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Eds.

Subir Dhar, Tapu Biswas, Ronan Paterson,
Bryan Reynolds, Papia Mitra

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Gender Dynamics and Patriarchal Resistance in Indigenous Narratives: An in-depth Analysis of Temsula Ao's Short Stories

Hawaibam Loiyumba

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the complex gender dynamics and patriarchal resistance depicted in Temsula Ao's short stories, exploring how Indigenous women in Northeast India, particularly Naga women, navigate and challenge oppressive societal structures. Focusing on "Laburnum for My Head," "The Jungle Major," "Soaba" and "The Last Song," the study examines how Ao's female protagonists confront and resist the dual challenges of militarized violence and the rigid patriarchal systems that confine them. Through their struggles, these women forge paths toward self-determination, showcasing their strength as they confront and resist systemic oppression. Through layered character portrayals, Ao reveals the convergence of gender, culture, and state oppression, shedding light on the struggles of women who are often marginalized both within their communities and in larger historical narratives.

Characters like Lentina, Khatila, Imtila, and Apenyo embody diverse forms of resistance, ranging from subtle acts of rebellion to bold acts of courage. Lentina's choice of a laburnum tree as her memorial, Khatila's ingenuity in protecting her husband, Imtila's quiet perseverance in a stifling marriage, and Apenyo's tragic victimization amidst military violence all draw attention to the multifaceted ways in which women reclaim their power. Ao's narratives are deeply rooted in Indigenous traditions, emphasizing the spiritual and cultural connections between women and their environment while critiquing the dehumanizing effects of patriarchal and state-imposed systems.

By weaving together themes of nature, identity, and resistance, Ao not only critiques the structural subjugation of women but also celebrates their strength and endurance. This paper argues that her stories serve as a powerful affirmation of the enduring struggle for gender equality and self-determination in patriarchal and militarized societies. Through an ecofeminist and postcolonial lens, the study focuses on the significance of Ao's work in elevating the voices of Indigenous women and reshaping narratives of resistance and empowerment. Ultimately, Ao's stories offer a profound commentary on the lived realities of women, advocating for their recognition and liberation in the face of institutionalized oppression and state violence.

Keywords: Patriarchal resistance, gender violence, Naga women, Indigenous, military oppression, Northeast India, Tamsula Ao.

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of Northeastern Indian literature, Tamsula Ao stands as a celebrated and influential figure, known for her remarkable contributions to Indian English literature as a short story writer. Her narratives reflect the oral traditions of storytelling through song, offering profound insights into the personal, cultural, and historical concerns of her homeland. Ao's works explore the rapid changes unfolding within her community, highlighting the rich history, culture, and traditions of the Nagas while addressing the complexities of gender identity and the risk of erasure of Indigenous histories due to acculturation and modernity.

The assertion made by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* resonates powerfully: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you." (366) This sentiment echoes the struggles of Ao's female protagonists as they seek to reclaim their autonomy amidst oppressive structures.

In her short stories, Ao sheds light on the plight of women in politically volatile and violence-ridden environments, particularly during periods of military operations. Women are portrayed as bearing the brunt of dual oppression: the brutality of military violence and the entrenched patriarchal norms of their society. Ao's narratives vividly depict the insecurity and

danger that women face, becoming victims of both external forces and internal cultural constraints. Through her storytelling, Ao brings forth the often overlooked and unexplored experiences of women, exposing the multiple layers of dehumanization and exploitation they endure. This paper delves into the gender dynamics and patriarchal resistance present in Ao's short stories, offering an in-depth analysis of how Indigenous women navigate their oppressive environments, seeking to reclaim their voices and identities.

LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD

Temsula Ao's short story "Laburnum for My Head" offers a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics and patriarchal resistance within the Indigenous context of Northeast India. Through the protagonist Lentina's journey, Ao delves into the subversion of patriarchal traditions, the reclamation of female independence, and the interconnectedness of nature and feminine identity. This story serves as a reflection of larger themes within Indigenous narratives, where women challenge societal norms and seek empowerment in subtle yet profound ways.

In "Laburnum for My Head," Lentina's determination to be remembered through the blooming of a laburnum tree, rather than the conventional grandeur of tombstones, serves as a powerful act of resistance against patriarchal expectations. Traditional societal norms dictate that women's lives, and even their memories in death, are controlled by male relatives and community practices. The erecting of expensive tombstones to honor the dead is steeped in patriarchal values of materialism and status. Lentina, however, quietly defies this tradition by opting for a natural, organic legacy, wondering, "Why not have a laburnum tree planted on her grave, one which would live on over her remains instead of a silly headstone?" (Ao, "Laburnum" 4). This choice aligns with Indigenous beliefs in the cyclical and nurturing aspects of nature. Her resistance extends further when she insists on accompanying her husband on his final journey to the graveyard, a space traditionally reserved for male authority. This decision reinforces her quiet defiance of societal norms, emphasizing her autonomy in both life and death.

Ao's story also sheds light on the profound connection between women and nature, often seen in ecofeminist discourse. The laburnum tree serves

as a symbol of Lentina's personal empowerment as an individual, defying patriarchal attempts to control both women and the environment. This interplay between nature and gender dynamics is a recurring motif in Indigenous storytelling, where women are frequently depicted as having a deep, spiritual connection to the land, which empowers them to resist oppressive forces.

For Lentina, the laburnum is not just a tree; it is an extension of her identity, her desire for freedom, and her rejection of the societal constraints imposed on her. Reflecting on the tree, Lentina thinks, "She had always admired these yellow flowers for what she thought was their femininity; they were not brazen like the gulmohars," (Ao, "Laburnum" 3) emphasizing qualities of humility, resilience, and quiet strength often associated with femininity in Indigenous cultures. By rooting her identity in nature, Lentina challenges the male-centric values of dominance, control, and materialism that underpin both colonial and patriarchal systems.

The death of Lentina's husband signifies a pivotal moment in the story, granting her the freedom to embrace her own freedom and pursue her dream of planting the laburnum tree. Before his passing, Lentina's enthusiasm for the tree was belittled as impractical, her desires overshadowed by her roles as a wife and mother. As Ao narrates, "Her husband and children were convinced that she was developing an unhealthy fetish for laburnum and began to talk openly about this in close family gatherings. She could not understand their concern and was inwardly hurt by their seeming insensitivity to the beauty around them." ("Laburnum" 3-4) This reflects the dismissal of women's desires and passions within patriarchal structures, where individuality is often undermined and trivialized. However, with the patriarchal figure removed, Lentina finally gains the space and autonomy to act according to her own wishes. This shift allows her to reclaim her individuality, breaking free from societal expectations and finding fulfillment on her own terms.

This shift reflects a common theme in Indigenous women's narratives: the reclaiming of her own identity in the absence of patriarchal control. Lentina's newfound freedom after her husband's death symbolizes the wider struggle of women in patriarchal societies, where their self-determination is often suppressed until they can break free from male authority. Her decision to be buried far from her husband's grave further reinforces her rejection of

traditional gender roles and expectations. As Lentina declares, "This is my spot; I want to be buried here when my time comes." Babu, taken aback, protests, "But madam, your place is already earmarked beside my mother!" (Ao, "Laburnum" 6) This defiance of societal norms—that women should always be tied to their husbands, even in death—represents Lentina's assertion of her individuality and her refusal to be bound by patriarchal conventions. The quote illustrates the tension between individual freedom and cultural expectations, drawing attention to Lentina's resolve to assert her own identity and forge her own path within the constraints imposed by societal norms.

At the core of "Laburnum for My Head" is a deep ecofeminist message, where Lentina's connection to the laburnum tree transcends the gender politics of her community. Ao's portrayal of the tree as a symbol of feminine strength, growth, and resilience is not confined to patriarchal notions of women as docile or submissive. Instead, the laburnum represents a spiritual and empowering force that resonates with Indigenous views of nature as a source of healing, wisdom, and renewal.

By choosing a natural, living memorial over a material one, Lentina's actions reflect a rejection of the patriarchal tendency to colonize and control both women and the environment. The laburnum becomes a metaphor for women's resistance to the forces that seek to suppress their voices and limit their potential. In this way, Ao weaves together themes of gender, nature, and Indigenous identity, creating a narrative that challenges patriarchal power structures while celebrating the resilience and autonomy of women.

Temsula Ao's "Laburnum for My Head" powerfully examines how Indigenous women, through Lentina's defiance and connection to nature, reclaim their self-determination and resist patriarchal norms, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for empowerment and freedom.

THE JUNGLE MAJOR

Temsula Ao's short story "The Jungle Major" serves as a potent examination of gender power structures and challenges to patriarchal authority within Indigenous narratives. Set against the tumultuous backdrop of the Naga independence movement, the story delves into the lives of Punaba and Khatila, a childless couple whose personal struggles intersect with larger political and social upheavals. Through the character of Khatila, Ao not

only challenges gender dynamics that confine women to passive roles but also reconfigures Indigenous women as active agents of resistance, defying both colonial and patriarchal forces.

As Uddipana Goswami notes, "Temsula Ao's stories exhibit a unique blend of personal and collective memory... Her characters, especially the women, are witnesses to history but also active participants, who challenge, resist, and survive the brutality of conflict-ridden Nagaland" (Goswami). This is evident in Khatila's actions throughout the story, where she actively resists both colonial authority and the patriarchal expectations placed upon her. (Goswami)

The story is anchored in the Naga freedom movement, where men like Punaba are drawn into the conflict, leaving their wives and families to navigate the perils of a society under siege. Punaba's involvement in the underground army subjects Khatila to scrutiny and surveillance, as government forces target the women left behind by rebel fighters. Ao deftly portrays the psychological and physical threats women face, with Khatila constantly under the threat of sexual violence as the authorities attempt to extract information about her husband's whereabouts. The officer's lascivious threat, "We know how to deal with women like you," (Ao, "Jungle Major"), accentuates the gendered violence that is systemic in both colonial and patriarchal systems of control.

However, Ao redefines the typical narrative of female victimhood by positioning Khatila as a figure of resistance. While Punaba's membership in the independence movement places her in danger, Khatila is not a passive victim. Instead, she exhibits resilience and resourcefulness in the face of extreme danger. Recognizing the imminent danger posed by the government forces, she devises a clever plan to protect her husband by disguising him as a lazy servant. As the search party arrives, she loudly berates him, calling out, "Hey, where is that lazy so-and-so? Haven't you gone yet?" (Ao, "Jungle Major" 6). Khatila's prompt action not only facilitates Punaba's escape but also prevents catastrophic consequences for the village. As Ao narrates, "Had he been killed or captured that morning, the entire village would have been punished for harboring a notorious rebel and not informing the government forces about his presence in the village" (Ao, "Jungle Major" 7). Through this decisive action, she not only defies colonial authority but also challenges the patriarchal expectations

placed upon her, positioning herself as a powerful figure of resistance. By exercising her independence in a context where women are often marginalized, Khatila dismantles the notion that women are submissive onlookers, instead highlighting their critical role in the survival and well-being of their communities.

In "The Jungle Major," Ao skillfully interrogates the intersection of gender and power within Indigenous narratives, emphasizing how women navigate and resist the constraints imposed by both colonial and patriarchal forces. Khatila's ability to outwit the government forces demonstrates her intelligence and ingenuity, qualities that are often overlooked in traditional patriarchal systems. In this way, Ao critiques the ways in which women's contributions to resistance movements are often marginalized or ignored, both within their own communities and in larger historical narratives.

In "The Jungle Major," Ao presents Khatila as a resourceful and courageous figure who defies patriarchal norms, showcasing women's essential roles in community survival and resistance. This characterization emphasizes the potential for Indigenous women to challenge and subvert oppressive power structures.

SOABA

In Temsula Ao's short story Soaba, the character of Imtila is vividly portrayed as a woman trapped in the confines of patriarchal oppression. Her struggles exemplify the significant challenges faced by women in deeply patriarchal societies, where economic reliance and societal expectations greatly restrict their freedom of choice. Despite possessing a compassionate and nurturing disposition, Imtila finds herself increasingly powerless as her husband's rising influence entraps her further. His ascent to power introduces drastic and unwelcome changes in her life, transforming her from a domestic figure into a prisoner of her own home, bound by rigid social norms. As Ao describes,

Her husband's changed fortunes compelled her to set aside her hitherto sedate and domesticated lifestyle and adopt one more in keeping with her husband's. While entertaining, she was required to wear the expensive clothes and jewelry that Boss bought for her. She was expected to circulate among the strangers who came to the parties and be the amiable hostess. ("Soaba" 14)

This passage brings forth to the transformation Imtila is forced to undergo, shifting from a life of simplicity and domesticity to one that reflects her husband's newfound status. She is not only expected to play the role of the dutiful wife but also to conform to the superficial trappings of wealth and social obligation. Her lack of freedom, symbolized by the expensive clothes and jewelry she must wear, reinforces her position as an object within her husband's domain, further emphasizing the oppressive control he exerts over her. Through this portrayal, Ao critiques the patriarchal structures that reduce women to mere accessories in their husbands' lives, stripping them of their personal liberty and individuality.

Imtila's situation epitomizes the orthodox patriarchal norms that objectify women, reducing them to mere possessions controlled by male authority. The narrative demonstrates how Imtila is stripped of her individuality, her movements restricted by the presence of bodyguards, and her relationships with friends and family strained due to the intimidating environment her husband has created. Her isolation within her own home showcases the psychological imprisonment women often face under patriarchal control, as they are separated from their support systems and forced into lonely, constricting roles.

In a desperate attempt to find relief from her oppressive circumstances, Imtila's compassion is channeled toward Soaba, an intellectually disabled boy she takes under her protection. This act of care represents her resistance to the dehumanizing environment around her, offering her a brief reprieve from her emotional confinement. However, it is the tragic death of Soaba that ultimately triggers a shift in her husband's behavior, awakening him from his moral decline. Imtila, despite her own suffering, takes it upon herself to restore order and salvage her marriage. As Ao writes, "She tried to pick up the broken pieces of their former life and create a new order from the pathetic remains. It was not an easy task, but she persevered because the alternative was too frightening to contemplate" ("Soaba" 20-21).

This moment exemplifies the resilience of Indigenous women, who, despite existing within deeply patriarchal structures, strive to affirm their self-determination and preserve familial connections. Imtila's perseverance can be seen as both a form of survival and a subtle resistance to the overwhelming forces that seek to dominate her. By reconstructing her life from the broken remnants of her marriage, she navigates the delicate

balance between submission and defiance, embodying the quiet strength of women who resist patriarchal control in subtle yet powerful ways.

Through Imtila's story, Tamsula Ao critiques dehumanizing gender dynamics, portraying her protagonist as a symbol of resilience who resists patriarchal subjugation through compassion, perseverance, and the assertion of her humanity.

THE LAST SONG

In "The Last Song," Tamsula Ao presents a harrowing depiction of gendered violence, particularly highlighting the dual forms of exploitation faced by women in conflict zones. Apenyo, a young girl, becomes a victim of both patriarchal oppression and military brutality, reflecting the deeply ingrained gender dynamics of her society. Women during this turbulent period in Nagaland are subjected to patriarchal control within their homes and communities, while also enduring the violence and dehumanization inflicted by military forces during political unrest. As Preeti Gill eloquently observes, "Tamsula Ao's work is like a mirror reflecting the trauma and everyday challenges of people living in the shadow of violence. Her stories don't just tell us about conflict; they make us feel the cost of it—especially for women and marginalized communities." (Gill)

The narrative focuses on Apenyo's tragic experience, as she is violently assaulted by an army captain during a village raid. Ao writes, "He grabbed Apenyo by the hair and with a bemused look on his face, dragged her away from the crowd towards the old church building" ("Last Song" 28) illustrating the captain's dehumanizing treatment of her as an object for his pleasure. Ao further critiques this abuse of power by highlighting how Apenyo was gang-raped "while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn" ("Last Song" 28), delineating the complicity and systemic nature of such violence.

The story poignantly captures how women's bodies become battlegrounds in political conflicts, where the lack of safety they experience is amplified by military operations. Apenyo and her mother, Libeni, both fall victim to sexual violence at the hands of the military, echoing the systemic silencing of women and their marginalization within both patriarchal and colonial structures. The silence of the community, which accepts the abuse

of Apenyo and her mother, further reinforces the idea that women are seen as objects whose bodies exist to appease male desires.

Ao's portrayal of violence in "The Last Song" critiques patriarchal dominance and the failures of military structures, using Apenyo and Libeni's experiences to highlight the historical marginalization of women in Indigenous contexts and advocate for resistance against ongoing gender suppression.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Tamsula Ao's short stories, including "Laburnum for My Head," "The Jungle Major," "Soaba" and "The Last Song," offer incisive examinations of gender dynamics and patriarchal resistance within Indigenous narratives. Through the portrayals of characters such as Lentina and Khatila, Ao challenges conventional representations of women as passive entities, instead illustrating their capacity for empowerment and strength. Lentina's subtle defiance and Khatila's bravery stress the ways in which Indigenous women reclaim their autonomy and assert themselves against oppressive structures.

As Tilottoma Misra notes in *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*, "Tamsula Ao's stories are not just about insurgency and violence; they are also about human endurance and the quiet strength of women who defy societal expectations and fight to carve out their own space in a patriarchal society." (Misra) This sentiment resonates deeply with the women in Ao's stories, who embody a quiet but profound resistance, refusing to be diminished by the systems that seek to control and subjugate them. Margaret Atwood's assertion in *The Handmaid's Tale*—"Don't let the bastards grind you down" (Atwood)—further echoes this theme, capturing the essence of these characters' quiet yet powerful defiance.

Furthermore, Ao's critique of the dehumanization of women and the shortcomings of patriarchal and governmental systems in safeguarding the vulnerable is poignantly articulated through the experiences of Apenyo and Libeni. Collectively, these narratives not only illuminate the historical marginalization of women within Indigenous contexts but also advocate for their empowerment, emphasizing the importance of recognizing their lived realities and the crucial roles they occupy in the ongoing struggle for survival and liberation.

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