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Author/s	Suganya V. ¹ & Dr Padmanabhan B. ²
Affiliation	¹ Phd Research Scholar, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. ² Assistant Professor, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.
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“Transgenerational Transmission of Chosen Trauma”: Locating Micro-Experiences in Macro-Historical Events and the Quest for Cultural and National Identity in Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

Suganya V.¹ & Dr Padmanabhan B.²

¹Phd Research Scholar, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: suganya.efl@buc.edu.in.

²Assistant Professor, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: padmanabhan@buc.edu.in.

Abstract

Micro experiences of people immensely influence their personal narratives and play an undeniable role in reflecting the effects of macro-historical events. The narration of individual experiences contributes to the transgenerational transmission of historical memory and its collective experiences to posterity. Interweaving the micro experiences with macro-historical events promotes the construction of ethnic, national and cultural identities. Such individualistic narratives help in the construction of both the personal and cultural self for the macro-historical formation. This paper aims to interpret the select short stories from Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* for manifesting transgenerational transmission of the memories of Naga insurgency incidents and the collective traumatic experiences through the micro experiences of the characters. The storytellers in the select stories such as “The Last Song” and “An Old Man Remembers” situate themselves as historical subjects to relay the stories of protracted armed conflicts, political instability, and civilian casualties that occurred in the Indian state Nagaland during the years of insurgency. Hence, through careful analysis, this paper provides the relevance of transgenerational transmission of chosen trauma and the role of storytelling technique to preserve and transfer the endurance of the past through narratives.

Keywords: transgenerational memory, chosen trauma, Naga identity, oral narratives, Nagaland

I hear the land cry,
Over and over again
'Let all the dead awaken
And teach the living
How not to die'
Temsula Ao

1. Introduction

This paper aims to demonstrate the significance of storytelling for the transgenerational transmission of Naga insurgency memories as chosen trauma for establishing Naga identity as rendered in “Last Song” and “An Old Man Remembers” from *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. It also highlights the necessity of transferring the Naga cultural history to young generations and the role of personal experiences in reflecting the collective sufferings. Previous

studies focused more on sexual violence against women during times of conflict, patriarchal biases and how the traditionally established patriarchal structure silences the agony of women in the Naga community, as expressed in *These Hills Called Home* (Arora 2019; Pou 2020a; Maut 2020). Besides, few studies have concentrated on the portrayal of ethnic and broken identities, postcolonial identity, revival of lost identity, the theme of insurgency and the role of literature in carrying the Naga history in *These Hills Called Home* (Longkumer 2014; Kamal 2019; Gogoi 2019; Borkotoki 2014). Therefore, this study critically analyses the characters as historical subjects and the individual’s role in transmitting the historical truth to posterity through the storytelling tradition of Naga culture.

The Naga people in north-eastern India encountered multiple perilous circumstances and precarious living conditions during the ruthless implementation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in 1958. Since their protest for Naga national identity, they experienced diverse security threats, including sexual harassment, civil casualties, kidnapping, violence, and demolition of public and private assets. The contribution of North-eastern literature is significantly influential in communicating collective, cultural and individual tribulation and representing tribal cultural values, history, beliefs and tradition. Temsula Ao, in her narratives in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, instils the micro-experiences of Naga people in the characters to reverberate the macro-historical realities of Nagaland. She highlights the wrath and inefficiency of the armed forces in distinguishing the insurgents from the common people and their punitive expedition to punish innocent people for helping underground leaders. As a result, Ao (2006) once stated that the Naga people are “restricted from their routine activities, demonstrating to them that the ‘freedom’ they enjoyed could so easily be robbed at gun point by the ‘invading’ army” (p. 11). She continues to situate her characters as historical subjects and invests the themes of violence, memory, trauma, vehemence, vulnerability, homeland, and history in the narrative to promote the transgenerational transmission of Naga culture and the traumatic experiences of insurgency to the posterity. The stories in the book are intertwined with history, ethnic elements and fiction in order to reflect cultural authenticity and retain and render the richness of storytelling technique. By implementing oral aspects in the narrative structure, Ao engenders cultural rebirth and imparts new status to her community and the woman folklore. She also explains that during troubled times, “there are no winners, only victims and the result can be measured only in human terms” (2006, p. x). “The Last Song” and “An Old Man Remembers” are the two redolent stories, like other stories in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, entrenched with the facets of orature which stir cultural consciousness and further exude civil unrest, indignation, exploitation of power, human rights violations, cultural and historical ignorance of younger generations in the community.

2. The Story of Pain

“An Old Man Remembers” is a poignant story about the jungle life of Sashi and his friend Imli. Sashi recounts the violations of human rights that happened during the Naga insurgency to his grandson Mao. Sashi debilitates through time, and his memory is fraught with the experiences of his early years. He prefers to live alone after his wife’s death and conceals his darkest life history in the jungle with his friend Imli from his family members. Therefore, Sashi’s remembrance of the

past is a solitary activity. As a result of withholding the past and resistance to sharing the truth behind the history, Sashi's grandson Mao unknowingly questions him like a murderer:

"...'Grandfather, is it true that you and grandfather Imli killed many people when you were in the jungle? Old man Sashi was completely taken aback by the question". (Ao, 2006, p. 92)

Sashi and Imli were the Naga freedom fighters who fought to preserve their people's lives during the troubled times of ethnic violence. Through his question, Mao marks them as killers instead of freedom fighters because Sashi has never attempted to share his past life. Thus, Sashi understands the validity of Imli's words that the inevitable responsibility of older generations is to transfer the history and their experiences to the younger generations through his grandson's question. Ao posits through her narrative that the memories of younger people will be the next historical and cultural agents obliging to preserve and transfer the cruelty endured by their ancestors to attain cultural individuality and political freedom in the homeland: "Imli had often told him that the young had the right to know about the people's history and that they should not grown up ignorant about the unspeakable atrocities that they, the older generation had witnessed". (Ao, 2006, p. 93)

Sashi believes that the past would always be pointless to the youngsters of his community, and it is already dead. Now, he regrets it because "...his grandson was hurling a question at him from the other side of history" (Ao 2006, p. 93). He, thereby, recognises the responsibility of telling and imparting the past experiences and endurance to Mao. Eventually, he musters up his courage and energy to relay the historical truth to his grandson Mao who had misunderstood his own community's history. The act of Sashi implies that if people fail to pass on history, the future may misrepresent or alter the truth of a historical event. So, history is created not to die but to traverse through generations and to reverberate its role in their collective identity because "When one's history is abolished, one's identity ceases to exist as well" (Laub 67). Thus, Sashi gives re-birth to his dead past experiences. The question of Mao acts as a motivation for Sashi to unload his traumatic experiences that happened during the struggle for Naga sovereignty with underground groups through remembering: "I should tell you these stories because only then will young people like you understand what has wounded our souls" (Ao 98).

Sashi realizes the necessity of sharing the historical moments with young people like Mao and prepares himself to relive the intense pain of physical and emotional suffering experienced during the insurgency. Temsula Ao implies through her narrative that Naga history does not reflect the regular day-to-day life incidents; it unfolds the incidents containing solid emotions, feelings and struggles, and it is the crucial source for who they are as a group. Therefore, history should not be a static memory; it should be an active element to impart cultural and human values to own people. Sashi conveys to his grandson that Imli, and he witnessed the chaotic condition of people in their village at their young age. They have witnessed the cruel incident of Imli's father being caught up by the army and beaten to death. At that time, they were children and defenceless; hence they had to leave Imli's father to the mercy of God in order to protect themselves from the soldiers. Sashi relays the incident to Mao with great agony and feels guilty.

“It was the sentry and some soldiers wearing heavy boots and helmets were beating him up...I realized why Imli was behaving in this manner: the inert man on the ground was his father ... Imli began to whimper like a hurt animal” (Ao 99).

Sashi and Imli were held as hostages by the insurgent groups for several months while attempting to escape from the Armed Forces. And then the groups recruited them to revolt against the Indian army. The violent intervention of the Armed Forces forced Sashi and Imli to enroll themselves in underground activities such as spying, collecting food and other essentials from the village people. They are also involved in combats to protect the village people, “And do you know? We were not yet sixteen when we became such ruthless killers” (Ao, 2006, p. 108).

The protracted conflict between armed personnel and underground Naga soldiers resulted in severe economic consequences and civil casualties. The Naga people were subjected to terrible experiences and forced to find shelter in the jungle in order to save the lives of their families. The army exploited their special powers by committing physical violence, plundering the villages, uninformed raids and rape (Arora 2019; Srikanth and Thomas 2005). Therefore, young people like Imli and Sashi began to revolt against the army. They were the victims-turned insurgents who worked for the underground Naga groups to protect their people. American Psychiatric Association in a report state that “a traumatic event is one in which an individual experiences, witnesses, or learns that a close associate has experienced an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury or other threat to one’s physical integrity” (2000, p. 463).

Witnessing the distressing event of Imli’s father being brutally attacked evoked feelings of fear and helplessness, marking it as a traumatic experience for them and aroused hostility towards the Indian army. Moreover, the inability to protect Imli’s father from the violators created a deep feeling of guilt. Herman (2015) explains that “feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience” (54). Similarly, Sashi has been living with immense guilt for his inability to protect the older adult, Imli’s father. Yoder (2015) elucidates that trauma cannot be limited to the individual; it can be exposed at the collective and cultural levels. Sashi’s encounter with devastating incidents during his young age is not only the representative of the individual psyche but also the representative of collective Naga psyche and Naga historical moments. K B Veio Pou (2018) claims,

“Those were the days when villages in remote parts of Naga areas bore the burnt of the onslaught of the Indian soldiers who would mercilessly lash out at the innocent Naga villagers to avenge the humiliation suffered at the hands of the Naga underground”. (“Charting a Space of Their Own”, para. 38)

The eruption of conflict between the Indian army and the insurgents forced people to live in fear and led to protracted internal displacement. The unanticipated spate of random bombing, gunshots, rapes and killings forced them to move from their villages and live in dark jungles. Sashi remembers that after the entry of the Indian army into his village, people left the place and shifted to the safe places in the wilderness. The village has been demolished and stands as a symbol of the death and suffering of the Naga people. Ao narrates the cruel sufferings of the people as,

...youth was a seemingly endless cycle of beatings, rapes, burning of villages and grain-filled barns. The forced labour, the grouping of villages and running from one hideout to another in the deep jungles to escape the pursuing soldiers, turned young boys into men who survived to fight these forces, many losing lives in the process and many becoming ruthless killers themselves. (Ao, 2006, p. 93)

In the Guideline Principles on Internal displacement, the Office of the High Commissioner for the Human Rights (OHCHR) explains the factors causing displacement as,

People forced to flee or leave their homes – particularly in situations of armed conflict – are generally subject to heightened vulnerability in a number of areas... They also remain at high risk of physical attack, sexual assault and abduction, and frequently are deprived of adequate shelter, food and health services.

The people of Sashi's village abandoned the place due to the high risk of physical violence, abduction, uninformed raids, forced labour and humiliation. Many young people sacrificed their lives for the well-being of their community and involved in underground activities against the armed forces. It takes years to restore normalcy in their homeland. In the present day, Mao, Sashi's grandson, lives a comfortable life with adequate essentials owing to the sacrifice of many people like Imli and Sashi.

Human memory is very much vulnerable and can corrupt an individual's past experiences with time. Instead of restoring accurate information, it may reconstruct and provide a summary of the events. Several studies have discovered that human memory involves constructive processes and relays the interpretation of the past (Bartlett 1932; Conway and Pleydell 2005; Nelson 1993). However, Kolk and Hart state that: "some memories are fixed in the mind and are not altered by the passage of time, or the intervention of subsequent experience". (1995, p. 172)

Thus, Sashi remembers the past vividly even in his old age, and he can still recollect and reflect on the social condition of people during the period of insurgency. Manzanero and Recio (2012) state that remembering traumatic experiences may differ from person to person. Some can vividly recall past traumatic situations, and some remember their past in a fragmented manner. Therefore, Sashi's remembrance of the past indicates that the emotionally charged events are retrievable because he continuously recalls through nightmares and remembers the people associated with the event. However, his memories of the past negatively influence and make a high emotional impact on Sashi's cognitive processes.

After all these years, he can remember and narrate the incidents in elaborative and evocative ways, though he tries to forget them. Remembering and re-telling the past are highly effective methods for alleviating the agony of the past (Ringel and Brandell, 2011). But Sashi, in "An Old Man Remembers," believed that "...the bad things will go away if one does not talk about them" (Ao, 2006, p. 93), and thereby his pain is excruciating and immutable. If the victims of war, violence, and abuse cannot cope with traumatic situations, they may undergo severe cognitive effects that affect their day-to-day lives. The inability to handle the trauma engenders relentless post-traumatic reactions, thereby the memories of them continue to be active and perturb the individuals' consciousness in various forms, including flashbacks, hallucination, avoidance, insomnia and nightmares (Horowitz 1993; Erikson 1995; Manzanero and Recio 2012). In "An Old

Man Remembers,” Sashi could not recover from the physical and psychological wounds inflicted on him and his people. The long-term remembrance of traumatic experiences and his failure to handle the trauma submerged for years disturbed his psychosocial well-being. Ao portrays the condition as,

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 often shake him awake when he groaned and moaned and sometimes even shrieked in his sleep. Many times he would wake up crying and screaming because of his bad dreams... (Ao, 2006, p. 94)

Even after the declaration of the ceasefire, Sashi struggles to return to normality like other people. Unconsciously, he cries and mourns by thinking about the past, which results in nightmares. Throughout his life, Sashi suffers from psychological trauma and has been mourning the past privately. Herman (2015) states “Remembering and telling the truth of terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims”. (1) Sashi’s attempts to narrate his past involve a robust meaning-making process and mitigate the prolonged grief. By recounting his life history to Mao, Sashi looks back and relives past experiences to locate his micro life history in the macro-Naga cultural history. His life history is not an individual’s experience; it is the experience of the whole of Nagaland.

3. **Women – The Least Weapon**

During times of conflict, women remain the most vulnerable and defenceless. The conflicting groups target women as their least weapon to defile the nobility of a community because women are considered innocent, unarmed and fragile. Physical abuses and exploitations affect them psychologically. Naga women are also not exempted from the experiences of the cruelty of conflicts and war. Arora (2019) mentions,

Physical violence, forced arrest, custodial rape, torture and sexual assault become a way of official functioning in states under AFSPA. In such a situation, women become vulnerable targets of state sponsored violence. Their bodies are sexually assaulted and marked by the terminology of violence, shame and honor. (p. 4)

“The Last Song” is the heart-wrenching story of Apenyo and her mother Libeni, who are physically maimed during turbulent years. The story renders the predicament of women in the hands of marauding soldiers who have sexually assaulted the mother and daughter as a punishment for paying taxes to the insurgents. Ao brings life to the unheard voices through her narrative.

“...even though by the time of the fourth one mounted, the woman was already dead. Apenyo, though terribly bruised and dazed by what was happening to her was still alive...there were witnesses to their despicable act, turned to his soldiers and ordered them to open fire on the people who were now lifting up the bodies of the two women. (Ao, 2006, p. 28,29)

The abrupt intrusion of soldiers collapses the villagers during the ceremony of opening a new church building. Men are kicked out and physically assaulted by the soldiers. Apenyo and her mother Libeni have become prey to the cold-hearted soldiers. “During those days, the villages

were often burned down, their people tortured and women sexually harassed" (Pou, 2018b). Another significant event that manifests the superficial beliefs of the community is that their own people disavow burying the inert bodies of Apenyo and Libeni in their graveyard. Because the people believe that, "the deaths of these unfortunate people were considered to be from unnatural causes and according to tradition they could not be buried in the village graveyard". (Ao, 2006, p. 30) Apenyo was praised as the nightingale of their village, and she brought tranquillity to their soul through her melodious singing. However, because of the intense fear about the armed personnel, the villagers could not protect the victims. Their profound suffering, during the darkest history of the village, was not acknowledged faithfully; instead, the villagers buried their maimed bodies outside the graveyard and "no headstones would be erected for any of them" (Ao, 2006, p. 31). Ao represents that the old beliefs and traditions are still active, even though they follow Christianity. People believed that what happened to Apenyo and her mother was a humiliation to the entire Naga community. The villagers wanted to remove the incidents from the history of their village to preserve their community and cultural dignity. Pou (2018) states,

"Sexual violence against women in war and conflict has been seen as one of the biggest crimes against humanity. It is not just a humiliation of the community but violates an individual's rights to live with dignity. Yet, time and again, "rape" has been used a weapon in war".

Therefore, Apenyo and Lebini are dishonoured by their own people. Herman (2015) states,

"When the cry is not answered, the sense of basic trust is shattered. Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life". (p. 52)

The real recognition for their sufferings and pain lies in acknowledging their agony as collective suffering and not as individual victims of an unfortunate event. The anguish of the two women was not treated as collective trauma because the villagers failed to acknowledge their pain as part of the Naga history. The experiences of men, such as physical attacks and forced labour, were portrayed in history as heroic deeds, but women's experiences were not properly registered in history because they believed that such incidents bring humiliation to their community. Ao brings to light the patriarchal structure of Naga society which treats women with much discrimination and inequality. She voices to the voiceless

An old woman narrates the story of Apenyo and Lebini to the younger generation calls the day the Black Sunday of the village: "She tells them that youngsters of today have forgotten how to listen to the voice of the earth and wind" (Ao, 2006, p. 32). The author implies that the new younger generation is oblivious to their own historical incidents. They do not lend their ears to recognise and experience past incidents and historical truth. The older woman influences young people through the storytelling technique by creating awareness about the past. The older woman and her interest in telling and retelling the experiences of Apenyo and Lebini acknowledge the struggles of women during the armed conflict.

4. **Storytelling and Transgenerational Memory**

“The history of the Nagas has turned into folklore, passed down from generation to generation through the oral tradition of storytelling.” (Gupta 2020)

The storytellers in “Last Song” and “An Old Man Remember” situate their memory in historical and cultural contexts to understand the past, experienced and witnessed by the older generations. During storytelling, “Individuals are active agents taking actions and engaging in interactions with others in their cultural environment”. (Alea & Wang, 2015, p. 5)

They intend to impart unfortunate incidents and cultural significance that persuade the listener to establish a bond with their history and cultural values. They instil the historical and cultural meaning of their past experiences and the salient elements of remembering and preserving cultural continuity. Through her narrative structure, Ao insists that storytelling is an authentic prerequisite and an inevitable medium; thereby, the younger generation does not rely on outside sources that may misrepresent their history. Temsula Ao describes,

“The inheritors of such a history have a tremendous responsibility to sift through the collective experience and make sense of the impact left the by the struggle on their lives” (2006, p. x).

“All human cultures have narratives...that encode shared beliefs from which they derive coherence and group cohesiveness that has been both the glory and the bane of human existence throughout its history.” (Nelson, 2003, p.127)

The narratives of “Last Song” and “An Old Man Remembers” encode and decode the shared experiences of people “whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged” (AO, 2006). Through storytelling, the Naga historical truth and cultural individuality traverse transgenerational people and establish the necessity to preserve the past for determining the cultural and political identity. Hence, by the act of storytelling, the individual memory turns into transgenerational memory for the travel of past to future generations.

5. **Chosen Trauma and Group Identity**

Volkan’s (2001) proposal of ‘chosen trauma’ helps readers to understand the insurgency trauma as the crucial component of Naga identity.

“... the large group suffered loss and/or experienced helplessness, shame and humiliation in a conflict with another large group. The transgenerational transmission of such a shared traumatic event is linked to the past generation’s inability to mourn losses of people, land or prestige, and indicates the large group’s failure to reverse narcissistic injury and humiliation inflicted by another large group, usually a neighbor, but in some cases, between ethnic or religious groups within the same country.” (Volkan 2001, p. 87)

The subjective experiences of thousands of people in Nagaland are interconnected by the protracted armed conflict and human rights violations. The members of the Naga group have begun to share their memory “to maintain, protect and repair their group identity” (Volkan, 2001, p. 79). By representing Naga insurgency incidents as chosen trauma, they reflect the collective suffering of ancestors during the armed conflict. The oral tradition of storytelling helps

significantly to represent the chosen trauma of Naga community “in order to support the group’s threatened identity” (Volkan, 2001, p. 79)

6. Conclusion

The paper has identified the elements of oral narratives and the lived experiences of Naga people in the short stories “Last Song” and “An Old Man Remembers” of *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* by Temsula Ao, that contribute to the transgenerational transmission of chosen trauma for the construction of collective identity of Naga people. The select stories unveil the tropes such as protracted armed conflict, violations of human rights, trauma, memory, internal displacement, feelings of guilt, sexual assault and superficial belief system prevailed in the Naga society. The story of Sashi in “An Old Man Remembers” asserts the faith that sharing traumatic experiences with others can alleviate the intensity of pain. The interpretation of select stories in this paper reveals that narrating the ethno-cultural experiences to young people is significant to preserve and pass on the historical truths in order to avoid the misrepresentation of the past. Accordingly, Temsula Ao states that through the storytelling tradition, Naga people communicate the troubled times of ethnic violence and endurance among the community and beyond in order to define their individuality. Therefore, storytelling functions as cultural memory to keep the past as present and creates a bridge to link the past with the future. Ao locates the characters Sashi, Apenyo and Libeni as historical figures in the narrative structure to represent the collective sufferings of the Naga people during the insurgency through personal narration. Thus, an individual’s memory turns into transgenerational memory through the commencement of sharing. The portrayal of the troubled years of Nagaland manifests the disruption of the cultural patterns of Naga people and its significance in forging the Naga identity. In this regard, Temsula Ao, through her writing, offers a cultural and historical recreation to the events which are unacknowledged and never mentioned in mainstream literature and history for a prolonged period of time. To conclude, the micro experiences of the characters in the stories “Last Song” and “An Old Man Remembers” reverberate the macro-historical realities of Naga people.

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Suganya V. is a PhD Scholar in the Department of English & Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore. She currently works on her thesis entitled "Narratives of Memory, Trauma, and Resilience: Contextualising the Facets of Historical Revisionism and Identity Reconstruction in the Select Contemporary Irish Novels".

Dr. Padmanabhan B. is working as Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore. He is teaching post graduate students and guiding research scholars. He is pursuing research in the fields of cognitive approaches to literature, memory studies and digital humanities.