

Subaltern Consciousness and Representation in Temsula Ao's Works

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Received: 1 March 2015

Abstract

In Post Colonial Studies, subaltern themes have become so prominent that it is widely used in various disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology and literature. In meaning 'subaltern' denotes the 'inferior other'. So, subaltern literature reflects themes like oppression, marginalization, gender discrimination, subjugation of lower and working class, etc. This paper attempts to analyze Temsula Ao's works and identify inherent subaltern themes. The aim is to posit Temsula Ao as a very strong subaltern voice in the Naga Context.

Keywords: Subaltern, Hegemony, Subjugation, Identity, Women, Colonialism, Consciousness, Patriarchy, Oral, History, Tradition, Voice, Marginalized

1 Subaltern: Definition and Meaning

The origin of the word *subaltern* is from Late Latin *subalternus* from Latin *sub*-meaning 'under' + *alternus*-meaning 'alternate', from *alter*- other (of two). Therefore the word *subaltern* denotes the *inferior other*. Initially, the word applied to vassals and peasants. Now, as a noun, it means an officer in the British army, who is lower in rank than a captain. However, the term *subaltern* was first used outside the non-military sense by the Italian Communist intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). He used the term to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. Drawing inspiration from Gramsci, Subaltern Studies took shape in the 1980s as a project for rewriting the history of South Asia outside the bounds of colonialist, elite nationalist and Marxist frameworks. The Subaltern Studies scholars developed alternative models of history and politics attuned to the agency of subordinated social groups. (Byrd & Rothberg, 2011:1-2) They engendered a change in the way the word *subaltern* was used. As Ludden writes,

The meaning of subalternity in Subaltern Studies shifted as the framework of study increasingly stressed the clash of unequal cultures under colonialism and the dominance of colonial modernity over India's resistant, indigenous culture. Subalterns in India became fragments of a nation; their identity and consciousness reflected India's colonial subjugation. This approach has organised an impressive collection of enduring scholarship on colonial texts, vernacular resistance,

bureaucracy, police, factories, communalism, ethnography, prisons, medicine, ethnography, science, and related topics. It has also enabled Subaltern Studies to speak as India's subaltern voice.

(Ludden, 2002:19)

Subaltern no longer meant just subordination and inferiority but represented a person who did not belong to the colonial elite. It also encompassed a range of "different subject positions" and "subjugated knowledge". The concept of the subaltern was furthered forward by the intervention of the post-colonial critic, Gayatri Spivak. For her, ". . . *subaltern* is not just a class word for "oppressed", for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. . . . In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern — a space of difference." (de Kock, 1992:29-37) She expanded the definition of subaltern to include women. In her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, she talks of the gendered subaltern's inability to speak, saying, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as a female is even more deeply in shadow..." (Gayatri Spivak, 2002:28). This is so because "she is first a victim of the imperialist project and secondly she is at the periphery of a patriarchal order" (Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, 2004:49). Sociologist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his book *Toward a New Legal Common Sense* (2002) uses the term subaltern to describe the oppressed peoples at the margins of a society who are struggling against hegemonic globalization. However, context, time, and place determine who, among the peoples at the margins of a society, is a Subaltern; in India, tribal, women, Dalits, immigrant laborers are part of subaltern.

Thus the meaning and concept of the subaltern has undergone considerable change and has become a critical concern in post colonial theory. Subalternity is now accepted as a concept within the field of Post-Colonial Studies, and therefore concerned to explore the experiences of peoples who have been subject to Western colonialism. The term also refers to the search for the authentic voice of those social groups who have been normally 'written out' in the historical accounts given not just by Western scholars but by Western-educated elites in postcolonial societies (Krishan Kumar, 2000:837). In Post-colonial theory, the term *Subaltern* describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society — a subaltern is a person rendered without human agency, by his or her social status (Robert J. C. Young, 2003). In other words, the subalterns are the marginalized, suppressed and exploited people based on their cultural, political, social and religious beliefs.

In the light of the above assertions, the Nagas, as tribals, and their history, unacknowledged, can be called subaltern. The rich Naga tradition, oral in nature, is silenced by the written Word of Christian missionaries and western scholars (Abraham Lotha, 2013:77).¹ The Nagas, previously a sovereign people in the pre-colonial period, became subject to a foreign rule with the coming of the British administration. The hegemonic rule of the Indian state in post independent India pushed the Nagas further towards the periphery. “The native subjects [the Nagas], robbed of their culture, history and tradition get subjected to the silence imposed on the subaltern” (Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, 2004:46).

2 Tracing Subaltern Consciousness and Representation in Temsula Ao's Works

Temsula Ao is a poet, short story writer and folklorist. She has published five books of poems, two collections of short stories apart from her academic work, her collections of Naga folk tales and a memoir *Once Upon a Life* in 2013. A recipient of the Padma Shree Award from the Government of India in 2007, Temsula Ao is, at present, the Chairperson of the Nagaland State Commission for Women. She also received the Sahitya Akademi Award for her short story collection *Laburnum for My Head* in 2013. She is widely respected as one of the major literary voices in English to emerge from Northeast India.

A major aspect of *Subaltern Studies* has been the subaltern consciousness and its representation – “to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny” (Ranjit Guha, 1984:vii) – without appropriating their voices. The subaltern scholars looked for alternative source material to conventional historiography through oral narratives, songs and myths in order to retrieve subaltern histories. (Taisha Abraham, 2007:43) When we look at subaltern literature, themes such as suppression, oppression, marginalization, gender discrimination etc are reflected. And in the works of Temsula Ao, we find these expressions. There is also the attempt to retrieve the commissions and omissions perpetrated on the history of the Nagas by the dominant elite. Considered as one of the major voices in Nagaland (Ashley Tellis, 2010: 2), Temsula Ao's works

¹ Abraham Lotha (2013) *The Raging Mithun: Challenges of Naga Nationalism*, Tromso, Norway: Backweaver Publications, p.77. Here he writes, “the Nagas were caught unawares in the colonial tide. So when the first missionaries came to Nagaland, everything Naga was considered unchristian. To be a Christian meant to worship God in the colonialists' way.” See also I. Bendangangshi (2008) *Glimpses of Naga History Vol II*, Kohima: Author, pp. 58-60. Here he retells a story of how the British administration was confronted with the issue of origin between two parties. Unable to solve the case, the British administration declared that “henceforth all Aos shall be considered to have originated in Longterok, Jungliyimti, and anyone saying otherwise will be penalized.”

echoes of the oral narratives, songs, myths, culture, history and tradition of the Nagas. The subaltern as a female' is also sensitively delineated. They are given a voice, their peripheral existence given centre stage. This paper thus is an attempt to trace the subaltern consciousness and representation in her poems, short stories and non-fiction.

3 In Her Poems

The subaltern concern for a voice, culture, history and tradition of their own can be perceived in her poems. The quest for an identity, the assertion of one's self and substance, the quest for a song and therefore, ultimately a voice finds expression in her poem, *Wishes*:

*I want to sing
Of the poems
That lie
Unwritten
And of the beauty
That dies
Unrevealed.*

*And so
I write
And I write, still. (Temsula Ao, 2013:117-118)*

She endeavours to express the 'unwritten' and the 'unrevealed' and in the process inscribe the agency of the marginalized in dominant narratives. Her epigraph to *Songs from the Other Life* is testimony to the breaking of silence and ushering an alternate narrative.

*These songs
From the other life
Long lay mute
In the confines
Of my restive mind
Unrelenting in their urging
For new vocabulary
To redraft history
They now resonate
In words of new
Discernment
To augment the lore
Of our essential core (Temsula Ao, 2007:9)*

“Myths”, as Robin S Ngangom writes, “provide a key to the cultural behavior of a people, but when communities seem to be losing their way in the midst of cultural colonization, mythopoeic poets... step in and try to emulate the traditional storytellers and shamans by recalling the lore of the tribe”. (Robin S Ngangom, 2010:1) The poems in the *Songs from the Other Life* recall the lore of the Nagas and tell of how important it is to remember

*Grandfather constantly warned
That forgetting stories
Would be catastrophic
We could lose our history,
Territory, and most certainly
Our intrinsic identity.* (Temsula Ao, 2013:240)

This concern for preservation of identity, of essential tradition is the voice consciousness of the subaltern. Sukalpa Battacharjee in her essay, ‘Tracing the Subaltern Voice’, writes:

The imperial domination extent not only over the native subjects, but also over time and their memory. The Empire made temporal exiles of the colonized by also ruling their memory and casting them outside their time. As a result the colonized found themselves cut out from their times past, which they knew to be their own history, a history in which they acted, wrote and remembered... Removed from their history and community, the colonized had to bear the burden of an alien history and alien administration. (Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, 2004:46)

In the Naga context, the pristine past was erased and replaced by a dominant alien worldview. This state of being removed from their history and the need for restoration of the past is what is represented in the poems. We find the theme of subjugation and the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny, in the poem *Blood of Other Days*,

*...The suppressed resonance of old songs
And the insight of primitive stories
Resurface to accuse leased-out minds
Of treason against the essential self.*

*In the re-awakened songs and stories
A new breed of cultural heroes
Articulate a different discourse...* (Temsula Ao, 2007:68)

In the above lines we also note the awakening of a people’s consciousness. Temsula Ao does not leave it at this. Rather, she writes of the suppressed voice, now ‘articulate’, loud and powerful.

*...Demanding reinstatement
Of customary identity
And restoration of ancestral ground
As a belligerent post-script to recent history... (ibid)*

This is what she has to say about her *Songs from the Other Life*, that “it marks a significant phase in my poetic career because the inspiration for the book has been derived from my Oral Tradition which has informed my psyche and given me a definite identity”(Temsula Ao, 2013: xliii). However, it is not just the writer herself whose consciousness is awakened and identity found but also of her own people. Sen and Karmawphlang writes, “Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social organizations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress”(2007:i) Thus, in her poems she sings of the myths, legends, personal stories and in the process articulates and records the history of her people and land, marginalized by the alien dominant force.

The subaltern as a female, who is at ‘the periphery of a patriarchal order’ is also given space and voice in her poems. The gender question, the identity of women, their place and status in the society, reflected in her writings are nothing but critiques of the traditional view of women in a patriarchal society. The poems, *Requiem?*, *Hanger -On*, *A Village Morning*, *Village Morning II*, *Village Morning III* are replete with the images of the subject/subjugated position and exploitation of women – “a beast of burden”(Temsula Ao, 2013:17)² The subordination of women that exists in almost all societies as a weaker being and also because of patriarchy is seen in the poem *Woman*:

*Nature fashioned her thus.
To bear the burden
To hold the seed
And feed
Every other need
But hers.*

*Time perpetuated her assignment
And custom prevailed
Even when she cried and wailed*

² *a beast of burden* – this phrase can be found in the poem *Woman*.

*In protest.
Man beguiled her
Into submission
Thus establishing
Timeless dominion...(Ibid, 17)*

Yet, it is not only of woman as a victim that she writes of but also of the woman as a recusant.

*But woman,
Thus fashioned
Thus oppressed
Beguiled and betrayed,
Sometimes rebelled
To break the mould
And shake off the hold
That nature devised
And man improvised*

*So woman beget
Such deviates
To spurn man
And custom.(Ibid,17-18)*

A very strong voice is given to the erstwhile victim and we hear the declaration of the woman's true self in *The Creator*. She asserts,

*"I am a woman,
And woman creates
Therefore
I shall create
The real me
And a brave new world"(Ibid, 128)*

Although Spivak has argued the gendered subaltern's inability to speak, Temsula Ao, as a Naga woman writer, represents and re-presents the subaltern voice and consciousness.

4 In Her Short Stories

In the preface to her collection of short stories, *These Hills called Home*, she reminds the reader that;

Many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears

that make up the history of the Nagas from the early fifties of the last century, and their demand for independence from the Indian State. But while the actual struggle remains a backdrop, the thrust of the narratives is to probe how the events of that era have re-structured or even 'revolutionized' the Naga psyche (Temsula Ao, 2006:x).

The stories talk of a history lived and experienced by ordinary folks, the interrupted life of the Nagas- men, women and children, and the suppression at the hands of a dominating force beyond the ken of their knowledge. Tales of simple men and women, displaced from the traditional way of life by the "advent of the Word" on the one hand and the new identity imposed by the Indian state on the other, are narrated 'lest we forget'. This harking back to the past and the retrieval of memories, though traumatic, serves to rouse the hitherto forgotten history. In the narration of the stories that deal with insurgency, we read of the political struggle for sovereignty from the colonizing centre-the Indian state and the peripheral subjects-the Nagas. The exertion of dominion by the Indian army through groupings³ curfews, vigils, spies are attempts to silence the Naga voice for self-determination. By representing these themes, T. Ao seeks to retrieve the stifled voice.

In the story *Soaba*, the protagonist, Imtimoa, an orphan and a dimwit and hence referred to as Soaba⁴ later called Supiba⁵, does not have a coherent voice. He is not able to comprehend anything much except hunger, thirst and shelter from cold and rain. Yet it is through the story of this marginalized character that a different history is narrated- one that does not find mention in the meta-narratives of the dominant literature. The freedom movement against the Indian government in the 1950s, the counter strategy of the government to snuff out the freedom fighters, the extra arms beyond the law and civil rights- the Home Guards,⁶ the silencing of the

³ The word *grouping* here is referred to how it was understood in the 1950s and the following decades, when the forced occupation of the Naga area by the Indian Army started. It 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 them day and night. It was the most humiliating insult that was inflicted on the Naga psyche by forcibly uprooting them from their origin and being. During this time of horror, many villages were burnt and with it many legacies – proofs of history.

⁴ In the Ao language "Soaba" means "idiot".

⁵ "Supiba" is an identity that Soaba constructs for himself. It is based on the phrase "stupid bastard" which he (mis)hears Boss calling someone in the story.

⁶ This is in reference to the Village Guards.

people by instilling fear in them, the new vocabulary that has crept into the everyday language of the people- words like convoy, grouping, curfew and 'situation' acquiring sinister dimensions (Temsula Ao, 2006:10) are the mini narratives that T. Ao foregrounds in the narration of Soaba/ Supiba's tragedy. The acts of suppression and subjugation committed on the Nagas through the many controlling measures that the Indian government has artfully documented. Ask any Naga, who lived during those turbulent fifties, and they will attest to the atrocities of the 'invading' Indian army.

An Old Man Remembers recounts another side of a history that is very often romanticized. This is the history of the freedom fighter which tells of 'painful memories'. However, the recalling and remembering of this painful past is important for it is the truth- "Truth about self, the land and above all, the truth about history" (Ibid, 112). In the stories, T. Ao gives voice to ordinary people whose lives were so cruelly disrupted by the 'power struggle between two warring groups.'

The eight short stories in *Laburnum for My Head* have more thematic variety compared to *These Hills Called Home*. But, the ordinarieness of the characters still continues and in the telling of their stories, she narrates an alternative history. Thus, the Naga subaltern's history, which has been 'written out' of the mainstream narratives 'get told' through the medium of the written word.

Her stories are therefore accounts of an alternative "history from below". The stories are the "subtext of the palimpsestic narrative" of the Indian State. Hence, a 'space' is made where the subaltern – ordinary people – can speak and relate their accounts. The collective memory as history also subtly documents the marginalized and subaltern's story. As opined by Battacharjee, "for the subaltern, 'memory' and 'history' lack unity as these are acutely colonized. Constituted in these contradictions, the identity of the Subaltern is never secure, never natural, never primordial, and never to be taken for granted. Their identity is always historical and their nationality is always questionable. Subaltern histories offer neither triumph nor redemption because their memories are not fully theirs" (2004:47). Therefore, the stories reflect the same "fragmented and episodic" history, the peripheral existence which they seek to subvert, but fails.

As in her poems, women find representation in both the collections of short stories. In the story *The Jungle Major*, we come across a woman who through her wit and presence of mind saved an entire village from the fate of the dreaded grouping. *The Last Song* tells the poignant story of a little girl who was 'born to sing' having inherited her father's gift of singing. In spite of

the struggle, she and her mother faces after the death of her father, life was idyllic. She does well in school (the star pupil), learns the art of weaving and excels, had an 'exquisite singing voice' and blossoms to become a beauty, which earned her the nickname singing beauty in the village (Temsula Ao, 2006:15). However, tragedy beyond their comprehension befalls as the Indian army decides to "teach" all those villages the consequences of 'supporting' the rebel cause by paying the 'taxes.'"(Ibid, 26) Apenyo raises her voice in song earning the wrath of the marauding soldiers for this act of defiance. She is silenced by the violence of rape against which she has no defense. Her mother meets with the same fate as she tries to rescue her daughter. The evidence of this atrocity is set on fire and destroyed. But the Captain cannot silence Apenyo's song. In his mind he can still hear the tune she hummed finally driving him to madness. Even after the passing of thirty odd years, on certain nights, Apenyo's last song can be heard. Because of the manner in which they died, as per tradition, they are not given burial inside the proper graveyard but outside the boundary without any headstones. Apenyo's fate is not an uncommon one among the marginalized and by giving her literary representation, T. Ao tells us of another untold history that was experienced by Naga women during the height of the independence movement of the Nagas.

The Night and *The Pot Maker* portray the lives of women whose lives are dependent on the protection of man and relate how the dictates of the patriarchal society limit one's choices. In the name of 'duty', 'tradition' and convention, women are made to toe the line and abide by the age-old practices. Men as decision takers are clearly depicted in the stories. Imnala's fate is left in the hands of her maternal uncle. The village council⁷ decides that Arenla should be reminded of her duty to teach her daughter the skill of pot making. Thus, the discrimination and subordination of women in a patriarchal Naga society is delicately depicted.

Laburnum for My Head is "the story of the un-dramatic life of an ordinary woman [Lentina] who cherished one single passionate wish"(Temsula Ao, 2009:20). However, the actions of Lentina are not ordinary. In a patriarchal society where women have no decision making powers, she is able to hold her ground. The assertive voice of woman that we heard in her poem *Creator* reechoes in the story. Lentina is decisive and sure of what she wants. She takes initiative to draw up a legal document in anticipation of what is to come. Through her ingenuity, the town Committee agrees to give a 'written undertaking' that her land would be managed according to her terms. So in the story, the subaltern female (Lentina is a widow) creates a space for herself. She speaks and

⁷ *The traditional Naga village council comprises of male members only.*

heard. Through imaginative representation, T Ao brings the peripheral existence of women to the centre. It is to be noted that the land she acquires for her burial was beyond the boundary of the town cemetery.

Furthermore in *A Simple Question*, we read of an illiterate village woman who unsettles the captain of the army camp in the village by 'challenging the validity of his own presence in this alien terrain' (Ibid, 87). She appropriates the captain's matchbox and one cannot help but go back to another story where a captain's matchbox burnt all evidence of their crimes. The Naga women as seen in later stories have changed. They are no longer victims but are able to make their oppressors see the impossible situation they face. And thus, it is with an awakened voice consciousness that the subaltern female is speaking.

5 Her Non-fiction

Taking into context the subject-matter of this paper, the essays *Identity and Globalization: A Naga Perspective* and *Benevolent Subordination* will be given emphasis. The preservation of one's identity is a vital aspect of the subaltern. In the essay 'Identity and Globalization: A Naga Perspective, she extrapolates 'the implications of identity in the wake of globalization in the Naga experience'. The concept of the subaltern, as espoused by the Subaltern Studies group, stems from the subsumption of identity by elitist historiography. Consequently, they attempted to present history from the perspective of the other. Identity is tied up with history and the loss of one's identity is tantamount to loss of history. It is this concatenate subject that T. Ao talks of in the essay. Taking the Ao Naga example, the 'existential', 'locational' and 'artefactual' identity of the Nagas is constructed. The impact of globalization, according to T. Ao, will have an adverse effect on the identity markers of the Nagas:

The loss of the visible distinctions in cultural products will eventually deplete much of the lore and history of the people so that a time will come when the product will account for writing a "de-humanized" history for the people (Temsula Ao, 2006, *Identity*: 7).

She ends the essay with the warning that 'globalization [...] will eventually reduce identity to anonymity'. In voicing the concern for preserving one's identity, T. Ao becomes the subaltern voice rousing fellow Nagas to brace against a stronger, more dominant force. For it is in the maintenance of one's identity that history is protected from obliteration.

The gendered subaltern's case is articulated in her essay *Benevolent Subordination* (Temsula Ao, 2010). Naga society is a patriarchal society. According to Athungo Oving, "among the Naga

tribes, there are significant variations in culture and social organizations and even between the sections of the same tribe which makes more complicate to define gender to one understanding. However, some degree of patriarchy is universal everywhere”(Athungo Ovung, 2012:50). Patriarchy generally refers to the male domination to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways (K. Rajaratnam, 1999:1). In the Naga context, subordination is perpetrated courteously and there are many who disclaim discrimination. Yet, as Rosemary Dzuwachu, a women's rights activist from Nagaland says, “the identity of Naga women for the world lies behind a veil of liberty; in reality, a Naga woman is conditioned by oppressive customary laws and has no voice in making decisions for her community” (2012). In the essay, T. Ao succinctly pinpoints the Naga attitude towards women and questions the entrenched belief of the Naga society regarding the status of women. She discusses the mechanism of power politics and the position that women have in the real power structure of Naga polity. Thus, the real nature of gender bias in Naga society hitherto unrepresented is voiced in a public space. By bringing the discourse of the social status of Naga women to the public domain, the private experiences of Naga women are accentuated.

6 Conclusion

Temsula Ao calls herself a peripheral writer and in her writings tries to say that “it is the ordinariness of life that becomes so important” (Temsula Ao, 2013, *A Memoir*. 229-230). She writes in the “Preface” to her Memoir, “That I also happen to write a bit has added, I hope, a new perspective to the narrative” (ibid, xiii). This is true of the subaltern project. It is all about a new perspective to the narrative. In what is perhaps her most famous and controversial essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Spivak contends that the subaltern cannot speak and asks ‘with what voice - consciousness can the subaltern speak’ (Gayatri Spivak, 2002: 27). Essentially, what Spivak wants to emphasize is that the subaltern cannot be represented and therefore they have to be their own voice. Accordingly, the Naga voice long appropriated by ethnographers like Miles Hutton, Smith, etc, have found a representative voice in Temsula Ao. Ashley Tellis’ epithet ‘Tongue of the Nagas’ is befitting for she is definitely the voice of the Nagas. She not only represents but also re-presents the Nagas.

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