeks to weave together an understanding of both, the political and the aesthetic in Temsula Ao's short fiction.

Conflict in Northeast India comprises a common ground of concerns, while each region has a specific dynamic of conflict it witnesses. Broadly stating, the concerns of preserving indigenous identity and resenting a biased treatment by the nation's 'mainland' are some reasons behind conflict in each region of Northeast India. Temsula Ao, a Naga writer of short fiction, engages with issues in Nagaland in particular. She discusses the atmosphere of unrest in the region and the way it has been impacting common people's life. Problematic actions of the state forces and the way life transpires in the region despite conflict are some concerns Ao engages with.

In her short stories, both political and the aesthetic aspect of conflict become evident. One may note that oftentimes, it is the political that takes the center-stage in discussions of literature from troubled regions. However, it is equally important to look at the way the aesthetic of such narratives is impacted by the circumstance of unrest, leading to new definitions of form and beauty. This paper will explore representation of conflict in Ao's fiction, with focus on both the concerns of history and those of the aesthetic. For this

purpose, Temsula Ao's two short-story collections *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) and *These Hills called Home: Stories from a Warzone* (2005) shall be taken up for analysis.

### **Nagaland in Ao's fiction**

Temsula Ao's short stories are largely based in villages of Nagaland, often moving to the town of Mokokchung and other urban centers. Villages have councils that comprise men. Women are conspicuous by their absence in structures of decision-making. In the village, people are seen working in the fields and those who move to towns join government offices—some join the police, others become government contractors. One also finds that nature has a distinct presence in the lives of the people in the region. In Ao's fiction, one finds mention of long winding roads in the hills, dense forests through which the insurgents are seen making their way and laburnum flowers growing in the cemetery. There is also a strong sense of community amidst people; they have close-knit relationships. In situations of violence perpetrated by insurgents or the security forces, people act together. Society is one big unit where people do not shy away from advising each other or even discuss others' life amongst themselves. Cultural details about folk songs, community celebrations, that find mention in Ao's fiction, make us aware of the vivid social dynamics of the Nagaland.

However, in sharp contrast to this is the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. The circumstance is made stark by violence caused by the insurgents and that which is unleashed during the counterinsurgency operations of the government forces. In this extremely polarized circumstance, common people face the dilemma of who to side with. Remaining neutral is not an option; on occasions a village is seen supporting the insurgents' cause by paying them taxes and other times one witnesses informers who reveal information about the insurgents' whereabouts to the government. These vivid details are engaging, acquainting the reader with the felt-experience of those bearing the brunt of conflict.

History of the circumstance of unrest in Nagaland goes back to the times when India was under the British dominion. Nagas were a community of people living in harmony in different villages. Each village was sovereign and had a village elder as a figure of authority. Natives of the region did not wish to be a part of the Indian mainland after independence from the British. They even expressed this concern to the Simon Commission.

The club [Naga Club in Pre-independence times] submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929, in which it stated that the Nagas and the people of mainland India had nothing in common between them. Therefore it would benefit both to stay separate and form their own political entities when the British left India. (Goswami 91)

This fact their being unable to identify themselves with the country's mainland, was one of the initial reasons that fuelled the desire for independence in the Naga tribe. They wished for a separate Naga nation. However after the British left, the region then called the Naga Hills, was incorporated as a district of Assam, much against the wishes of the people in the region. In 1951 these people conducted a plebiscite in which majority of the people voted for having an independent nation of their own. This, when communicated to the government, was not met with immediate approval and gave rise to the conflict that has got no decisive answer since then. With time, the dissenting members of the tribes organised themselves into insurgent groups<sup>2</sup> to fight for the 'cause'.

### Tribes in Transition

History is a process, where past, present and future are not mutually exclusive entities. Instead, when considered together, they weave a perspective that is nuanced. First story relevant in this context is "The Last Song". Postscript of the story comprises an old woman telling a tale to a group of youngsters who are home for vacations. This setting immediately makes one aware of the figure of the grandmother as a link between the past and the present, where the present is symbolized by the young people. She asks them to listen to the sound of a peculiar wind that is blowing from the graveyard. But the youngsters are unable to listen to it. The narrator says,

At first the youngsters are skeptical and tell her that they cannot hear anything and that such things are not possible, but the old woman rebukes them by saying that they are not paying enough attention to what is happening around them. (Ao, *These Hills* 32)

This incident makes us aware of the writer's thoughts on the current situation in Nagaland vis-a-vis its youngsters and their role in this indelible violent reality of the region. For education or employment, the youngshif from villages to other cities within the region or to different other parts of the country. This going away, in the context, seems to have caused a certain disconnect with the community's customs and more importantly with its past. They need to be brought back in touch with the experience and emotion of their own people, who acted with courage in the event of painful challenges. In the story, wind blowing from the graveyard is a symbol of knowledge of the turbulent past and sacrifices of those who lost their life while grappling with atrocities unleashed during the militarized conflict in their homeland. The particular incident referred to here is one around which the story "The Last Song" is woven—"That Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children." (Ao, *These Hills* 33)

One notices a certain anxiety in the writer about preserving an aspect of their experience that seems to be fading away with time. She uses the mode of story-telling to reinstate those memories and make them available to subsequent generations. In the narratives of conflict, there is a pressing need to concretize past struggles and preserve memory. Fiction then becomes a source of creating parallel historiography, where events are worked out objectively and truth shines forth. The process of transition lays bare anxiety about this need to memorialize and preserve the experience of the collective struggle of the Nagas.

Additionally, 'transition' and the allied framework of past and present bring up the question of tribal customs. Self-determination is at the centre of conflict and indigenous culture is crucial to identity. Culture comprises beliefs, practices, celebrations, language, narratives and songs of a group of people that capture the emotion and ethos unique to a group of people. These elements serve as a binding force. People are knit together in a framework of shared values. And it is this shared aspect of experience that a community holds on to in times of collective crisis.

In case of Northeast India, assertion of culture is of particular importance as its representation strikes at the root of the stereotypical image of the region constructed around conflict. This part of the country has come to be defined, as it were, by violence, unrest and instability. Insurgency and the counterinsurgency operations have become the only lens through which the region is viewed. And this limited approach of viewing people is problematic. Tamsula Ao's fiction sufficiently addresses this concern and seeks to undo it, even as it engages with the compelling reality of resistance in the region. Her

narratives forge a parallel image of Nagaland where its people, their character, beliefs and habits come alive. Representation of culture then serves as a political tool in the hands of the indigenous writer for asserting that which often gets obliterated by the discourse of politics or conflict.

There is also a flipside to the way cultures and traditions operate in such cases. As evident in the recent developments in the region, men are having recourse to tradition in order to protest against 33% reservation for women in the local body polls.<sup>3</sup> While in one case tradition strengthens the contemporary discourse of identity, it is the same parameter that acts as a hindrance to the movement forward of the very same people. Even as past is an important feature in understanding and shaping one's present, an uncritical adherence to its diktats is problematic.

### Exploring Insurgency during Conflict

Naga insurgency, one of the issues pertinent to the political context of Temsula Ao's fiction, began as early as 1946 with the formation of Naga National Council (NNC). This group rallied for rights over their land, including legislative and executive powers; a denial of the same, fuelled the desire for Naga independence. Second major event in the Naga insurgency was the Shillong Accord of 1975.<sup>4</sup> This caused a split in the movement and gave rise to opposite outfits within the Naga rebel movement- NSCN (K), that is the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) and NSCN (IM) where IM stands for Isak-Muivah. The separation was based on differing views of the leaders Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Swu and S.S. Khaplang.

Along with the existence of local rebel movements, counterinsurgency operations by the Indian State added another dimension to the conflict in the Northeast. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958) is the case in point. The government deployed army in the region to curb insurgent activity. But the act raised more issues than it solved. In extreme situations, the said act granted immunity to army personnel that gave rise to incidents that people in the region strongly opposed. Further, the army's presence in the state was a blow to people's constitutional rights. What were the special powers granted to the armed forces? This can be understood by a statement of the Manipur MP in 1958 Sri. L. Achaw Singh. He said, "This is a black law...How can we imagine that these military officers should be allowed to shoot, to kill and without warrant, arrest and search? This is a lawless law." (qtd. in Naorem 5)<sup>5</sup> The exercise of power by this state machinery brought to light some instances where common people were victims of questionable conduct of the army personnel.

Scenes of violence, both from the government and the insurgents are present in Temsula Ao's narratives. Under attack are the forces that curb freedom, free expression and peace:

The subject of independence became public talk; young people spoke of the exploits of their peers' in encounters with government forces and were eager to join the new band of 'patriotic' warriors to liberate their homeland from 'foreign rule'. (Ao, *These Hills* 3)

This quotation from the story "The Jungle Major" highlights one of the most essential sentiments behind insurgency in the region— the feeling of alienation. The words 'foreign rule' and 'patriotic' are striking and convey the exact sentiment, giving rise to insurgency. Nagas did not associate with the idea of 'India' and felt like outsiders. The government's presence felt like "foreign rule". Further, it also brings out the absence of belonging to the Indian nation and reflects on the sentiment evoked in people due to the way they are

treated by the powers that be that it felt like 'foreign rule' even as they were in their own land. This has resulted in a movement for self-determination giving rise to a situation of confrontation between the national army and the group of Nagas who resolved to organize themselves for the 'cause'. In the above excerpt Ao refers to them as 'patriotic warriors'. This elaborates on the demand of Nagas for a separate nation of their own. Tamsula Ao brings out this context in this story and others.

At one point while Tamsula Ao depicts insurgency from the perspective of the Naga natives, highlighting the source of such feelings, another approach adopted by her depicts insurgency and the conflict from the perspective of common people. Her fiction makes us aware of three broad categories of people and the three different standpoints from where conflict can be understood. These three groups are the insurgents, the authorities and the common people. While these narratives acquaint us with the discourse of the organized outfits of people who demand independence of their land, at the same time a parallel understanding of this reality emerges from the text. The insurgents demand a separate state so they may live as a community without any apprehension of their interests being compromised due to an over-arching narrative of the nation. They seem to be working in the interest of their own people. However, the means that they deploy is quite ironic to their avowed motives.

People whom they are fighting for are the ones who have to face the brunt of daily violence. In particular, their mode of tax collection comes to light in the narratives. In the story "The Letter", the narrator states, "Such acts of blatant extortion from the so-called 'national workers' was not a new thing for the simple villagers" (Ao, *Laburnum* 55). And those who fail to comply with this demand, for whatever reason, are met with violence. In this case then, these groups fighting for the cause of their people, against a universalizing narrative of the nation, are they not themselves giving rise to an order that is against their own demands? These scenes of violence evoke a sense of horror. What is at stake in a circumstance infested with torture and destruction? Innocence, faith, sense of security, harmony, and capacity to feel for fellow men is sacrificed in the face of such brutal atrocities. Basic conditions for leading a fruitful life stand sacrificed. One wonders then that progress, for which the insurgents are fighting, can it be ever achieved under such sub-human circumstances? These questions seem to arise as Ao's fiction paints a gruesome reality of humanity being slaughtered at the altar of violence and conflict.

### **State and its Contentious Role in Conflict**

State and its various forms come under scrutiny in Ao's fictional representations. The army, police and the government are some structures whose activity is represented in her stories. One of the first is the security force deployed by the government to keep what they call 'rebellion' in check. They are always curious for any information about the hideouts of the underground army or their activities. Any leads into that help them 'tame' these people working against the government. Even as this is done in the interest of the country, the measure adopted for the same make one think twice about such undertakings. In the story "The Jungle Major" a view of the violence unleashed by the authority is mentioned:

Some villages to which the underground leaders belonged were severely punished. The houses were ransacked by the security forces, the grain in their barns was burnt...numerous stories proliferated of women being molested by the security forces and the obstinate ones who refused to give information being severely beaten. (Ao, *These Hills* 3)

Here we notice the manner in which power goes rough shod on people, exposing the sheer irrationality of the way these structures operate. What is happening here is that violence is being perpetrated on those who are merely apprehended to be 'linked' to the underground forces. By attacking innocent people, an atmosphere of trauma and fear is perpetuated amongst people; terrorizing them and making them comply to the whims of those wielding power.

What is the threat felt by the authorities with existence of such outfits as the underground in the Northeast? Is there any harm that these groups are causing? First what comes to mind is the violence perpetrated by these groups towards government, in the form of attacking army men. However, at a larger level, such groups embody dissent, which is a bigger threat to the powers that be than physical attack by people from the underground. In the case of the Nagas the challenge posed to the authorities is in the form of self-assertion and a refusal to accept the universalizing discourse of a unified 'nation' whose dynamics are defined by a handful few at the center. Or is it the anxiety of the minority of losing their identity and getting subsumed in the larger national rhetoric? While she captures the atrocities of the Indian state and the local rebels with equal insight and intensity, one may wonder about Tamsula Ao's own standpoint. She seems to side with the exploited, hence adopting a humanist stance. In the story "A Simple Question" the narrator says, "Very soon entire land was gripped by terror unleashed both by the underground forces as well as the government soldiers." (Ao, *Laburnum* 83) The picture of trauma and atrocities presented by her has an immediate impact on the reader, making him/her feel one with the victim. Her sympathetic portrayal of the exploited is further substantiated by the fact that she presents common folk as victims of both the army and the government.

### **Ao's Humanist Standpoint**

A precedent of Ao's humanist approach lies in the objective portrayal of violence in her stories. She explores the impact of violence during conflict on both, the victim and the perpetrator. The narratives seem to convey that brutality unleashed during conflict inspires sub-human instincts which at times shock even the perpetrator. In the story "The Last Song", from the collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a Warzone* (2005), the army Captain who brutally rapes the young girl Apenyo and her mother, is himself found in the mental asylum as the narrative draws to a close. Similar predicament is depicted in the story "A Simple Question", from the collection *Laburnum for my Head* (2009). Imdongla, the young woman in the story asks the head of the army, "What do you want from us?" With this question he is visibly perturbed. The narrator says, "...the illiterate village woman had managed to unsettle his military confidence by challenging the validity of his own presence in this alien terrain" (Ao 87).

Tamsula Ao also displays faith in human courage- people's capacity to take charge and stand up against anti-human forces. In her short fiction she envisions people of the region along political lines, waging a struggle against both - the terror outfits and the homogenizing government forces. She envisions these peace loving people as becoming politicized, involving them in freedom and emancipation through fight along lines of humanist collective. In the story "A Simple Question" an illiterate woman, Imdongla, opposes army's act of whisking away her husband and other village elders merely on suspicion that they help insurgents. She goes to the army camp where they are held captive and openly questions the army personnel about their unjust act. On a larger level, Ao envisions the entire community organizing themselves against the oppressive forces.

This is evident in the story "The Letter" when the entire village gets together, forms a human wall and beats up the insurgent who had come a second time to demand money from them. (Ao, *Laburnum* 57)

### The Aesthetic of the Conflict Narratives

The aesthetic of a literary text is an essential parameter of understanding politics inherent in it. The mode of narration, emphasis, silences, gaps, contradictions, and other such devices together help a discerning reader arrive at an understanding of the standpoint from where the stories are written. Ideas are concretized when they are expressed in the written mode and the particular way of putting across a point conveys the dynamic inherent in it.

Let us begin by defining the aesthetic in fiction. One can say that the aesthetic is a feature that controls and disciplines a work, tells it where to begin, which direction to take, what to choose, and emphasize. It also involves elements deliberately kept out of the narrative or discourse. Omissions, ironically, also contribute to an emphasis of that which is opposed, criticized or rejected. In the case of Temsula Ao, her narratives always begin with a reference to the particular experience of a character. Day-to-day incidents in the life of her characters are at the center of her narratives. We never find mention of any historical figure of national importance. Instead she sees heroism in common people's lives as they confront brutal realities. In the story "The Last Song", from the collection *These Hills Called Home* (2005), the young girl Apenyo's courage is unprecedented. It shines forth on the occasion when the security forces attack a congregation of villagers. They had gathered to celebrate the inauguration of a new church in the village. Apenyo is the lead singer in the choir. But the brutality unleashed thereafter is hair-raising. As the army interrupts village celebrations, the narrator says:

Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her. Her mother...saw her daughter singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to God in heaven. (Ao 28)

Apenyo's uninterrupted song is seen to "withstand the might of the guns" (Ao, *These Hills* 28). The army which disrupts the celebrations is met with courageous resistance of first the young girl Apenyo and then the entire choir, who joins her song. The choir bursting into a song, with a reignited passion in the presence of the army dramatizes a dialogue that occurs in the moment between people and the state representatives but involves no words. Singing comes across as the villagers' way of expressing their resilience in front of the army who announced their arrival with bullets.

Broadly speaking her narratives invariably move in a direction whereby freedom, courage, justice are celebrated and forces countering these values are looked at critically. This can be seen in the above sections discussing insurgency, violence, and humanism in her fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Conflict narratives are a powerful political tool, contributing to an objective analysis of the situation and bringing to the fore aspects of reality that may be hidden otherwise. Real-life circumstance is coupled with imagination and rendered in fiction. This mode of representation is immensely enabling.

Temsula Ao's short stories add another dimension to the idea of the aesthetic in conflict narratives. In her short-fiction, beauty lies in the moments of bare emotions felt intensely. This is a unique aesthetic of conflict literature that emerges in her short-fiction. Her stories bring the reader closest to the characters by means of detailing the felt-experience of the characters. The reader feels one with their predicament. The story "Old Man

Remembers", presents the predicament of a man who was part of the insurgent group, but has now retired. The narrator says, "Though he was making a valiant effort to lead a normal life as a common villager, he could not hide the inner turmoil from his wife who would shake him awake when he groaned and moaned and sometimes even shrieked in his sleep" (Ao, *These Hills* 94). At another point when he is recounting incidents from his days in the jungle as an underground soldier, the man is unable to control his emotions. The narrator says, "Young Moa immediately went to his grandfather and wordlessly put his hands around his grandfather's emaciated shoulders. This gesture further aggravated old man Sashi's sorrow and he began to whimper loudly in his grandson's arms" (Ao 97).

Ao's narratives comprise two parallel lines of thought—that of conflict, and the one where beauty of normal life is highlighted. Intensity of experiences other than those during conflict also comes to the fore. The sense of companionship between people, their joy and confusions, their preference for nature and harmony, struggle with life's circumstance, their courage and grit among others are aspects discussed. In a militarized society, aspects of life that persist despite conflict are where beauty lies. The descriptions of nature are particularly tasteful. In the story "Laburnum for my Head", descriptions of the beauty of the laburnum flowers are immensely appealing. Phrases like "the humble Indian laburnum bush erupts in glory, with its blossoms of yellow mellow beauty" (Ao, *Laburnum* 1), "And ever May...the laburnum tree...bursts forth in all its glory of buttery-yellow splendour" (Ao 20), are a delight for the reader for it evokes beauty in sensuous detail. Representation of the ordinary felt sensations interweave with violent ones to give a unique aesthetic form to Ao's short fiction.

As observed, Ao's fiction has an aesthetic appeal, while it also works out a perspective on the Naga conflict. The Humanist stance of the writer helps create an understanding of the issue whereby violence is denounced, no matter what side it is perpetrated on and by whom. Further, Ao's manner of engagement with the conflict experience brings alive heroism of common people in the face of crisis. While being politically educative, Ao's narratives carry an artistic quality that appeals to the reader's emotions and imagination alike. And the depiction of beauty and nature further contribute to the aesthetic appeal of Ao's short fiction. One can say that Ao's writings are as much works of art as they are political statements.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> From the essay "In Guerilla Zone: The Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim—Isak-Muivah", Namrata Goswami.

<sup>2</sup> Organized Naga insurgency, one of the issues pertinent in the political context of Tamsula Ao's fiction, began as early as 1946 with the formation of Naga National Council (NNC). This group demanded Nagas' rights over their land, including legislative and executive powers; a denial of this fueled a desire for Naga independence. Active through 1940s and 50s under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo, NNC was a group majorly rallied the demand of a separate Naga nation. In January 1956, the Naga Hills District was declared a "Disturbed Area", putting it under the command of the Indian Army. And with its 'Disturbed' status, the Arms Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 became operational in parts of present-day Nagaland and Manipur

<sup>3</sup> "In January, violence erupted in Nagaland as the tribal bodies protested the state government's decision to conduct urban local body elections and reserve 33% of seats for women. The groups



claimed the move disrupted tribal customary laws that are protected under Article 371(A) of the Constitution. The protests led to a political churn and TR Zeliang stepped down as chief minister in February." (Saikia Arunabh. "As Nagaland prepares to review reservation for women in civic bodies, old faultlines surface"), November 4, 2017. From <[<sup>4</sup>South Asia Terrorism Portal, managed by Institute for Conflict Management, mentions various facts about this historic agreement between the central government of India and the insurgents. The portal outlines following outcomes of the Shillong Accord: \(1\) The representatives of the underground organizations conveyed their decision, of their own volition, to accept, without condition, the Constitution of India, \(2\) It was agreed that the arms, now underground, would be brought out and deposited at appointed places. Details for giving effect of this agreement will be worked out between them and representatives of the Government, the security forces, and members of the Liaison Committee, and \(3\) It was agreed that the representatives of the underground organizations should have reasonable time to formulate other issues for discussion for final settlement. \(From <\[http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/documents/papers/nagaland\\\_a\\\_ccord\\\_the\\\_shillong\\\_nov\\\_11\\\_1975.htm\]\(http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/documents/papers/nagaland\_a\_ccord\_the\_shillong\_nov\_11\_1975.htm\)>\)](https://scroll.in/article/855672/as-nagaland-prepares-to-review-reservation-for-women-in-civic-bodies-old-fault-lines-surface#:~:text=In%20January%2C%20violence%20erupted%20in,(A)%20of%20the%20Constitution.></a></p>
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<sup>5</sup>Sanjaoba, Naorem. "AFSPA: A Law Review", *Critical Quest*, 2014, Delhi.

<sup>6</sup>"I hear the land cry,/Over and over again/'Let all the dead awaken/And teach the living/How not to die" Temsula Ao begins her short story collection, *These Hills called Home: Stories From a War Zone*, with this epigraph. She mentions awakening of the dead and teaching those who are still living. These stories are set in a milieu with history of conflict. Such narratives serve the purpose of conveying a message to people in the present, learning lessons from past experiences of the community.

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