

Navigating Rape as a Tool of Dominance in Conflict Zone Literature: A Study of Tamsula Ao's "The Last Song"

Jayini Bhaumik*

Abstract: Nagaland, often called the 'Leningrad of the East', is marred by internal uprisings since decades and continues to be a jutting conflict zone. One of the most gruesome evils of the situation is the act of rape and physical assault inflicted upon the Naga women in order for the Army to show power and dominance. Tamsula Ao, in her short story "The Last Song" delineates how regular lives of young Naga women are harrowed by the armed forces, subjected to rape and murder only to violate human rights and encroach their private spaces. This paper would explore two of the probable causes of such phenomena, namely the pre-conceived notion of humiliating the displaced sense of 'honour' that revolves around women's bodies, and strategies of ethnic cleansing in a conflict zone.

Keywords: human rights, dominance, honour, Naga women, doubly marginalized.

* PhD Research Scholar, Department of English; Central University of South Bihar, Gaya, Bihar
Email- bjayini@gmail.com

Introduction

The Northeastern part of India, especially Nagaland, has often acted as the blazing site for political turmoil and tensions, coupled with violation of human rights. Being always vocal about the atrocities hurled upon people in the Naga villages by the Indian Army, Temsula Ao, through her short stories and poems, shows that internal uprising not only hinders or slows down economic and political harmony, but also cripples people's lives, exposing them to perpetual contestation and struggle. In "The Last Song", the third story in her short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a Warzone*, through the rape of Apenyo and her mother Libeni, by the army officers and their feat of ultimately vandalizing the entire village, she depicts how sexual violence or rape is often used as a tool for inflicting pain upon the dissenters, loosening their confidence and valor altogether. This brings one down to precisely two questions— Why do women belonging to the dissenters or opposition group have to bear the brunt of physical assaults in order for the group in power to show dominance or inflict humiliation? And, if invasion or dominance is a broad concept and gender-neutral, why do the menfolk think only about their conventional "honour" to have gotten stained when women of their clan get raped, rather than pondering upon the pains women actually have to bear, often leaving trauma for the rest of their lives? While exploring the root cause of such phenomena, the idea of displaced sense of honour (resting mostly on the shoulders of the women) and motifs of ethnic cleansing strategies crop up as probable evils of the conflict zone mishmash.

Feminist activist Kamla Bhasin, reacting to the backlash of rape cases had opined, "When I'm raped, people say that I've lost my honour? My honour is not in my vagina. It is a patriarchal idea that my rape will defile the honour of my community. I'd like to tell everyone, why did you place your community's honour in a woman's vagina? We never did that. It is the rapist who loses his honour, we don't." Torn between the two conflicting forces, the Naga women are 'doubly marginalized'; first for being a woman within the four walls of their house pregnant with patriarchy, and secondly for being a tribal in an otherwise feudal society. While dwelling in the conflict zone and bearing the aftermath of sexual assaults, primarily they become the target by the army. To add to the misery, they are overburdened by the society's pressure to bear the blot of such incidents for the rest of their lives. This paper is dealing, on one hand, with the delineation of a slice from the violence, tension and trauma that Naga villagers face on a daily basis because of the government forces' encroaching violence through the lenses of Temsula Ao. On the other hand, it explores the root causes of wartime rape as a prop for dismantling confidence and valor of the opposing group, owing to the patriarchal notion stemming out of what Amrita Punj has called "a misplaced sense of honour" (Punj, 2)

Rape as a Tool of Dominance in War: “The Last Song”

Ao meticulously designs the character of Apenyo in “The Last Song” with minute details of innocence, devotion to God, coupled with an inherent flair for singing. The narrative gyrates around her and her mother’s brutal rape and murder in the hands of the Army, followed by vanquishing their entire village, bringing it down to ruins, in order to silence their anti-establishment or anti-government activities.

At the very outset, one learns that Apenyo is a simple village damsel who sings hymns in the Church choir. She is known by the name “singing beauty” in her village because of her natural beauty and talent and her mother is proud of her. Her village is set in the blazing site of political conflict, where people find solace in their faith in God. One fine day, the Indian Army gets a cue that the villagers are paying taxes to the ‘underground government’, which is anti-establishment. They arrive at the village on a Sunday morning when the villagers were preparing for the Church assembly, with the intention to ransack the space in order to show them “what happens when you ‘betray’ your own government.” (*These Hills Called Home*, pg. 26) As soon as they started a gunfire at a distance, panic spread in the Church where a huge congregation had gathered. When a middleman asked the mass to stay quiet and not move around, to everyone's surprise, Apenyo started singing her solo number, quiet oblivious to the impending danger. To shield Apenyo from getting identified, the choir began singing along with her. This triggered the army as they thought they are showing resistance to the force, and in an uncontrollable fit of rage, “they pushed and shoved the pastor and the gaonburas, prodding them with the butts of their guns towards the waiting jeeps below the steps of the church” (*These Hills Called Home*, pg. 27). Apenyo kept singing with a childlike innocence, until she was grabbed by an officer, only to be brutally raped later on. Her mother, Libeni, kept looking for her and when she found her out, the very site of her daughter led her to a state of trepidation. She saw “...the young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn. The mother, crazed by what she was witnessing, rushed forward with an animal-like growl as if to haul the man off her daughter’s body but a soldier grabbed her and pinned her down on the ground.” After raping Apenyo, the soldier tortured Libeni while she succumbed to the torture and died. This leads one to what Immanuel Kant had opined about lowering down women’s existence to that of a puny object or morsel. Regarding such ‘objectification’ of human, in *Lecture on Ethics*, he said “...as soon as the appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts aside a lemon which has been sucked dry. As soon as the person becomes an object of appetite for another, a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used by everyone.”

Apenyo and her mother were mere civilians and never really had anything to do with the insurgency directly. Owing to the age-old concept of equating the 'other' (to men) with women, and subjugating the status of women as inferior to men, while navigating man-woman relationship. Simone de Beauvoir equates the 'other' with the minority in the group, "for a man represents both the positive and the neutral, as indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity." (McCann, 33) Such conventional equation gives men the agency to dominate women physically and mentally, and even a slightest upheaval or rebuff in their comforting spaces trigger them beyond limit. Corollary to this, the Army officer could not gallop down the sight of Apenyo signing even after their rummaging through the village and announcements and took it into his nerves before he devoured himself into the act. The villagers tried to shield their bodies but that further aggravated anger in the Army and they open fired, killing many, and the girl's "last song died with her last breath, lived on in the souls of those who survived the darkest days of the village". (*These Hills Called Home*, 31).

Rape vis-à-vis Demands of Honour?

Probing deep into the root cause of such atrocities like rape, one must realise that be it in a conflict zone or elsewhere, it stems from the displaced idea of 'honour'. The entire pressure of the clan and society to uphold the so called idea of 'honour' dwells upon the shoulders of the women. To be more specific, sexual fidelity or attributes related to sexuality of a woman is what determines the purity or neatness of a particular race, conventionally since ages. In this regard, Theodore M. Anderson said "...there is a continuity of values from the heathen literature to the sagas and that the demands of honor remain constant". (Anderson, 1) In "The Last Song", the Armed Forces rummaged through the nooks and corners of the village in order to perpetrate dominance, and probably found Apenyo singing unabashedly as a revolting act. Relating wartime rape with violation of human rights, the Baguio Declaration of the 2nd Asian Indigenous Women's Conference criticized and condemned violence perpetrated on women and said that such incidents "perpetrated by state forces" are detrimental to the growth of civilization and "rape continues to be used as a weapon of war by the military to humiliate and attack indigenous communities. Girls and even older women and children are not spared." One of the aspects behind such phenomena could be the notion of revenge. When a particular group is offended or have had suffered in the hands of the other group, the former avenges the pain by inflicting methods of torture and violence on the latter. Women being soft targets, fall prey to the notion. To cite a real life example, one is reminded of the Oinam incident that took

place in Senapati district of Manipur. The Assam Rifle post near the Poumai Naga area was raided and ransacked by the Naga underground folks and they killed nine Army officers. As a form of retaliation, the Assam rifles launched the "Operation Bluebird" in almost thirty villages to recover the lost. Beard noted that,

"...in course if a few weeks the Assam Rifles shot dead 14 people after subjecting them to inhuman torture. The villagers were made to stand at the playground exposed to torrential rains and scorching heat for weeks. The Assam rifles used the churches as concentration camps. Hundreds of villagers were beaten and subjugated to third degree methods of tortures, men were hung upside down, buried alive and given electric shocks. Women and girls were sexually assaulted. Two women were compelled to give birth to their babies in open ground in full view of the jawans" (Beard 23)

Corollary to this incident, "The Last Song" is supposedly derived from a similar course of action that happened in the year 1997 when the Assam rifles and MLI raped groups of women in Mokokchung town and burned buildings as a part of their operation against NSCN(K). In a way, this leads to champion the ethnic-cleansing strategies as well, specially when the conflict exists owing to racial disparities. K B Veio Pou said, "Most of these incidents happen in a situation where the stronger agency, in most cases the authority in power launch its policy these terminating the lesser ethnic minority. The sense of perpetrator with the weapon of destruction acts as a symbolic image to incite a feeling of submission from the once perpetrated upon, by which the perpetrators can demonstrate their victory over the men of the other group." (Veio Pou, 67) Like the Nazis during World War and Myanmar military Junta And caught up in this unending loop of war and vengeance, the women fall prey to the wrath of the patriarchs who feel let down once a woman belonging to their clan gets physically assaulted. From a global viewpoint, thousands of Shan girls and women are merely a morsel of the number of women all over the world who have been dealing with wartime rape and torture during national and international conflicts (Hongthong, 2002). But the moot point in all these is why should the women only be treated as a waste product and thrown away like garbage, ripped off choices and living normal lives? The answer probably harks back to the age-old belief of treating women as commodities owned by men folk. Mishmash of it would be surmounting to increased sense of anger and insecurity. Kavita Punjabi opines,

"...the honour of the community is supposed to be vested in its women, so rape is a symbolic form of dishonoring the community, a woman and her sexuality are the implied property of man, so rape signifies an appropriation of property; or a woman's identity is presumed to be based on her sexuality. So rape denotes the unmaking of her

very identity a devastation greater than death itself.”

All this is a result of the prolonged and intense shadow that patriarchy has cast on women since ages. To rape woman is surmount to tarnishing the ‘property’ of the entire clan. The notorious, brutal and ruthless rape and murder of Apenyo and Libeni are so gruesome that it leaves the readers with depressing memories, to the point of being numb. It was never their choice to be ripped off their private spaces. It was never their intention to be treated that way, without any fault of their own. Even after their death, the senior folks of their tribe did not let their bodies be buried inside the graveyard because they felt they died due to unusual causes, thus, they must be kept outside. The worst part of the whole thing is the fact that wars end and things settle down, peace treaties are made and businesses are discussed, yet the physical and mental trauma and torment that rape or physical assaults perpetrated upon the women can never be faded away from the minds and souls of them.

Conclusion

Temsula Ao, in the introductory section of the short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a Warzone* expressed the fact that when memories of pain keep haunting one’s conscience, it is pointless and futile to keep calm. She said, “when these people say that ‘it does not matter’ they mean that there is an inherent callousness in the human mind that tends to ignore injustice and inhumanity as long as it does not touch one directly” (Ao,2). Refusing to take sides, she unabashedly delineates the gruesome attributes of wartime rape through Apenyo’s character, lest one ignores that it is more than just violation of human rights and has got to do a lot with the sense of ethnic-cleansing and violation of the displaced sense of honour. However, she does not fail to show how trauma can equally get the better of the torturers, and the gamble of predestination or *karma* spares none. During his last days, the officer who raped Apenyo and the mother Libeni had to meet a fateful end, “...he was traced to a military hospital in a big city where he was being kept in a maximum security cell of an insane asylum.” (Ao, 31) Ao believes in eternal justice and probably Apenyo’s devotion to God, which made her unabashedly sing her last song, could never get off from the minds of the officer and the melody of her last song dwelled in the minds and senses of the villagers for the rest of their lives.

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