

Unveiling Memory Loss and Resilience: A Post-Colonial Analysis of Temsula Ao's "These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone"

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Abstract

This study analyses Temsula Ao's book *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* through an examination of the themes of memory loss and resilience among the ethnic population of Nagaland. The book comprises ten unique narratives, of which four will be closely examined using a postcolonial lens. The narratives vividly portray the longstanding conflicts and tensions spanning sixty-two years between the ethnic communities of Nagaland and the Indian authorities. The study looks at how colonialism shatters and distorts indigenous memory, causing the Naga people to experience identity fragmentation. This study analysis's themes of memory loss and resilience among Nagaland's ethnic population in Temsula Ao's book *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. The book contains ten narratives, and four will be closely examined using a postcolonial perspective. These narratives depict conflicts between Nagaland's communities and Indian authorities caused by colonialism. The study looks at how colonialism can distort indigenous memory and lead to identity fragmentation.

Keywords: Colonisation, memory, indigenous, division, distortion

Introduction

Postcolonialism is a rational investigation of historical narratives, cultural paradigms, and discursive modalities inherent to developing nations. It seeks to raise discussions on colonialist legacies and the imperative task of decolonization. The text discusses how colonization has shaped our identities and perceptions of the world. Postcolonialism investigates historical narratives, cultural paradigms, and the discourse of developing nations, aiming to engage with the legacy of colonization and the imperative of decolonization. "...the changing face of global politics with the emergence of newly independent states; in the wide-ranging re-evaluation begun in the 1980s of the exclusionary forms of western reason and in the perception of their complicity with imperial expansion and colonialist rule; in the debates that raged about empiricism and culturalism in the social sciences from the 1960s; and in the challenges to dominant discourses of representation from feminist, gay, lesbian and ethnic studies in the 1970s and 1980s." (Quayson, 2020).

Postcolonial theory examines power dynamics between the subjugated and the powerful, and critiques the legacies of Western societies. It emerged in the 1960s and gained momentum in the 1980s as a new interdisciplinary paradigm with a humanistic perspective. Postcolonial theory emerged from anti-colonial movements and aims to dismantle dominant narratives imposed by colonial powers. It provides a platform for marginalized groups to express their experiences, perspectives, and participate in various conversations and movements, thus bridging the gap between colonizers and the colonized.

Post-colonial theory studies the subaltern, marginalized by dominant power structures in society. Gayatri Spivak, an influential postcolonial thinker, enriched the term 'subaltern' and her work explored the subaltern experience. Her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", is a foundational text, shedding light on representation and power dynamics. Spivak's critical review analyses traditional representation, introducing the term "epistemic violence." Dominant discourses suppress marginalized voices, with any representation of the subaltern leading to further suppression and erasure. Despite challenges, Spivak believes in the power of the subaltern. She urges reflection on remaining power and privilege. Her subaltern theory offers a multifaceted understanding of power relationships and forms of resistance within the colonial and post-colonial context.

Temsula Ao was an Indian poet, fiction writer, and ethnographer from Nagaland. She was born in 1945 and died in 2022. In 2013, she received the "Sahitya Akademi Award" for her collection of stories titled *Laburnum for My Head*. Ao was a Professor of English at North Eastern Hill University for three decades. She was awarded the "Padma Shri" in 2007. Her works have been translated into several languages and often include semi-autobiographical themes. Her anthology *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* consists of ten tales taking place during the Naga movement. The stories follow ordinary people living in Nagaland villages disturbed by the rebellion of the state.

The author's narratives do not aim to provide a factual account of historical events or to pass judgment on the past. Rather, she argues that in such conflicts, there is no clear winner, only victims. Despite starting her writing career late in life, she published five poetry books, all titled with the word "Songs". Her works were initially published in Kolkata, but she gradually built a reputation in Pune. She is also recognized for her short stories, including *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone*, *Zubaan* and *Laburnum for my Head*. Additionally, her scholarly book published in 1989 explores the concept of an Ideal Heroine in literature through the works of Henry James. *These Hills Called Home* is a collection of interconnected short stories by Temsula Ao, a prominent literature figure from Northeast India. Published in 2016, it explores the multi-layered experiences of the Naga people in Nagaland, covering themes such as memory, cultural heritage, identity formation, and the impact of modernization on traditional practices. Ao also examines how historical events have shaped the Naga community's existence and worldview, and how individual memories intersect with broader societal narratives to shape personal identities. The book explores the collective memory of the Naga community and the lasting impact of historical events like colonialism, conflict, and displacement. The book also delves into the complex interplay between individual memories, societal narratives, and personal identities. Ao's writing style is characterized by vivid descriptions, use of symbols, and a strong sense of place. The work critically examines the aftermath of colonial rule in India, particularly in rural areas where diverse ethnic tribes were brought under the Indian empire. Ao's stories reflect on power exploitation, the loss of cultural identity, and the impact of conflict on people's lives. She traces the tension between traditional norms and modern ideologies, analysing the impact of globalization, urbanization, and Western culture on Naga society. Through her writing, Ao captures the strength and perseverance of people being put to difficult tests. Her stories incite people to reflect on and question the constructs of culture and identity.

These Hills Called Home is praised for its intricate depiction of Naga society and its diverse characters. It explores human relationships and portrays moments of happiness, sadness, love, and bravery with profound insight. The story encourages understanding of characters' struggles and cultural heritage. It highlights the abuse of power during the shift from the British to Indian Imperial system and celebrates unrecognized heroes who are called upon in times of crisis. The essay discusses memory loss and resilience in postcolonialism, using Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* to explore the struggles and victories of the Naga people of Northeast India. It examines how the legacies of colonization continue to impact identities while highlighting the resilience and empowerment of minority groups. The study contributes to postcolonial discourse by emphasizing the importance of decolonization and cultural revitalization in overcoming colonial oppression's lasting consequences. The book discusses memory loss and resilience in postcolonialism, using Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* to explore the struggles and victories of the Naga people of Northeast India. It examines how the legacies of colonization continue to impact identities while highlighting the resilience and empowerment of minority groups. The study

contributes to postcolonial discourse by emphasizing the importance of decolonization and cultural revitalization in overcoming colonial oppression's lasting consequences. Exploring how characters in literary works address memory loss can provide a deep understanding of how colonialism has affected both individual and collective psyches. Examining the portrayal of memory loss in Ao's works brings out the severe psychosocial and emotional scars caused by colonialism. Indigenous people often undergo the process of being erased and having their stories silenced in colonial or post-colonial contexts. By reviewing the issue of memory loss in Ao's literary works, it is possible to emphasize the need to reclaim and safeguard indigenous stories, which is critical in the process of decolonization. Ao's work pays tribute to the determination of the people of Naga and highlights how oppressed groups assert their cultural identity. Analysis of memory decay and the capacity to reclaim in *These Hills Called Home* allows us to gain insight into the persisting impacts of colonial domination on individual and communal stories while acknowledging the resilience and empowerment of the marginalized in their quest for cultural reawakening and self-determination.

The study aims to understand the subaltern elements among the ethnic people of Nagaland as depicted in Temsula Ao's book *These Hills Called Home*. The objectives are to investigate the use of memory and loss as narrative devices, analyse the strategies of resilience, place the themes within the subaltern theory framework, and explore indigenous perspectives on memory, loss, and resilience within Naga culture and literature.

Scholarly analysis of *These Hills Called Home* by Temsula Ao has explored themes of memory loss and resilience, but has not applied subaltern theory to the postcolonial context. Further research is needed to understand the complexities surrounding memory loss and resilience of marginalized individuals in the postcolonial landscape depicted in Ao's work. This could contribute to a better understanding of agency, resistance, and identity formation within the subaltern context in postcolonial narratives.

This research aims to analyse themes of memory loss and resilience in Temsula Ao's "These Hills Called Home" through a postcolonial and subaltern lens. It intends to reveal how memory loss functions as a tool of colonial erasure, while exploring how resilience becomes a form of resistance and survival for subaltern subjects. The study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power, agency, and resistance in postcolonial literature.

Analysis and Discussion:

Each Naga tribe has its own unique language, customs, and traditional attire, which are all essential components of Naga identity. Unfortunately, the forced displacement of Naga villagers by the Indian military has led to further displacement and disillusionment among the Naga people. Weaving is also important to Naga culture, symbolizing strength. Ethnic identity and territorial sovereignty involve ownership, self-determination, and autonomy. Sovereign lands are fundamental to expressing ethnic identity, with territorial boundaries tying together cultural and ethnic bonds. Therefore, the Armed Forces' invasion of their ancestral lands endangers Naga identity and fuels the separatist movement. In *These Hills Called Home* Temsula Ao tells the story of the Nagas' struggle for self-governance since the 1950s. The marriage of Punaba and Khatila caused controversy in their village due to their differences, but they enjoyed a happy marriage until Punaba joined the Naga resistance movement. Khatila remained strong despite constant police surveillance and intimidation. The entire village supported the movement for the restoration of land and sovereignty, led by *The Jungle Major*. However, their happiness was short-lived.

‘It was after a year or so of Khatila’s marriage that the entire land was caught in the new wave of patriotic fervour that swept the imagination of the people and plunged them into a struggle, which many did not even understand’ (Ao 2)

Indian military personnel intruded and interrogated Katila and Punaba about Punaba's location. Katila disguised Punaba as a house helper with ash and torn clothes, allowing them to evade capture. The army assumed a power dynamic between Katila and Punaba. Punaba carried a water basket on his head, diverting attention from his true identity. The army couldn't find Punaba, and Khatila said he was mute. Punaba's mild build allowed them to

conceal their true identity. The captain was left perplexed, obscuring the truth to their benefit. The "mismatched couple" faced many challenges in navigating the dangers of a well-constructed farce. Their quick thinking, intellect, and keen cognition helped them in facing difficult times. Punaba's simple appearance masked her strategic planning and imagination in steering them clear of disaster. In Nagaland, land is entwined with cultural identity, and Temsula Ao often interrogates nationalism in her literary works. The Nagas' identity is linked to ownership and stewardship of the land. Even the remotest village becomes an integral part of the movement that defies the conventionality of nationalist struggles being confined to an urban centre or to elite circles. Indian forces invaded the ancestral home of the Nagas, and the armed forces harassed the villagers who gave shelter to these disruptive activities-oriented Nagas. Temsula AO explores and challenges the concept of nationalism within the Nagaland context, given that even the most isolated villages were actively participating in this movement.

In the story *The Jungle Major*, the military threatens the villages to provide or conceal any information about the rebels. 'The subject of independence became public talk; young people spoke of the exploit 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)

The Indian authorities have used oppressive measures to suppress the Naga movement for independence. The armed forces have raided the homes of Naga leaders and intimidated villagers who sheltered those involved in disruptive activities. Temsula Ao's stories depict the Nagas' resilience in the face of state-sponsored oppression. The stories give voice to the marginalized and challenge dominant narratives of power and control. The official army's brutal and repressive measures have led to a change in attitude among non-involved villagers who sympathize with the silent resistance groups operating in the area. The new unity is rooted in the suppression and resilience of memory, along with subaltern theory. The villagers forget past injustices and traumas, but renewed violence reignites indignation and resistance. Despite constant pressure, the villagers endorse underground resistance movements, relying on collective strength and determination. Through alliance and support with clandestine resistance groups, they challenge the authority of the state and demand recognition of their rights and dignity. The growing unity and support shown to resistance groups by previously indifferent communities sum up the themes of memory suppression and resilience. Despite being suppressed for generations, these groups remain resilient, calling on their communities to move against oppression.

In *The Last Song*, Apenyo's extraordinary singing talent is called upon for a significant event. The tale is introduced by Temsula Ao, the esteemed author.

'It seemed the little girl was born to sing.... what the mother considered unreasonable behaviour in a child barely a year old, was actually the first indication of the singing genius that she had given birth to.' (Ao 7)

Apenyo's mother had strong religious beliefs and took her daughter to church every Sunday. Apenyo's father was a great singer who passed away before finishing his teacher training. Her mother ran the farm and was an excellent weaver. Apenyo inherited her father's singing talent and became known as the "singing beauty". During the opening of a new church, the state authorities arrested those who they believed were working against national interest, causing distress to the Nagas community. The military forcibly relocated all the villagers for surveillance and monitoring. When the villagers resisted, the Indian Armed Forces used violent means. The incident exemplifies the power dynamics and resistance of the Nagas in their fight for autonomy and recognition of their rights. Despite violence and repression, the Nagas show resilience by demanding recognition of their identity and sovereignty through collective resistance. Villagers were excited and well-planned, but trouble arose when the army relocated them to unfamiliar lands for better monitoring. The Indian Armed Forces then used extreme methods to prevent them from fleeing. 'There was chaos everywhere. Villagers trying to flee the scene were either shot at or kicked and clubbed by the soldiers who seemed to be everywhere.' (Ao ix)

The text describes the tragic fate of Apenyo and her mother, raped and murdered by the Indian military. This story highlights the plight of the ordinary Naga population caught up in the war, killed both physically and morally. The responsible Captain was punished for his crime, implying a sense of divine retribution. The Nagas struggled against assimilation into the Indian Union by government forces, costing many innocent villagers their lives.

Temsula AO's stories raised questions about ethnic identity and sovereignty over land. The Nagas maintained their identity and tried hard to reestablish their ancestral home as an autonomous entity, striving to avoid assimilation into the Indian Union despite the human cost.

The narrative depicts a cycle of violence endured by Sashi and his friends during their teenage years. They faced physical violence, rape, and burning of homes, forcing them to seek refuge repeatedly. The story questions if it's possible to break free from this cycle and whether those who suffered this history have been able to free themselves from the past. The old hero wants to tell his grandchild the bitter truth of how their generation took away their teenage years, an age of blood and tears shed by countless innocent victims. Temsula Ao's *An Old Man Remembers* is a powerful narrative that explores the story of Shashi and Imli, who found themselves as soldiers deep in the jungle, fighting for survival. The story vividly captures the tremendous fear and complete desperation that overwhelmed them as they wandered around in the shadows and uncertainties of their enemy-dominated world. Despite their participation in acts of brutality as members of the clandestine army, they found themselves grappling with profound remorse for their actions. The narrative highlights the governmental emphasis on regulating and shaping the Naga populace through bio-political strategies of rehabilitation, normalization, and institutionalization. This underscores the intricate power dynamics at play in the post-colonial landscape. Sashi carries the heaviest burden of identity crisis due to the deep upheaval in Naga's internal dynamics.

The Old Man Remembers is a story about Sashi who is still haunted by the memories of his childhood friend's untimely death. Sashi and Imlikokba joined the secret army when they were young and were thrown into the world of aggression and conflict in Nagaland. Sashi's memoir illustrates the stoicism of people such as himself and Imlikokba, who were thrust into adulthood during political strife. The story reminds us to pay respect to the stories of those who were silenced or ignored and come to appreciate the importance of memory and fortitude in shaping our collective consciousness. Sashi and Imlikokba witnessed violence and oppression in their village. They were urged to flee during a chaotic incident, but Imlikokba was consumed by a desire for revenge upon seeing his injured father. This event shaped their resistance against oppressive forces. They fought for their rights and dignity, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. On that fateful day, a haunting memory was created that fuelled Sashi and Imlikokba's unrelenting determination to resist against oppressive powers. Their unyielding resilience exemplified the subaltern's spirit, refusing to be silenced by forces of dominance and power. Exhausted, they fled into the inescapable jungle, destination uncertain after days of starvation and emotional weariness, they fell into a restless sleep. They woke up to find themselves surrounded by armed people who forced them to join the Naga National Army, making them soldiers in the underground rebellion. Sashi revealed the sad truth behind the loss of their youth and innocence, taken away by tumultuous socio-political conditions.

Temsula Ao's works carry the theme of the fluid Naga crisis and explore the manifold difficulties faced by people in the midst of war. In *The Old Man Remembers*, Sashi laments the loss of his innocence and that of his friend Imlikokba.

Ao's stories show how the state dominates people's lives, as seen in *The Curfew Man*, where the government controls through force and rules. The establishment of an overnight curfew made life difficult for small towns. People could no longer socialize at night. The story also shows the divisions in Nagaland, such as the army, rebel groups, and government spies. We meet a new spy, Satemba, who became a spy due to personal factors.

"In order to detect and arrest the relatives of 'rebels' and their sympathizers, the government began to enlist recruits from the ranks of the bad elements in the towns and villages by paying them handsomely and sometimes even by threatening to reopen old criminal cases if they did not co-operate with them. These were the people who operated in the grey area between the government forces and the so-called 'freedom- fighters', some by choice and others by compulsion." (Ao, 35)

Satemba, a Naga, worked for the Indian Army while also supporting the Nagas' struggle for their homeland. As *Curfew Man*, he secretly monitored Nagas outside the curfew while betraying his community for money. The government offers employment to the Nagas at the cost of their subjugation to governmental policies, which coerces them into submission. Satemba's dilemma between income and loyalty to his ethnic origins is a poignant

example of this. The government's policies impact every facet of Naga society, from ordinary people to shadowy leaders. *The Curfewman* by Temsula Ao explores the complex identity of the Nagas, which is shrouded in ambiguity due to political and socioeconomic factors. Through various control mechanisms, the state affects the population, and the narrative delves deep into the complexities of Naga society, illustrating the interplay between insurgent groups, gangs, and people acting as spies under the banner of the state. The government tracks down and captures rebels through various methods, including inducements by way of money and force and coercion. Temsula Ao's portrayal of resilience and agency reflects the nuances around coercion, cooperation, and survival set in a post-colonial context. "*The Curfew Man*" by Temsula Ao explores issues of memory loss and resilience in a post-colonial context. Ao uses a subtle narrative style to depict the struggles of a village under strict nocturnal curfew, resulting in violent encounters between civilians and military patrols. Amidst the chaos, individuals form alliances with government forces and "freedom fighters," balancing personal agency with external pressures.

Conclusion

This analysis examines the works of Temsula Ao, focusing on selected stories such as *The Jungle Major*, *The Last Song*, *The Old Man Remembers*, and *The Curfewman*. The subaltern theory approach and postcolonial framework provide understanding of postcolonial experience in Nagaland. Ao's works document how memory loss is used as a tool of destruction by the colonial apparatus. Memory loss is an actively exercised process that feeds on the already-implemented apparatus of domination and authority. Despite memory loss and colonial oppression, Ao's works capture a resilient community that resists colonialism through storytelling, culture, and identity assertion. The subaltern perspective is the only perspective that can be taken seriously while analysing postcolonial literature. It recognizes the subtleties within power dynamics, the complexity of individual and group identities, and the strength of fringe communities.

The works of Temsula Ao and other postcolonial authors provide valuable lessons on the enduring legacy of colonialism and the endless battle for decolonization and liberation. The subaltern perspective and postcolonial interpretation help unravel the complicated web of postcolonial dealings within Nagaland and recognize the resilience of fringe groups in the face of historical injustice. *The Jungle Major* explores the erosion of resilience and memory experienced by indigenous communities under colonial rule. Using the subaltern theory, we can interpret the protagonist's Alzheimer's disease as a reflection of cultural amnesia imposed by colonial powers. The protagonist's acts of resilience through oral traditions help to reclaim their cultural identity and defeat erasure. This perspective provides insight into the dynamics of colonial oppression and the resilience of indigenous cultures. In *The Last Song*, Temsula Ao meets the themes of memory loss, colonial displacement, and resilience in the narrative and, thus, displays her poetic expression toward what has been lost from the collective memory of the indigenous due to colonialism. We consider here themes of memory loss, colonial displacement, and resilience and realize how power and resistance dwelled in the colonial context. The protagonist's reflection of a loss of homeland and cultural heritage gives a critical view on the wide-range repercussion of colonial displacement. Subaltern theory is premised on the fact that colonizers silenced indigenous voices and experiences, hence colonized history and traditions were forgotten in the dominant narrative. Therefore, in the story *The Last Song*, the feelings of loss and dislocation of the protagonist are directly the results of intrusion and forced assimilation policies without any warrant. Now that subalternity has become the major element in making pain, loss, and displacement heard and acknowledged, it also becomes a subaltern strategy that challenges erasure by the colonial powers through storytelling. In performance, the protagonist saves their personal memories and lays claim to cultural identity and historical rights through storytelling.

Of course, from this subaltern perspective, there is a resilient use of narratives, allowing marginalized communities to recapture agency and counter the hegemonic colonial narrative. Through sharing their narratives and continuing to practice the cultural traditions of their community, the protagonist and the community at large defy attempts by colonial forces to silence and marginalize them. Thus, they claim and stake their tenacity, not willing to be marginalized to history's margins. Another meaning linked with storytelling involves the use of counter-memory. In this context, it presents an alternative narrative that is against the dominant and hegemonic colonial narrative. Here, the protagonist's narratives in *The Last Song* reach toward how Ao disrupts linearly the

progression of history dictated by colonial powers, showing how the complexity and nuances of indigenous experiences could never have been either linear or the simple by-product of colonialism.

The Last Song explores memory, displacement, and resilience in the colonial context. It highlights how colonialism shapes the collective memory of indigenous communities and their resistance against erasure. The subaltern voices and experiences challenge colonial legacies and lead us toward decolonization and liberation.

The Old Man Remembers by Temsula Ao is a reflective exposition on the interplay of memory, trauma, and resilience against the backdrop of colonialism. The protagonist's experiences centre on the overlooked aspect of intergenerational trauma and highlight the need for counter-hegemonic space by countering forgetting. Through the protagonist's involved storytelling, Ao challenges audiences to understand the continued effects of colonialism and the robust ways in which marginalized societies have circumvented historical wrongs done to them.

The Curfewman by Temsula Ao delves into memory, resistance, and resilience amidst state violence, surveillance, and colonization. The subaltern theory illuminates how the protagonist's experiences depict the larger patterns of marginalization and resistance during the colonial period. This short story explores the issue of memory, resilience, and resistance against colonial violence and surveillance. By using subaltern theory, the experiences with the curfew man can be interpreted as an outgrowth of systemic violence and oppression. Acts of resistance develop a subaltern counter-power against colonial authority and the assertion of the agency of the subordinated group. The preservation of cultural heritage helps the marginalized group to resist assimilation and to assert their identity. The protagonist invites us to face the legacy of colonialism and how people's resilience endures to fight against systemic violence and injustice. Temsula Ao's literary works explore the violent struggle for Nagaland's independence from Indian rule. Her stories vividly describe the raids, patrols, and ambushes of the underground Naga movement. She also popularizes Naga folk tales. The short story anthology *These Hills called home* bears powerful witness to Naga history. It describes the violence, identity crisis, oppression, bloodshed, and political unrest during the freedom struggle.

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