



A STUDY OF FEMINISM IN THE POETICS OF TEMSULA AO

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Abstract

Temsula Ao, a well-known writer from Northeast India, focuses on the lives of Naga women facing challenges between tradition and modern life. In her book “These Hills Called Home,” she tells stories of women like Khatila, Imnala, and Aosenla, who struggle with family rules, marriage, identity, and society’s expectations. These women try to find their own voice and independence while dealing with hardships such as social stigma, family pressure, and war. Ao shows they strength, courage, and hope as they balance personal dreams with their roles in the community. Her stories highlight how women can grow, resist, and change their situations despite difficulties. Through her writing, Ao presents a clear message about women’s rights and equality, making her work important not only for the Naga community but for readers everywhere who want to understand the fight for women’s freedom and identity.

Keywords

Feminism, Naga women, Patriarchy, Oral tradition, Identity, Resistance, etc.

Full Article

Temsula Ao a prominent writer from North-East India, is known for her sensitive portrayal of women’s issues in modern society. Her work focuses on middle-class Naga women, deeply rooted in their culture and community. Her stories explore women’s quest for self-discovery and their struggle to break free from social, cultural, and personal restrictions. Her female characters are portrayed as autonomous beings who seek to understand their identity, history, and relationships within Naga society. Ao’s stories reveal the inner conflicts and suffering of these women, highlighting their resilience and strength.

In *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, Ao presents women caught between tradition and change. For instance, Khatila in *The Jungle Major* defies her family and clan by marrying a man from a different clan, challenging deep-rooted social norms. Despite facing strong opposition and numerous struggles, she aspires to independence and embraces a new understanding of life guided by love and conscience. Her journey reflects the complex negotiation between societal expectations and personal desires, a recurring theme in Ao’s feminist narratives.

At a critical point in her story, Khatila’s commitment to her loved ones deepens as she strives to protect her husband and villagers from the oppressive army presence. This struggle makes her more conscious of her roles and responsibilities as a woman within her society. While she remains obedient and silent, embodying dedication, sacrifice, and submission, she never crosses the boundaries imposed by her family’s traditional rules for women. Yet, by shouldering the full burden of household duties during her husband’s absence, Khatila gains a deeper understanding of what it truly means to be a woman in her community. This balance between conforming to tradition and asserting her inner strength highlights the tension Ao explores throughout her stories — the conflict between social conformity and individual agency.

Ao’s stories feature memorable female characters on quests for identity. In *The Last Song*, Apenyo, a gifted child singer, inherited her talent from her father, Zhamben. She watches her



mother Libeni weaving colourful shawls sold in the market to support the family. Libeni, a skilled and sought-after weaver, embodies strength, will, and resilience. Her love for Apenyo is so strong she would rather prefer to suffer herself than let her daughter suffer. Together, mother and daughter endure life's hardships without complaint. Libeni's courage to continue fighting despite overwhelming odds makes her a heroic figure. *The Last Song* portrays Apenyo's growth as she faces life's crises with positive affirmation, learning to accept adversity, adjust to new realities, and forgive others.

In *The Night*, Ao presents the fate of a woman in a male-dominated society through Imnala, an unmarried girl who is impregnated and abandoned by a man. While the man moves on with life, Imnala's world is shattered. She struggles with the patriarchal stigma of illegitimate motherhood and lack of paternal support. Her life becomes a search for identity amid societal rejection. Though her voice has traditionally been muted, she breaks free from silence and pain, shedding tears as she redefines her values and reflects on her mother's teachings. Her story powerfully expresses the woman's perspective on relationships, norms, and values in her community.

Imnala's memories bring her mother's words back, giving her a new perspective and helping her recreate her life. She searches for truth about herself, though her shadowy past distracts her. She realizes that society must grant women equal status. Her emotional life is shaped by relationships with family and society. Through crisis, she gains maturity and wisdom, understanding she must face the life ahead. Her growing self-awareness leads her to accept her condition and strive to overcome it. Imnala passes through crucial stages and finally reconciles with herself. Though different from others, she longs for peace. Seen through a male-dominated society, many women remain adjacent to men. She represents modern women—educated and socially aware—who face critical challenges. She listens to her inner voice and rebels against society. She starts her family life full of hope and confidence, rescuing herself from insecurity. Though love disappears, she avoids becoming a mute sufferer. Her conflict reflects that of many women—trusting her feminine self and confronting reality rather than fleeing it.

In *Three Women*, Ao examines human conditions through three generations: Martha, Medemla, and Lipoktula. Martha's story begins with childhood pain from being called a "coolie," facing exclusion and mockery in school. Despite loneliness, she finds solace sitting beside her grandmother. Medemla's story reveals heartbreak when her fiancé's father opposes their marriage. Though her mother sees it as fortunate, Medemla never recovers. Martha enters her life after being abandoned by a teagarden worker, named by a nurse because her father rejected her for being a girl. She developed a special love for the black beauty, forming a strong bond with Martha. Though she worried about the risks of adopting an orphan child with genetic and cultural differences as a single unmarried woman, her determination to make Martha her daughter grew stronger.

Lipoktula's secret reveals the grandmother's long-hidden sorrow and guilt after being raped by Merensashi, a village council member. Hearing about her daughter's love for Imsutemjen and their plans to marry, Lipoktula felt compelled to reveal the truth to prevent an incestuous relationship. She confronted Merensashi to stop the wedding, risking shame for both. The story highlights motherhood's sacredness and a mother's duty to protect her children, while exploring women's social discrimination when their moral values are questioned. It ends with hope through the struggles of these three women.

Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is set during the early Naga sovereignty movement, depicting village life and the people's confrontation with the Indian army's harsh repression. The 10 stories present men and women—young and old, innocent and corrupt—with impartiality, free from blame or accusation of outsiders. Stories like "Soaba," "The



Pot Maker,” and “An Old Man Remember” blend sadness and delight, leaving readers reflective, as Ao hopes we learn to live fully through lessons from the past, growing spiritually and becoming better human beings.

Aosenla's Story tells of a young bright girl struggling to break free from a tradition-bound society. When financial hardship forces her to attend a local college instead of pursuing her dreams, she faces disappointment as her family pressures her into marriage. Her journey begins with dissatisfaction and anger. She revolts against her parents but remains insecure in her need for love and security. Her mother was responsible for convincing her to accept the proposal because she had to obey her husband and attend to her children. It terrifies and humiliates Aosenla so much that she cannot even speak to her parents about her dreams. She feels stripped of independence by being forced to marry a man she has never met. At this juncture, she feels isolated from her family and realizes that as a woman, she must sacrifice her happiness for the family's well-being while trying to retain her individuality. But she cannot express all she wants to. This happens largely due to a guilt consciousness she has developed. Even her brothers urge her to accept the proposal from a prosperous man in the village. She feels deserted by her family. Acute confusion prevails. She feels unjustly treated by her mother, father, brothers, grandmother, and everyone else. She tries to compromise with a faint hope of resettlement, but bitter emotions grow stronger, and guilt sweeps over her mind, making her sensitive. She feels abhorrent and helpless, developing hatred toward her mother, who always obstructs her progress. The position of a woman is understood as an inner conflict between grandmother, mother, and daughter—a trauma born of the clash between imposed tradition and personal will.

Raised in a traditional atmosphere, the education she received made her rebellious. As an educated young woman, she questions everything. Her mother almost forces her to stay within the house's four walls and denies her permission to make decisions. This breeds hatred toward her mother for imposing restrictions, ignoring that times have changed. Sandwiched between tradition and modernity, education awakens a new consciousness absent in her parents' generation. She tries to accept reality and confronts family and society. She joins a wealthy family, and her future key lies in her hands, according to relatives. Though she wanted freedom and independence, questions now puzzle her. She wonders if she only broke family and tradition's hold to be dominated by love for her husband and family. She realizes she accepted Bendang not for love, but for family. Aosenla finds herself living in tragedy, unable to receive affection from those around her. It becomes a time of reckoning, as she reflects on her life, career, love, the traditional concept of marriage, and her choices. On one occasion, when helping her cousin Imlirenla prepare for a school variety show, she is questioned by her in-laws. This prompts Aosenla to reassess her situation and resolve to be more assertive and take control of her life. She decides to look back on her married life and try to adjust with her husband's family.

She reviews everything with reason and listens to the voice of her conscience. She tries to project her love, but in all her efforts, she fails—whether due to family pressure, fear, timidity, or a combination of these. In this deep introspection, Aosenla admits that her own sexuality was an intimidating discovery, which she used as a means toward pacification, reconciliation, or retrieving a missing element in her marriage. Besides being educated, she is very sensitive to her circumstances. She aspires to be independent and whole but finds many hurdles blocking her path. She realizes the futility of her life with her husband.

A woman is not only about giving birth and caring for her family. Aosenla's desire to assert herself and her affection for her children reveal her true self. She does not want her children to grow up like her, forced to live a life of disaster. She tries to offer love to preserve them. As a child, she was told to be obedient, submissive, and unquestioning, believing she would never pretend to be someone she was not. But marriage changed everything—she submitted and



adjusted. Another blow comes when the doctor tells her she can never have another child. This devastating news brings back the pain and sorrow surrounding her life. She resolves to free herself from worries and tensions. Aosenla struggles to understand the reality destroying her marriage—her sense of certainty, confidence, and assurance is shattered by her husband's presence. When she shares these feelings, he feels "nothing." She longs for real understanding between them. Though she seems to put recent tragedy behind her and embarks on a new phase, the spectre of death haunts her thoughts. The pain in her life is severe, but she tries to overcome it. She makes efforts to raise her family with love, socializing more with friends and relatives, visiting and inviting others for lunch and tea. Through this, she finds peace and happiness. Her expanding social circle helps build her identity in her own right.

Aosenla remains silent, probing her past as her life with her husband unravels. Establishing a rapport with him means a lot to her. She recalls her upbringing and environment, reflecting on what life has taught her. She wants to build a healthy family relationship and has always tried to balance the husband-wife relationship. But earlier, he never felt the need for friendliness or reconciliation, as he does now after his recent shameful behaviour toward her. He was overtaken by remorse after assaulting her and began trying to please her. Through her character, the woman's situation leads to achieving her goal of winning back her husband's love. She is happy and able to do what she wants. She longs for an ideal family built with love and emotion. She notices a great change in her husband's behaviour and quietly observes him. As a woman, she has faced many obstacles, but with positive thoughts and affection, she wins the hearts of his family. With silence and bitter feelings, she has suffered and tolerated many problems. Slowly, her anger fades as she takes responsibility for raising her two daughters. Despite alienation from her husband, she has no complaints. Social conformity is more obligatory for a woman than a man. She is careful to mould her children with love and care. Concern for her daughters is paramount; she wants to protect them from suffering.

Aosenla realizes dwelling on the past will spoil her present. She knows dealing with past issues will not let her move forward. She is a modern woman with real strength. Due to differences in attitude, their marriage becomes shaky and gloomy, more compromise than love, based on social fear rather than mutual need. In her thoughts, Aosenla sees a marriage filled with hatred and differences, reflecting in her social life too. To have a balanced conjugal life, husband and wife must be equal—something she painfully understands. Her inner turmoil is so bitter she cannot express it. Frustrated and disappointed, she is aware of her limitations but must accept the bitter realities women face. Traditional roles still dominate professional ones.

The arrival of an unwanted baby changes her life drastically. She becomes a socially awakened woman with infinite capacity for love and a passionate desire to be absorbed by her husband. She embraces life with commitment and joy. As a mother, she erases every trace of problems in her family. The love for her children makes her more responsible. Her dream of marital happiness grows, and she sacrifices past anger for her daughters' sake. Aosenla learns to see her life independently, recognizing her autonomy beyond being dependent on Bendang. The novel ends affirming Aosenla's individuality and the endless principle of life. Her feminine and motherly qualities add depth. Her confrontation with herself and role as mother, wife, and daughter-in-law shows her capability to decide for herself. She represents modern women who are educated and connected to society.

Ao's stories have not only psycho-social and politico-historical relevance, but also deep-searching philosophical relevance. They speak of the "human" condition, about you and I, about real people who lived in Nagaland—perhaps now fictionalised, but never out of context. In her stories, the "particular" is so "universal," cutting across the boundaries of changing historical and political eras, and confronting the very core of human nature and human plight against the



backdrop of compelling circumstances – all this accomplished very subtly and skilfully. And within this subtlety lies her feminist poetics—quiet yet unflinching, deeply rooted in lived realities, and attuned to the silences and voices of women navigating a patriarchal and turbulent world.

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