

Decolonizing Naga Identity: A Study of TamsülaAo's Literary Representation of Indigenous Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the decolonization of Naga identity through TamsülaAo's literary works, with a particular focus on *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006). The study explores how Ao's narratives interrogate colonial history and its ongoing impact on Naga identity, analysing themes of cultural alienation, resistance, and the search for an authentic self. Ao's incorporation of indigenous resistance through oral traditions, folklore, and mythology offers a unique framework for understanding how colonialism shaped, fragmented, and continues to influence the cultural consciousness of the Naga people. Through her literary lens, Ao provides a critique of the colonial and postcolonial landscapes, calling for the revitalization and reclamation of Naga identity in the face of oppressive historical narratives.

Keywords: Naga Identity, Folklore, Mythology, Resistance And Postcolonial

INTRODUCTION

TamsülaAo, one of the foremost Naga writers in contemporary Indian literature, engages deeply with the history, culture, and identity of the Ao-Naga people, offering a narrative rooted in resistance against colonial forces and postcolonial alienation. Ao's works, particularly *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, offer a compelling examination of the postcolonial experience, using the backdrop of war, conflict, and indigenous survival. Through folklore, myth, and oral traditions, Ao challenges the colonial constructions of Naga culture and identity, presenting a view of history that is cyclical, dynamic, and rooted in indigenous worldviews. This paper delves into Ao's critique of colonialism and the ongoing struggle to reclaim and redefine Naga identity in the context of global colonial histories.

Colonialism and Naga Identity

The colonial history of Nagaland is one of prolonged violence, cultural imposition, and loss of autonomy. From British colonial rule in the late 19th century to the ongoing postcolonial struggles, the Naga people have had their identity shaped and reshaped through external forces. Colonialism not only altered the political and economic landscape of the Naga people but also deeply impacted their cultural fabric. The introduction of Christianity, Western education, and colonial laws served to alienate the indigenous Naga identity from its traditional roots.

In *These Hills Called Home*, Ao encapsulates this alienation by narrating the experiences of her characters who find themselves caught between their indigenous heritage and the encroaching forces of modernity. Ao's critique of colonial rule is embodied in her characters' struggles to reconcile their identities with a foreign imposition. The recurring motif of war in Ao's work serves as both a literal and metaphorical representation of this struggle. As the characters grapple with the forces of colonialism and postcolonialism, Ao emphasizes the long-lasting effects of colonization on the Naga psyche and identity.

The introduction of Western ideals of civilization and progress often led to the dismissal of Indigenous ways of life, categorizing them as "primitive" or "backwards." The cultural alienation resulting from such imposed narratives is a central theme in Ao's work. By depicting the disintegration of traditional values in the face of external pressure, Ao highlights the emotional and psychological toll of colonialism.

Her portrayal of the Naga identity as fluid and fragmented reflects the trauma and dislocation experienced by the Naga people as they navigate the tensions between their indigenous past and the dominant colonial discourse.

Folklore, Myth, and the Reclamation of Naga Identity

In Ao's literary work, folklore and myth are not simply traditional elements but are re-imagined tools for resistance and cultural reclamation. The stories, legends, and rituals of the Ao-Nagas become the lens through which Ao critiques colonial history and asserts an indigenous perspective on history. The role of myth and folklore in Ao's work is to challenge the colonial erasure of Naga history and offer an alternative narrative that is deeply rooted in the indigenous experience.

TemsülaAo incorporates stories of gods, spirits, and legendary heroes that reflect the struggles and resilience of the Naga people. These mythic figures often symbolize resistance to foreign forces, both spiritual and political. For example, in *These Hills Called Home*, the mythic figure of the "Jungle Major" serves as a symbol of indigenous resistance against colonial domination. Ao's use of folklore emphasizes the continuity of Naga traditions despite external pressures. In this way, Ao reclaims the Naga past by giving voice to the stories and memories that colonialism sought to suppress or distort.

The cyclical nature of Ao's understanding of time and history, where the past is never fully gone but instead returns to shape the present, is reflected in the use of folklore. This cyclical view of history disrupts the linear progression typically promoted in Western historiography, which often presents indigenous cultures as stagnant or obsolete. Instead, Ao suggests that history is a living force, continuously informing and shaping the present. By incorporating folklore and myth into her work, Ao not only preserves cultural heritage but also critiques the colonial erasure of indigenous narratives.

Indigenous Resistance and Cultural Survival

Ao's works reflect the resilience of the Naga people in the face of colonial and postcolonial oppression. While colonialism sought to suppress indigenous cultures, Ao's writing illustrates how these cultures survived and adapted, using folklore and myth as tools of cultural resistance. Ao's characters often navigate the tensions between cultural survival and assimilation into the dominant colonial system. In *These Hills Called Home*, the stories of war, resistance, and survival are intertwined with the broader themes of cultural identity and the preservation of indigenous values.

In the face of colonial erasure, Ao's characters refuse to be defined by the imposed identities of the colonizers. They engage in active resistance, often by reclaiming their cultural narratives. Ao's stories of indigenous resistance are not just about physical survival but also about the survival of cultural memory and identity. By evoking these stories, Ao calls for the preservation and revitalization of indigenous knowledge systems, highlighting the importance of oral traditions, community bonds, and ancestral wisdom in the fight against colonial oppression.

The postcolonial reality in Ao's work is not simply a continuation of colonial power dynamics but a complex negotiation of identity and belonging. The search for an authentic self is central to Ao's narratives, as her characters struggle to reconcile their traditional heritage with the pressures of modernity. Through these characters, Ao presents a vision of resistance that is not about rejecting modernity altogether but about integrating it with indigenous knowledge systems in a way that does not erase cultural identity.

Colonial and Postcolonial Critiques: Challenging the Western Gaze

Ao's literary representation of indigenous resistance extends beyond a critique of colonialism to challenge the continued marginalization of Naga identity in postcolonial India. Postcolonialism, often characterized by the continued dominance of Western ideals and the persistence of colonial structures, is also a central concern in Ao's work. In *These Hills Called Home*, Ao critiques the continued imposition of external cultural norms, whether through Westernized education, political structures, or religious institutions. The presence of missionary forces in Ao's narrative represents the ongoing colonial encounter in postcolonial times, where the indigenous is continually redefined through the lens of Western civilization.

The concept of the "authentic self" becomes a central issue in Ao's critique of both colonial and postcolonial societies. For the Naga people, the search for identity involves not only a return to traditional practices but also a re-engagement with the colonial history that sought to distort their culture. Through her work, Ao challenges the colonial gaze that constructs the Naga people as "other" and instead presents a narrative where the Naga voice is heard from within, on their own terms. This self-representation is a vital aspect of the decolonizing process, as it enables indigenous peoples to reclaim their identities and histories from colonial frameworks.

Reimagining the Future: The Role of Literature in Decolonization

Ao's work, particularly *These Hills Called Home*, suggests that decolonization is an ongoing process of reclaiming not only the past but also the future. By interrogating the colonial history of Nagaland and critiquing the postcolonial structures that continue to oppress indigenous peoples, Ao's literature plays an essential role in the cultural and political

decolonization of the Naga people. Literature becomes a space where indigenous voices can challenge the dominant narratives and create new possibilities for the future.

Through Ao's characters and their resistance to both colonial and postcolonial forces, the paper illustrates how literature can contribute to the process of decolonization by fostering a sense of cultural pride, collective memory, and identity. By engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems, Ao's works not only critique the colonial past but also offer a vision of the future where Indigenous peoples reclaim their narrative and their place in the world. As Ao herself writes, "The past is never gone. It is always with us, like the hills that shape our lives" (Ao, 2006). In this sense, Ao's work offers a pathway for the Naga people—and for indigenous peoples more broadly—to re-imagine their identities in ways that affirm their autonomy, resilience, and cultural continuity.

CONCLUSION

Temsüla Ao's *These Hills Called Home* represents a powerful literary intervention in the decolonization of Naga identity. Through her use of folklore, myth, and indigenous oral traditions, Ao critiques the colonial and postcolonial forces that have shaped the Naga people's identity and offers a vision of resistance and cultural reclamation. Ao's work emphasizes the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge systems, while also recognizing the need for these systems to adapt to contemporary realities. Ultimately, Ao's literature serves as both a cultural and political act of decolonization, offering a counter-history to colonial and postcolonial narratives and creating space for Indigenous voices to be heard and celebrated. By reimagining the Naga past and present through myth and folklore, Ao's work provides a blueprint for the decolonization of Indigenous identities, encouraging Indigenous peoples to reclaim their stories, histories, and futures. The resilience and continuity of indigenous cultures, as depicted in Ao's narratives, offer hope for the ongoing struggle for cultural survival and self-representation in a postcolonial world.

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