Contemporary Literary Review India

Print ISSN 2250-3366 | Online ISSN 2394-6075

Vol. 12, No. 1

CLRI Feb 2025

Page 28-43

An Apology for "Home": Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*

Shelmi Sankhil

School of Letters, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi.

Abstract: Temsula Ao's anthology of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2005),

represents the first instance in which the varied experiences of ordinary Nagas during the peak of Naga insurgency (1950s to 1980s) are retold from the vantage point of hindsight. Ao's stories represent an attempt to contextualise the actions of Naga individuals in a way that complicates the rigid notions of right and wrong, patriot and traitor, etc., that are characteristic of Naga self-discourse about their past. The overarching premise of Ao in this revisionism is the recognition of the dynamic relation between the existential impulse of self-preservation (at the individual level) and the demands of revolutionary ideals (decided at the collective level). In Ao's conceptualisation of this dynamic, the abstracted idea of home functions as the default hermeneutical paradigm for individual action. Accordingly, in this article, Ao's stories in the anthology are read to test and explore the viability of this alternative interpretive frame for Naga literary criticism.

Keywords: Naga, Temsula Ao, hermeneutics of home, Anglophone Naga literature, conflict.

Introduction: From Memory to Text

Temsula Ao's anthology of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2005), is the earliest literary work in English by a Naga wherein the experiences of Naga people from the 1950s to the 1980s are retold from the perspective of hindsight. Ao's stories represent a bold attempt at narrating the untold atrocities and violence suffered by Nagas at the hands of the Indian state. At the time of publication of Ao's anthology, only one work of longer fiction in English by a Naga was published – Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003). However, Kire's novel is set in the late 19th century Naga Hills – present Nagaland state – and does

not concern with Naga political movement for a sovereign state in its 20th century form. So, it was unchartered terrain for Ao to write about the militarisation of the erstwhile Naga Hills by the Indian state. Ao's mediated redescription of real events in the form of fiction also represents an important commentary on the "kinds" of cultural and political violence Nagas experienced under successive powers: first the British and then India.

In fact, the twin factors of growing nationalism among Nagas and the extended armed conflict with a vastly superior India produced events and anecdotes that could be characterised as ranging from personal heroism to outright destruction of personhood, homes and villages. There are many Nagas still alive with first-hand experience of the brutalities and atrocities of the Indian state. For these Nagas, the political "solution" India has offered in the form of the creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 does not necessarily translate to finding a closure to a disrupted youth or a trauma-ridden past. Their living testimonies carry an unrivalled moral weight that is hard to outgrow and/or outlive. In fact, it is their oral accounts of those years that, in significant ways, continue to keep the flame of Naga nationalism burning. They furnish the frame through which the tumultuous period in Naga history after 1947 is remembered in the culture.

Interestingly, the British period is not accorded the same intensity of violence in Naga collective memory. Perhaps, this is because there is hardly any who is alive that has experienced British atrocities in the 19th and 20th centuries, or the subsequent Indian experience superseded anything before of a similar kind. In fact, "Japan War" – that is the native term for World War 2 in Naga collective memory – had an unprecedented destructive impact on both the material and psychological aspects of Naga experience. In Naga oral historiography, there is a before and an after of Japan War experience. However, it is extremely uncommon to hear of

incidents related to Japanese presence in Naga homeland during World War 2 that may be characterised as "traumatic". This is perhaps due to the fact that despite the unprecedented scale of destruction of some Naga areas in 1944, the whole experience lasted only for a few months. It was nothing like the armed conflict with the Indian state, which in terms of scale and intensity were sustained for decades over the entire Naga homeland in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, it is unsurprising that "generational trauma" of Nagas – Temsula Ao characterises it as the re-structuring of Naga psyche in the preamble to her anthology – exclusively concerns the Indian experience. Considered from this perspective, Ao's stories in this anthology represent an attempt to break the cycle of "inherited trauma" of Nagas by offering a sort of therapeutic catharsis in both their re-telling and reception.

It should be also noted that Ao's *These Hills Called Home* does not only recount the sufferings of Nagas at the hands of the Indian armed forces. It also problematises the whole conflict by exploring the subjectivities of some Nagas as passive sufferers and also as complicit agents of "Indian terror". Portraits of individual Nagas abandoning the collective objective for personal interests are painted as intersecting with the less-than-favourable material conditions of their existence. In this regard, Ao's focus on the domestic life of her characters and the type of home owned and aspired by them are narratorial tools for embodying the motive force of their actions. Whether the concerned individuals join the underground movement or serve the Indian establishment in various capacities, the organising normative principle for their actions is (their) home: the desire to secure a "better" home. The narrativisation of individual action as driven by a subjective motive that may not always align with the revolutionary ideals of the collective complicates and reframes the nature and memory of Naga insurgency movement as a

whole. In this regard, the focus of this article is the liminal space that is opened up by the asymmetry between individual action and collective ideals as they are rendered in Ao's stories.

When viewed from this perspective, Ao's anthology represents an attempt to contextualise the actions of Naga individuals in a way that complicates the rigid notions of right and wrong, patriot and traitor, etc., that are characteristic of Naga self-discourse about their past – especially of the period in which Ao sets her stories. The overarching premise of Ao in this revised historiography of Naga cultural memory is the recognition of the dynamic relation between the existential impulse of self-preservation (at the individual level) and the self-effacing, self-sacrificing demands of revolutionary ideals (decided at the collective level). And in Ao's conceptualisation of this dynamic, the abstracted idea of home functions as the default hermeneutical paradigm for individual action. Therefore, in this article, Ao's stories in the anthology are read to test and explore the viability of this alternative interpretive frame for Naga literary criticism. And given the relative recency of Anglophone Naga literature – especially fiction, which began in 2003 – exploring new reading frames and hermeneutical paradigms to access the layered meanings of subjective Naga experience is both necessary and inevitable.

An Apology for "Home"

The stories in Ao's anthology are essentially organised around the central theme of dislocated home and its intimate connection with the idea of a tribal or an ethnic identity. Domestic imageries of home, marriage, family and village function as reference points in this excursion into the source of the shadow that Nagas continue to contend with in the present. The traditional image of constancy and stability that home typically evokes in Naga cultural imagination is

rendered unstable by their fractured encounter with successive powers starting in the 19th century: British (colonial), Japanese encounter (World War 2), and India and Myanmar (post-British period). After 1947, the home-nonhome dialectic is primarily disrupted by the counter-insurgency programmes of the Indian army, causing widespread confusion, uncertainty and cognitive dissonance among Nagas. In the preamble to the anthology, Ao provides the context and objective of her stories: "the thrust of the narratives is to probe how the events of that era have revolutionised or restructured the Naga psyche" (x). Home as a stable category of Naga ontology, and firmly located within the boundaries of the village space, is dismantled by the widespread violence from counter-insurgency operations of the Indian establishment. Nonetheless, home is also the logic through which any form of individual or collective resistance for self-preservation is formulated and enacted into action by Nagas. In that sense, home as both an abstraction and a real entity in the village becomes a contested terrain for Nagas, and takes on physical and psychological forms in the stories. The ironic use of the word "home" in the title of the anthology is both a lamentation and a prefigurement of the "resistant actions" of the characters in order to "secure" their home: Is this a place where home can be sustained? Or could such a place marked by endless cycles of violence be called home?

The title of Ao's anthology comes from the story "An Old Man Remembers" (93). It is a poignant story of an old grandfather who wrestles with the idea of recounting his life in the Naga insurgency movement to his young, curious grandson. He eventually opens up because "it is the secret of our lost youth and also because I realise that once in a lifetime one ought to face the truth. Truth about the self, the land, and above all, the truth about history" (Ao 112). The trajectory of Sashi's youthful life was not shaped by a belief in the grand ideas of nationalism and sovereignty, even though Naga political

struggle was at its peak then – in the 1950s. Rather, very "basic" concerns of having a home in the village and the right to life were behind his decision to join the underground movement. In fact, the dream was to return to the village and rebuild his home – a village which has been burnt to the ground by the Indian army (Ao 102). And in search of "a safer home", Sashi found himself become a "ruthless killer" even before he turned sixteen (Ao 108).

At this point in Naga political history, it was uncommon to imagine home outside the village space. It would have been "safer" to establish a new home elsewhere away from the conflict zone. But life in the cities and towns outside the homeland was an option available only to a fraction of Naga population. In fact, home within the same village territory, but not on the same site as the existing/previous one, was not even contemplated. This is one of the odd things, or a unique feature, of traditional Naga conception of home and the village space. The attachment of Nagas (Aos in this case) to their village sites in the "periphery" away from the new townships is hard to explain in terms of the various formulations of attachment theory of home (Tuan 1977; Casey 1997; Somerville 1992; Saunders 2021). Returning to the same site of home that has been marked by a violent memory of destruction and tragedy bespeaks of a cultural psyche that needs its own theorising. This phenomenon requires historicising and a context-specific analysis, given the widespread presence of the trope of migration in Naga folklore. A home to these Nagas in the stories is no longer a home, or less of a home, if it fails to provide security: imagined territorially and specifically in the village. Therefore, when situations improve a bit, the displaced villagers return and rebuild their homes on the ruined site (Ao 111).

Continuing in this vein, the "politics" of a man like Sashi in the story is essentially driven by the need to secure a safe home in the village. Ontologically speaking, whatever Old Man Sashi

did was not "unplaced." The coordinates of his actions were rooted in the primality of the village space. Without the village, there was a loss of ontology. Or "a loss in a *kind* of being and not merely in the number of beings that exists" (Casey 71). Could Sashi have obtained a secure home for himself if he had sided with the Indian state? Perhaps. But at what cost? This is a question Ao obliquely explores in "The Curfew Man" and "Saoba".

"The Curfew Man" is a story about Satemba, a Constable in the Assam Police, who retired prematurely after he damaged a kneecap in a football match. His measly pension of 75 Rupees per month is barely sufficient to support himself and his wife. So, his wife accepts the job of helper and companion to the wife of the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO). From this association Satemba is "lured" into becoming an informer of the Government by the SDO. Initially non-committal, he accepts it as "he was discreetly reminded that his wife's job was somehow connected with the offer" (Ao 37). The monetary rewards from this "side business" after dark prove a huge help in meeting the expenses of the family. But Satemba has misgivings about his job. His wife catches on to his "secret" job, but Ao rationalises her silent "acceptance":

> *circumstances were forcing innocent, peace-loving people to turn to means that they would not ordinarily employ, just to stay safe and alive. She had to admit that they were indeed caught in a vice-like situation and every time Satemba went out at night, she kept a lone vigil in the darkness of their small hut and worried until he appeared at the door (38-39).*

However, when Satemba's second kneecap gives up and renders him unable to walk, his wife, Jemtila, feels a huge burden lifted. She goes to work "unusually light-hearted and free because now that both of Satemba's knees were damaged,

he would no longer be able to work for the S.D.O" (Ao 42). For Jemtila her husband's status as a cripple is preferable than being employed as a Government informer. "If the first bad knee had secured him his pension from the Assam Police, the second injury truly secured his freedom from the sinister bondage" (Ao 42). Her attitude arouses contempt in the SDO, who realises that Satemba would be of no practical use in his present condition. So, he fires Jemtila from her job and also adds that her husband's "services will no longer be needed."

Jemtila's characterisation of the manner in which her husband "truly secured his freedom" is a poignant commentary about life during this period. At this point in time, Nagas were segregated into three political categories: rebels and their sympathisers, moderates and fence-sitters (neutrals), and Naga Indians. The "freedom" Jemtila "cherishes" is the kind that comes from a "neutral" position in a conflict situation, and relates more to a mental state. The fact of the matter is that both she and her husband could be casualties of the armed conflict any moment. Being released from the "bondage" of the SDO and the Government did not guarantee that they would not be harmed in some unpredictable way. Nonetheless, simplicity characterises Jemtila's expectation from her marriage, and life in general. Her husband's neutrality, both physically (due to broken kneecaps), and symbolically (no longer an informer of the Government), provides her with a sense of relative security from both the Naga rebels and the Indian armed forces. She represents the majority of Nagas caught in-between the armed Naga rebels and the Indian state, and to whom the word "neutral" registers "security".

Even though Ao seems to attribute Satemba's job as an informer to his unique circumstances, and his desire to have enough money to build his own house, the ending of the story undercuts that and reinstates the necessity of ethical choices in any given situation. It is not a straightforward case of

"exoneration" because of the compulsions of economic struggles and physical disability. Rather, the place of choice in ethical conduct under complex and difficult situations undergirds it. Ao explores this theme further in "Shadows". The story narrates the tragic murder of a young recruit of the Naga National Council, who is also the son of a high-ranking officer, by his comrades while they were on their way to China via Burma (Myanmar). The order for his murder is issued by the Captain of the team, who, it is recounted, had been humiliated in the past by the victim's father. What Ao underscores in this story – which is likely based on true events – is the presence of variables that complicate a political movement like the Naga armed struggle for sovereignty. Beyond the gruesome, bone-chilling account of the murder, what comes through distinctly is that ideals alone are not enough for revolutions, as the variable of the individual – made up of heart and mind – can alter the course and outcome of such long-drawn struggles. Choice, an ethical one at that, is always available as an option no matter the circumstances. So, for Jemtila, a rented hut is preferred over a hypothetical building constructed with "blood money", and a measly income is preferred over an ill-gotten wealth.

The ethical ending of "The Curfew Man" is also the moral framework for the story of "Saoba". An orphan boy with some cognitive issues, Saoba is taken in by Imtila, the wife of Boss, the leader of the "squad". The squad is made up of personnel of the Home Guards that was raised by the Indian Government to aid its military efforts against the Naga rebels. As Boss grows in prominence in the eyes of the Indian establishment, his home becomes more of a "public" space, stripped of its personal and private characteristics. His "boys" take up residence and women visitors are entertained regularly. This causes Imtila to lose domestic autonomy over her home, and the moral of the story is articulated from her perspective. "She could no longer call her home her personal

domain. There was no peace and quiet for her or the children because her husband's lackeys seemed to be everywhere" (Ao 15). When Saoba, a mentally challenged orphan which she had taken in, is mistakenly shot dead by Boss in a drunken state, Imtila's lamentation represents an indictment of the perversion of the "ideal" home: "Oh my poor boy, were you born for this? Why did I let you come into this evil place?" (Ao 19).

To call one's own home "evil" is to invoke an idea or notion of home beyond the materiality of the house. Even if the "what" of a home is not explicitly spelled out, what it is not is implied through the description of the goings-on in the house. Ao foregrounds the distinction that exists between home and house in this story, but the nature of their relationship is only vaguely suggested. The materiality of a house is a necessary condition for a home in Naga culture, but can there be a "home" without a "fixed" house along the lines of the figure of the nomad? In any case, Imtila's lamentation and disparagement of her house as "evil" introduces a moral dimension to the idea of "home". However, Ao stops short of "prescribing" the features of an ideal home; she merely describes what it is not.

Ao's focus on the quotidian in her stories in this anthology also suggests a degree of detachment from the collective rhetoric of Naga political aspiration. For Nagas whose experience and struggles Ao chose to portray in her stories, their concerns seem to be more about the immediate struggles of establishing and sustaining a stable home. Faced with an existential situation because of the armed conflict with India, these Nagas grope for vocabularies to articulate their situation and aspirations. Any new word that negates or transgresses the familiar vocabularies of domesticity (village life) has a disorienting effect. "Grouping", "convoy", "curfew", "army", etc., are some of these new words that in due course of time register dread in Nagas. The "dread-ness" of these words

primarily originate from their associative meanings, which is the reterritorialisation of the familiar homespace – village.

"Grouping" refers to the forced collection of villagers into manageable groups while military operations against the armed Naga insurgents are carried out. Often, these operations involved the destruction of whole villages to render them unsuitable for Naga insurgents to take shelter in, and/or to punish the villagers for not distancing themselves from Naga rebels enough. In due course, the word "grouping" had acquired a usage that became associated with destruction of villages, barns, and the forced migration of Naga civilians into grouping areas – which basically are concentration camps. Ao writes about "grouping" in the story "Saoba" thus:

The word 'grouping' had a much more sinister implication; it meant that whole villages would be dislodged from their ancestral sites and herded into new ones, making it more convenient for the security forces to guard the day and night…It was the most humiliating insult that was inflicted on the Naga psyche by forcibly uprooting them from the soil of their origin and being, and confining hem in an alien environment (11).

"Grouping zone" is also evocative of what Marc Auge, in a different context, described as "non-place" (122). A place of transience away from the village is converted into a temporary "home" to pen in Naga villagers. Nagas generally have a "totalistic" attachment to their village. And so the "grouping zone" modality of the counter-insurgency operation of the Indian army proved very disconcerting for them. Cognitive dissonance produced an existential crisis similar to what Levi experienced in Easterine Kire's novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003). Ao perhaps had a similar image in mind when she characterised her stories in *The Hills Called Home* as concerned with the representation of the ways in which Naga psyche was restructured by the events of this period

(1950s-1980s). In any case, it is safe to say that Naga psyche begins with home in the village. And to be forcibly removed from it without is bound to produce psychological and existential situations which would require adapting in order to survive. In that sense, individual as well as collective choices and actions in the stories can be taken as examples of the manifestation of Naga psyche in the process of being restructured. And in this, home, or an idea of it, functions as the "baseline" for cognition and action.

That said, Ao does not close her anthology with a grim picture. Fractured as it may be by the decades-old experience of violence, Ao pays tribute to the indefatigable Naga spirit for survival, albeit with a caveat, in a context in which old solidarities and values are locked in a new contest with non-traditional values. The creation of Nagaland state in 1963 produced a palpable degree of optimism as conditions for stable homes were (partly) guaranteed. Ao captures this in the story, "A New Chapter", which is designedly featured last in the anthology: "With fresh hope in their hearts, they were also talking of re-building burnt down houses and granaries" (121). Ao also adds:

Slowly and painfully Nagas were beginning to look at themselves through new prisms, some self-centred and some thrust upon them…Those who survived, learnt to adopt to the new trends and new lifestyles (122).

A close-up view of the lives of the protagonists, Nungsang and Merenla, reveals new notions of social status and worth occasioned by the rise of the moneyed class of politicians, contractors and bureaucrats. Uncannily reminiscent of 19th century English novels, social mobility becomes the norm; and marital alliances are determined by material considerations – the marriage of Merenla to Nungsang for instance. The idea of a good home too is now subject to a new set of criteria as the community uneasily straddles tradition and modernity.

Armed conflict, globalisation and individual aspirations had combined to produce a new cultural reality in which owning multiple houses (as in distinction from homes) is considered a distinctive hallmark of social mobility in Naga society. So, from a very monolithic and totalised ideation of home in the village space, Naga imagination of home becomes less fixed to a "prescribed" place – the village. A vague outline of a more fluid conception of home begins to emerge on the horizon, and with it a new set of criteria of home is also encoded in the narrative as underpinning individual action.

Conclusion

The tentative use of "home" in *These Hills Called Home* is a deliberate ploy by Ao to characterise the destabilised and contested reality of Naga homeland. The ironic sense in which the Hills are called "home", bereft of all that one would normally associate with home – security, freedom, comfort, etc. – can be said to make the moral as well as existential case for armed rebellion. The decision of Sashi and his friend to formally join the Naga rebels after their accidental "enlistment" exemplifies this position. They visualised their role in the insurgency as motivated by the desire to defend their right to own a safe home in the village. Of course, one might argue that the loss of a "safe home" after 1947 was due to Naga refusal to be part of the Indian Union. But Ao certainly does not position her stories in that way. The justness of Naga armed movement for political self-determination remains unquestioned. Instead, the "compulsions" of ordinary Nagas and their actions (for self-preservation) are Ao's principal focus in the stories.

At another level of signification, Ao's graphic account of the cycles of atrocities and sufferings received by Nagas at the hands of the Indian armed forces "explains" the motive underpinning the "surrender" of the so-called moderate

Nagas. Their action is portrayed as driven by the desire to choose life over death, which Ao does not explicitly indict nor approve it. Nonetheless, what comes through from Ao's decision to re-inhabit the position of ordinary Nagas caught in the quagmire of the violence and articulate their experience is the familiar desire for self-preservation. And if the individual desire for life negates the revolutionary demand for self-sacrifice, it is merely human and relative. In that sense, Ao's anthology can be characterised as an apology for those who may be deemed as "traitors" for choosing to live a little, even if that means exchanging the ideated notion of Naga sovereignty for a set of limited but guaranteed rights under the constitution of India.

References

1. Ao, Temsula. These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2005.
2. Auge, Marc. Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. Translated by John Howe. London: Verso, 1995.
3. Casey, Edward. The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History. Okland: University of California Press, 1997.
4. Kire, Easterine. A Naga Village Remembered. Kohima: Ura Academy, 2003.
5. Saunders, Peter. A Nation of Homeowners. London: Routledge, 2021 (1990).
6. Somerville, Peter. "Homelessness and the Meaning of Home". International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, Volume 16, Issue 4, 1992, pp. 529-539. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.1992.tb00194.x

7. *Tuan, Yi-Fu. Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.*

Shelmi Sankhil

Shelmi teaches Comparative Literature & Translation Studies in the School of Letters, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi. His research interests include, Anglophone Naga literature, literatures from the Northeast of India, hermeneutics, fantasy literature and mythology. He writes poetry and fiction when inspired, and has published a collection of short stories called *Flame on a Hill: A Collection of Stories* (2021). Sankhil also composes songs and music which he produces and performs in Lamkang Naga language.

Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. Know more here.

Authors & Books

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website https://page.co/Vw17Q.