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WOMEN FRONTLINERS: A STUDY OF VICTIMIZATION AND AGENCY IN TEMSULA AO’S FICTIONS

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Abstract

The region collectively termed Northeast India has often being a subject of misrepresentation as a result of its position as a geographical borderland, and thus often relegated to the periphery of epistemic enunciation. Either there is a lack of truthful representation or more often the region is represented as a homogenous entity upholding and propagating stereotypes. Hence, literature emerging from the region is often dismissed as tales of war without anything significant to offer. However, Naga woman writer Temsula Ao attempts to represent the stories from a war zone by moving beyond the binaries of victim/aggressor, participation/resistance, passive recipient/active perpetrator of violence, of male/female, etc. Temsula Ao’s fictions are significant for their strong marginalised characters who not only present their side of the story through their voice, and hence their version of history, but also recount the strength of these women who came out triumphant with their humanity intact amidst the oppressive nature of the private space. These characters frequently assume new roles and responsibilities participating in political struggles redefining traditional roles and existing gender relations. Above all, they find means and ways of coping rather than being buoyed down by the weight of multiple aggressors. Despite multiple natures of oppression, the already oppressed in society, particularly women in a patriarchal society, have challenged and subverted various means of subjugation to posit themselves as survivors. Ao, through her stories in the anthologies These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone and Laburnum for My Head have sought to highlight the manner in which these marginalised characters in society, in the process of actively resisting in various forms, have re-articulated their position of a victim into an agency, thereby positing themselves at the forefront of the Conflict.

Keywords: Conflict, agency, gender, Naga woman writing, Temsula Ao.

Conflict as embodiment of various forms of violence in all its subjective and objective forms defies easy categorization and includes a number of legitimate/illegitimate, necessary/useless, visible/invisible, and rational/irrational acts. It goes beyond mere physicality to impeach upon the very humanity and dignity of man. It spreads itself in chains and spirals and acts in complicity with other forms of power structures. According to Girard, the only way to assuage it is through an identification of a surrogate victim. The victim should be at once located within the system and yet far enough to avoid retaliation. This proximity is required for it constitutes what he calls a collective meconnaisance or misrecognition in order to divert the violence from the original target. The success of this lies in the society’s
ability to conceal this nature of sacrifice. Though both Agamben and Girard are aware of the lack of sacredness to this concept of scapegoating in modern conflict, yet a similar notion of this scapegoat still exists in the form of the marginalised in society particularly women. Women are, at once the modern repository of this notion of misrecognition and their continued use as weapons of war only heightened a sense of victimhood which objective forms of violence such as patriarchy chooses to appropriate. Hidden in the rhetoric of land and honour, and national symbols of liberation, women bodies and identity become sites of contestations through which highly gendered power structures assert themselves. Thus, patriarchy becomes another form of systemic violence that emulates and restructures itself at times of conflict further marginalizing and subjugating women and silencing their existential voices. However, narratives of women’s sufferings are often juxtaposed with their tales of survival and they assume the responsibility of witnessing the ‘unassumability’. It is precisely this voice of survival that forms the agency of the marginalised in society. Temsula Ao, in her stories, has endeavoured to bring such narratives to the forefront and in turn posit women, their bodies, ‘self’ and identity, and their ‘storied’ existence into the battle’s frontline.

The various stories in the anthology These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone narrate experiences of ordinary individuals, with strong understanding of women lives and predicaments. Most of these narratives recount events around the Naga nationalist movement that swept the region after India’s Independence, and the counter measures while portraying alternative realities—the history of the subaltern, of the common people that did not make the headlines of newspaper pages or the media. In popular imagination, battles might have been fought and won with guns between the two disparaging groups but these stories actually present the gaps, silences, and alternate realities where the actual ideological warfare—battle between differing ways of life, between two differing of nationalities, between identities, gender power relations, and between actual life and death took place on a daily basis amidst the sounds of bullets, cries of innocent children, mourning mother and the eerie deafening silences between connecting shots of bullets and machine guns. Within this fictionalised retelling of historical events, whereby history is fictionalised, the narrative ‘self’ oscillates between individual subjectivity, collective consciousness, shared meanings, universal humanism and a community’s political, sociological and psychological history. These stories are geographically and historically located within the Naga Hills and explore issues of identity, nation, modernity, and nature and effects of war particularly on the marginalized female self. But more importantly, they are tale of resistances both within and without the narrative whereby characters attempt to negotiate subjective and objective violence threatening their very existence.

The notion of conflict is defined on two terms in the stories that are included in the volume. The first is the already well-established notion about political conflict in the North-eastern part of India. This conflict is extremely varied and complex and is impossible to dismiss it as mere tussle between two warring factions. The conflict engulfs everyone, the state, the rebels and its various factions, young, old, man, women, able, disabled, tribal, non-tribal, etc. However, the second aspect of conflict that the stories highlight is the conflict on the psyche of ordinary citizens caught
between the crossfire. It ranges from one of comprehension and incomprehension, participation and indifference, appreciation and condemnation, etc. What is more explicitly brought out through these narratives is a conflict within the inner self of the individual and the community as a collective self where their fate has become a battlefield in which they themselves have no active control whatsoever except be passive recipients of the brutalities associated with the conflict. This aspect of the conflict becomes even more prominent when the subjects are those marginalised in society whose voices and representations are suppressed by various systematic power structures.

Some stories such as ‘An Old Man Remembers’, and ‘Shadows’ deal directly with the actual arms struggle providing the reader a journey into the jungles and battle frontlines. A lot of the stories on the other hand, posits the conflict in the background and examines the interior world of the narrator or the marginalised in society. This is an act of subversion where the story of history is no longer the sole monopoly of the outside world governed by masculine might and power but is inclusive of the ‘effeminate’ interior space as it becomes an active site of contests and resistance producing new forms of heroism, bravery, and courage, through creation of counter spaces and identities outside the measuring yardstick of patriarchy and male dominated power structures. These counter spaces are a domain of the marginalised in society including women empowering them as resisters, as ‘frontliners’ turning their victimhood as one of survival. Whether as active fighters, or protectors of domestic space, their contributions are usually relegated to a position of invisibility but in actuality occupy the most visible field of activity in daily life in zones of conflict resisting against all forms of bio-political, geo-political, economic, and psychological forms.

The first story in the collection “The Jungle Major” narrates the plight of Punaba, a not-so-good looking and relatively uneducated man who, enamoured by the initial fervour of fighting for the Naga nation joined the underground force and eventually became a leader amongst the new wave of patriots. Facing possible arrest, or more probably multiple bullets, he was saved by the wits of his rather beautiful wife Khatila who had just enough time to throw a disguise around him by dressing him up in some of his old clothes, smearing his face and hands with ash and shouting at him as to a domestic servant reprimanding him for not carrying out his duties faithfully. Intensifying her reprimand with each approaching sound of the soldiers, she yelled out: “You no good loafer, what were you doing all day yesterday? There is no water in the house even to wash my face. Run to the well immediately or you will rue the day you were born”. (Ao 24) Unable to comprehend the truth behind the disguise, the soldiers eventually left the house and the village.

Through the extremely resourceful wit of Khatila, the story, at a microcosmic level, provides an alternative path of conflict resolution which is not violent in nature. In fact, the most violent of all scenes in the narrative is the violence of the Khatila’s shout that silences the sounds and echoes of bullets. The voice of a woman and her wit is able to drown out the sounds of guns. An unlikely hero—an ordinary woman, not only bore her husband’s absence from home with bravery but also manages to shield him, herself and the whole village from possible abuse and annihilation. She is portrayed as a frontline who manages to stay at the forefront of the conflict through
her steadfastness in maintaining her domestic affairs as well as by standing in the firing line when needed. A simple but beautiful village woman, who supposedly ‘lowered’ herself by marrying a relatively uneducated, ugly looking man belonging to a minor clan working as a driver, became a subject of gossip, acerbated by their lack of children. However, the narrative empowered these two marginalised members of society to plot an escape not only for themselves but for the whole village. Punaba though considered a lowly figure by din of his clan and vocation was able to make a seamless transition from being a taxi driver to becoming a captain in the insurgency movement. Khatila, on the other hand, though unable to move out of her domesticity steadfastly went about her business as usual even after her husband disappeared without any intimation. This retreat into the interior in order to stop the gossip tongue from wagging is a coping mechanism and survival strategy on her part. Yet, when the time is ripe, it is her domestic space that she uses as a counter space to actively subvert male patriarchy and military power.

The second story, ‘Soaba’ highlights the plight of two marginalised members of society: a village idiot and a housewife trying to make sense of a society spiralling into chaos and senselessness. At this point in the conflict, village grouping has become a common political strategy for the Indian army where a number of different villages would be dislodged from their ancestral sites and herded together in a concentration camp-like environment where villagers are herded together in cramped spaces closely guarded by armed military personnel, a space Agamben refers to as state of exception where exception is the rule, reducing its inhabitants to ‘bare life’. Amidst such developments, in the town of Mokokchung, there emerged a notorious leader of a new semi military group designated as ‘flying squad’, a band of die-hards who would become the army’s ‘extra arms’ beyond the law and civil rights and who would also ‘guide’ the forces who were so pitifully uninformed not only about the terrain on which they were fighting and dying, but also about a bunch of people so alien to them. The new leader of this ‘flying squad’ Imlichuba got himself drunk with power and roamed around streets intimidating civilians and suspected insurgents subjecting them to brutal tortures and interrogations within the walls of his own house. The cries of pain and moaning became so frequent and loud that eventually the only record player that Boss owned in the whole town became insufficient to drown out the noises. Though he manages to bear the violence he committed through his rowdy ways, his wife Imtila and Soaba-the idiot began to be terrorised beyond measure. The house became a physical and psychological prison where Imtila resorted to locking herself in her room while Soaba crouched inside a small hole in the pantry. This simple housewife, caught between fulfilling her role as a wife, a woman and a mother on the one hand, and giving all up to preserve her humanity, on the other, finally took the enormous decision to empower herself by moving out of her husband’s bedroom and bestowed her motherly affection on Soaba instead. This may seem like a small act of subversion but in a patriarchal society like the Nagas, an act of resilience against a power-hungry male chauvinist is no trivial act.

At the heart of it, the story is about three characters occupying the interstices of societal space: a woman amidst a slew of oppressive forces from patriarchy, violence, political power, and military might; a mentally challenged individual who wanders about from place to place able to articulate only his immediate physical senses such as hunger, thirst and pain; and last but not the least, a man seemingly powerful, yet merely a puppet hunted down from both sides. Imlichuba is one of those surrendered
militant who is simply used by the Indian army to use his knowledge of the underground world. As such, the power that he seems to possess, in the end, only remains a façade, where it could be taken away from him any moment when he is no longer required. Towards the end, his frustration leading to depression and extreme alcoholism emanates from a sense of insecurity for his stature, power, as well his own life. He is no longer the hunter that preys and traumatizes his prey but becomes a living dead, a mere shadow of his once imposing self.

Perhaps the strongest tale of resistance and survival is echoed in the ‘The Last Song’. A beautiful and simplistic Naga village explodes to a scene of absolute horror where a community celebration of the new church building dedication service became a celebration of mass murder, rape and torture orchestrated by the Indian army. The army justified its action on the pretext that the villagers were helping the rebels but in reality the story very delicately reminds the reader of the dilemma faced by every Naga village of paying forced ‘taxes’ to the Naga ‘government’ on the one hand and paying a price for it from the army on the other. Not paying taxes would mean trouble for the Nagas apart from being labelled traitors, and on the other hand, succumbing to the antics of the underground is interpreted as actively supporting anti state establishments and hence to be brought to justice by the brutal hands of the army. The story narrates how the political impeach upon the personal spaces of people but more than that it highlights the prerogative of the individual to hang on to humanity and every aspect that constitutes oneself a part of community. Hence the young protagonist Apenyo, a singer in the church choir, decides to sing through her ordeal like a soul possessed. “She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her… as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to God in heaven.” (Ao 53) It is, in a way, her mechanism to deal with the sexual and inhuman violence by shutting out the exterior world with her gift and the purpose of her life. She uses her gift as an agency to openly counteract the might of the masculinized military personnel and remained unaffected throughout the ordeal. The intrusion on her young body might have killed her physical body but she refuses to be defeated by the might of arms. It is a tale of a young frontline girl who confronted the violence against military occupation of her home, family, and village. The manner in which she gathered power in her moment of despair makes it impossible for us to see her victimization without seeing her agency and her steadfastness.

At the level of the narrative, story-tellers must tell stories to survive. Irrespective of the situation, it becomes their responsibility to share and shed light on the truth. “I must tell my stories before time claims it all”, says Temsula Ao in the Perface to her memoir. Moreover, she tells her story and the story of the community “lest we forget” because forgetting is not an option. Just as Apenyo’s song echoed throughout the hills much after her death so should these stories live much after the story teller has moved on because the identity and the spirit of the individual and the community is enmeshed in these stories of being—the beginning, the present and the future. These stories will continue to remind future generations of their roots, the wars they have fought, the lives lost, and guide them in their future course of becoming. “Youngsters of today have forgotten how to listen to the voice of the earth, and the wind”, (Ao 73) says the story-teller recounting Apenyo’s tale long after her death. Apenyo’s voice of resistance against conflict taking over her life, Libeno’s resistance against conforming
to society’s convention of ‘needing’ a protective male hand in the family—these are voices of resistances that is beautifully implicated in the narrator’s voice. These stories need to be told and as the ‘hum’ in the air reminds the old storyteller of the anniversary of that black Sunday some thirty odd years ago, these narratives will remind future storytellers to keep on doing the good work.

‘The Curfew Man’ follows the lives of a couple Satemba and his wife Jemtila and their struggle to make an honest living while circumstances conspired against them. With a shattered knee-cap Jemtila urged Satemba to take a premature retirement from his position as a constable in the Assam Rifles, as he could no longer dispense his duty as a football player nor qualified enough to handle a desk job. All along, the wife Jemtila is the one driving their life forward with all the important decisions taken by her. She decided that Satemba should take a premature retirement; they should move back to their ancestral village in Nagaland from Assam and take up farming; and when two years of farming proved unsuccessful, she took him to Mokokchung to try a new life. With her husband’s pension proving to be too little to build a life on, she moves from house to house trying to find a job for herself. She eventually found one in the house of a new S.D.O of the town who also became an employer for her husband. Ultimately, forced by circumstances surrounding the perennial conflict, the power equation that patriarchy attributes to gender relations was reversed by Jemtila whereby she becomes the so-called ‘male’ in the house, earning for and ‘protecting’ the family.

Another reality of conflict that is often overlooked is that existing structures such as class, religion, patriarchy, etc. get strengthened at times of conflict. Very often narratives of ‘protection’, ‘safety’, etc., vis-à-vis woman, dominates political and social discourse at times of conflict. As Zizek argues in Violence: Six Sideways Reflection, this, in a way, strengthens the hegemonic dispensation of the not so visible, but ubiquitous and much more systematic form of objective violence such as patriarchy. ‘The Night’ critiques a lot of such existing social realities based on gender. Imnala became a societal outcast as a result of double betrayal by two different men. Two children out of wedlock not only meant disrepute for herself but also her family. But what the story is able to achieve is to bring out the predicament of a girl child in a patriarchal Naga society. In both the unions, she became a symbol of rebuke while the two men walked away scot-free. The first man did not even owned up to being the father of the child hence casting aspersions on the character of Imnala to the extent that the new born remained without a clan. Friends and family warn her to toe the line so that she would have a male to protect her at ‘times like this’. However, she resolves to not be dependent on a male protector but rather bring up her two children on her own in the best possible way. She decides to complete her education, get a job, and provide a better life for them than she has seen for herself. This small act of subversion empowers her rather than being bowed down and becoming a victim of circumstances and patriarchy.

The narrative depicts two strong women characters—Imnala and her mother, though seemingly different, but whose determinations allow them to suffer without being defeated. What is remarkable about this story is the way Imnala’s body became a site of contestation. Traditional notions of woman, wife and motherhood clash with Imnala’s desire to take control of her body and sexuality. Traditional notions of being
a woman place a lot of emphasis on chastity and sexual ‘purity’ and patriarchy becomes the legal guardian punishing anyone who erred by shaming, disowning, or other extreme measures such as death. She is trapped between satisfying her own needs and those of society’s requirement. Pushed to such extreme, the narrative provides Imnala with a resolve to work towards self-awareness and a new concept of independence by deciding to take matters in her own hands and irrespective of what the council decides, she would raise her children to the best of her ability. This counter-narrative of motherhood challenges prevalent patriarchal notions of motherhood. It critiques the institution of marriage which inevitably leads to subordination of women. Alternately, the story imparts a sense of dignity to her character, freeing her from the role of an asexual object—as wife, daughter, sister, and raises her to a level of self-independence giving her a sense of agency both within man-woman relationships and the larger discourse of society and its concerns for survival. The body here is both a site of abuse as well as emancipation.

Similarly, in the story ‘Pot Maker’, the site of contest is relegated to that of women vocation. The art of pot making is not just another occupation taught to woman but also signifies continuity of the community from the past and also ensures its future survival, hence acts as a link of the past to the present and towards a new future. As told in the story, the ability of the woman in the village to make the finest pot in the area has meant that the village has been able to survive many attacks from enemies in the past. Thus, this tradition became interlinked with not only the livelihood of the individual and community but also their lives with violence. Temsula Ao, through this story points out the irony of how the well-being and survival of an entire village rests on the hands of the female population yet they seem to have no control over it as the survival of the art is ironically ensured by a council that is entirely male. As such, it is no longer a vocation of choice for woman but one that is imposed upon them. Thus, Arenla’s decision to not teach her daughter, Sentila, the art is a direct subversion of the lack of women’s role in shaping the past, present and future of its own community. Women exist only in relation to male. ‘Myth marginalizes women, history excludes them”, (Jain 125) says Jasbir Jain in her book Women Across Cultures, and both of these are hegemonic power structures with gender dimensions. Arenla’s attempt at intervention is, in a way, an effort to redeem the ‘self’ from this a-historicity and locate it within the historical mapping of the community.

The simplicity, yet effectiveness, of this subversion, as mentioned, is embedded within tales of survival. At the same time, these tales also highlight the agency inherent in such instinct to survive. As such, they not only provide an alternate reality to the political conflict that has engulfed the region over decades but also suggests alternate modes of mediating, one that is more simple, humane, and less atrocious. In ‘A Simple Question’, for example, the indomitable spirit of a peasant woman Imdongla navigates through the complexities of the conflict and destabilizes the entire equation by undercutting the very fabric on which the reasoning of the conflict is premised upon. Seeking the release of her husband and the other gaonburas who were captured by the army for paying taxes to the underground (interpreted by the army as ‘helping’ the underground outfit), she resolutely walked up the hills to the army outpost after coming back from the field and stood guard at the entrance of the make-shift prison inside which her husband and the others were lodged. On confronting the captain, she asks:
Look at them; aren’t they like your own fathers? How would you feel if your fathers were punished for acting out of fear? Fear of you Indian soldiers and fear of the mongrels of the jungle. (Ao 39)

But what affected the captain most was one single question that Imdongla had repeatedly asked: ‘What do you want from us?’ It was this last question that crushed the pretence to all logic for the captain that eventually led to the release of the gaonburas. Underneath the simple narrative is the character of Imdongla that drives the narrative forward with her fearlessness and determination. In the face of violence, the uneducated Imdongla is the one character who is able to wade through the complexities of the situation and come up with simple solutions in life-threatening scenarios. She is responsible for saving the lives of many men in the village in the face of atrocities and at the end of it all the narrative portrays her as one more courageous than the rest of the men put together. The men of the village seem completely perplexed and intimidated against both the warring factions but the feisty Imdongla is prepared to subject the army captain to the lowest of insult, by untying her waist cloth and standing resolutely against the power of arms. She refuses to be a victim and emerges a survivor from under the crushing might of military boots. As against patriarchal monopoly of protecting the ‘weak’, the power equation is reversed in this case. It is the so-called ‘weak’ uneducated woman that ends up protecting the ‘protectors’. Her agency in this case is allowed by her transgression of gender boundaries. Her venture outside the female space of domesticity into a military zone of the army makes her a frontliner in both the literal and symbolic sense. Her venture outside her prescribed domesticity also deconstructs traditional patriarchal roles and allows her to provide a peaceful resolution to the conflict at hand.

From disguising militants to raising children out of wedlock— acts of subversion abound throughout the narratives. All these are inherently tales of the subaltern waiting to be told. The powers of oppression are identifiably multi-pronged: that of the political power structures which are the harbinger of the Conflict, modernity and its by-products, and various shades of patriarchy. It is these structures that are critique through various marginal figures of the society—the under privileged and the oppressed. However, the nature, degree, sources, and agents of the resistances vary from one story to the other. The sentiments and dilemma experienced by men and women, young and old, harmed or causing harm, noble or corrupt, innocent or despicable, whether commonplace or extraordinary are expressed with as little adornment or exaggeration or pretension and honest empowerment of voices that are otherwise suppressed or unheard in the annals of formal history making. There are no in-between spaces where ordinary citizens can insulate themselves but rather the conflict co-opts people into its unending cycle. The perpetrators of violence in Ao’s stories are forever haunted by their act(s) and inevitably subjected to either external or internal forms of justice. Just as her characters have no escape from their histories, so is her act of telling not one of political exorcism but an act of mediating the conflict—the political conflict as well as her conflict of representation. Her portrayal of the violence may be distant but her identification with the tragic lives of the individuals disrupted at various levels by the all-encompassing violence and the stories of the triumph of the strong-willed to move ahead with their lives amidst such inimical ambience fighting actively to preserve their sanity and maintain peace, is immediate. Žižek states that when dealing with representation of violence, there is a thin line between participating in its horror, on the one hand, and over simplifying or
portraying an inaccurate description of it, on the other. Ao explores these various facets of the conflict and looks at how they impact human lives, the bio-politics of conflict in Foucault and Agamben’s theorization. But more than simply conducting a political, sociological, or philosophical study of the conflict, the narratives are remarkable for the depiction of how such conflict inevitably empowers certain sections of the society to emerge as ‘frontliners’ transgressing and subverting all notions of borders and boundaries laid down by highly gendered male sensibilities. As Marx argues that capitalism intrinsically lays down conditions for its own destruction, conflict in similar terms, allows spaces of contest and resistance within its politics of subjugation. More than anything else, it is the emergence of such counter spaces through marginalised and oppressed elements of the society that Ao gives voices to. The subaltern in this case not only speaks but resists and fights beyond bounds of patriarchy and masculinized military zone. They achieve this by challenging roles of sexuality, through the use of their body as weapons of war, through their wit, and through resilience, as various characters in her stories exemplify. Their victimhood goes hand in hand with agency. It deconstructs the representation of these marginalised citizens as either faceless masses who support, encourage, or promote insurgency or the other side of the spectrum which is that of being a helpless victim dominated by various forms of subjective, objective and systemic violence without providing a thorough understanding of the complex geo-politics of their loss and struggle. Their resistance is demonized and victimization dramatized. In Naderah’s words,

The strength these women demonstrated clearly revealed their indispensability to the causes of national liberation, not only as actors in the material revolution but as producers of an ideology that carries the potential for radical social change. Through their experience of oppression, they have learned most effectively the dynamics of oppression and how to negate it. They may see aggression to be necessary, but they propose new ways, strategies, and targets in order to cope. Their unique activism in the ‘battlefields’ and their courage in the face of daily adversity contrasts with social expectations that they should be passive and absent.” (Naderah 302)

It is the universality of this victimhood and the commonality of such subversions across the globe from Kashmir to Palestine to Moscow to Africa that Ao identifies herself and her characters with that renders her politics as one of universalism. Ao’s politics is her belief that to understand women’s victimization and agency—the way they tolerate, reject, react, fight back, subvert against any form of violence— one needs to look at the simple micro-political resistance to subjugation and not just the macro-political power play, the ‘grand narrative’ as it were. Hence, the home, village, field, their bodies, sexuality, activities like pottery, weaving, singing— all became active sites of resistances and contestations where the personal has become political, and hence they needed to react politically in order to ensure theirs and their loved ones security and safety. As such, the ‘self’ for Ao is ensonced in this universalist voice mediating the Conflict through tales of simple triumphs providing a possibility of a counter space, a counter narrative. It is with this responsibility that she wishes to re-tell the stories of her land and her people. These are narratives of resistances. They seek to undercut the distinctions between public and private, visible and invisible, legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence in a zone of conflict. This zone is characteristically a state of exception, a gray zone, or a veritable space of death where
political power, particularly characteristic of its thanatopolitical power, has absolute control over human life. As such, violence becomes an everyday reality. Nationalism can potentially inculcate a sense of belonging, and promote solidarity which can overcome pre-existing barriers yet it also inevitably institute new power relations that often end up strengthening patriarchy and marginalising women. Kaplan in the introduction to Between Woman and Nation writes:

We have the never ending experience of nation making, through which the vulnerability of certain citizens, some of whom are often in question, can be mapped. Often these subjects stand on the edge of contradictory boundaries—equality and liberty, property and individual self-possession, and citizenship itself—that the modern nation-state cannot resolve. (Nadirah 53)

These marginalised subjects are often women that occupy the ‘interstices’ of nation-making projects. Their lives and bodies become sites of contests for nationalist sentiments where patriarchal controls are inscribed onto it in the same way that nation is inscribed with nationalist signification.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, in his book Violence: Six Sideways Reflection, characterizes violence into two broad categories: objective and subjective. He argues that very often the all-pervasive nature of subjective violence such as armed conflicts aids objective violence inherent in social structure to go unnoticed.


3. Expanding on Foucault’s ideas of bio-politics, Agamben describes how such spaces is a prototype of ‘thanatopolitical’ (administering of death) power of modern bio-politics and creates a population of “living death”, which he calls homo sacer. The homo sacer is an example of ‘bare life’ subjected to double exclusion: from the ius humanum (human law) and the ius divinum (divine law). These exclusions places the homo sacer in direct exposure to violence of sovereign nature where lives and bodies are taken by the state at whim not as a legal punishment for any crime committed nor for religious sacrifice but merely for their availability. As such, these groupings are witness to a number of torture crimes such as rape, mutilations of the body and genitals, molestations, etc. Apart from the feeling of displacement, disruption of normal life, curtailment of freedom, these camps are a modern day structures of the concentration camp relegating people to a status of ‘refugee’ in their own land. These camps are examples of the total triumph of power over human lives described by Agamben.

4. Gaonbura's are villagers chosen from different clans by the government to aid them in their fight against the underground outfits. Saying no to the offer would mean sympathising with the rebels. On the other hand, becoming one means ‘betraying’ your own people in the eyes of the rebels. It is the same as forced conscription on the other side of the conflict. Torn between these two conflicting loyalties, gaonburas often end up paying with their lives. These are the prototype of what Agamben calls musselmann who constantly end up as sacrificial scapegoats of the conflict.


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