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Conflict and Displacement: A Conspectus with special reference to Temsula Ao's "These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone"

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Abstract:

Violent conflict causes millions of people to abscond their homes every year. The engendered displacement crisis not only creates logistical and altruistic nightmares, these dire straits threaten human aegis and risk the lives of displaced people. Conflict-actuated displacement consists of two main factors – the violence that caused the displacement and the features of the resulting displacement imbroglio. The terms like 'terror', 'terrorism', and 'insurgency' have their common traits which involve deeds of brutal, violent, inhumane actions, loss of home, and keeping an individual life at stake. Massive displacement of people within countries and across borders has become a defining feature. It is also a major feature of human insecurity. Displacement caused by conflict leads one to change one's own identity.

Keywords: Displacement, Violent, Conflict, terror, Insecurity.

In every part of the world, literature has been more or less a mirror of society. Literature of any age cannot escape the influence of the social scene and therefore is found reflecting the society of the age when it is created. "These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone" also reflects the bloodshed that has marked the history of the Naga people who lived in the troubled Northeastern region of India. Temsula Ao, one of the distinguished writers from North East India in this book deals with the struggle of the Naga people for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity provide the backdrop for the stories that make up this unusual compilation. It echoes in a very sensitive manner the terror-ridden lives of the Naga people and reflects the period of insurgency, the unrest and turmoil that has devastated the land. The stories in the book talk of how the characters got displaced with the conflict devastating the homes and fields of the villagers, how some lost their prime essence of the youth by being forced to join the underground bodies, how innocent girls became victims by being manhandled.

The first story "The Jungle Major" depicts the story of a man named Punaba who married beautiful Khatila. They seemed happy and content in their new role but after a year or so of Khatila's marriage the imagination of the people were swept away and plugged them into struggle. The village where they live also became a part of the network, which kept the underground outfit supplied with information, food and occasional arms. Punaba joining the underground army reached the authorities and his wife became more secluded and her visits to her parents' home also became less frequent than before. The government forces started their investigation and began questioning the villagers about Punaba. The whole land was surrounded in the flames of conflict between the rebels and the government forces. Punaba, because of his age and leadership qualities was made a captain in the rebel army. During these

years he was able to meet his wife. Unfortunately, the government forces came to know that he was in the village and the soldiers approached. Though extremely agitated and in perplexity Khatila's tactic saved her husband and the entire village.

Another story "Soaba" evinces displacement and conflict. In the story an unschooled young boy totally unaware of any reality was destined to be caught up in the whirlwind sweeping through the land and creating havoc in people's lives. The boy who became obsessed with the speeding vehicles had drawn him into a world where violence was the order of the day. The entire land itself turns out as a centre of turbulence egressing from the socio-cultural and political factors giving rise to myriad anti-nationalist elements. These elements make life vexatious to all people in general and also those who are impugning this development in every ascertainable stage. Soaba loses his life in the hands of Imlichuba who serves as a lackey for the Indian Army. But the actual circumstances of the death were never fully investigated nor talked about this poor idiot boy. The writer beautifully brings alive the agonizing and nagging experiences of a people caught in a spiral of violence.

Temsula Ao's "The Curfew Man" is also an instance of the troubled times for all in the land. It tells about the hostility between two warring armies. And it was the innocent villagers and those living in small townships had to bear the brunt of the many restrictions on their lives. In the beginning of the story she quotes:

"There were stories about how people carrying the sick to hospital or in search of doctors were stopped and subjected to humiliating searches causing unnecessary, and sometimes even fatal, delays"

Even the civilians were shot dead by the patrol parties after curfew and their deaths reported as killed in 'encounters' falsely alleged as underground rebels. The protagonist Satemba was recruited as a government informer. He roams about the town the Army-imposed curfew hours to spy on his fellow Nagas who have joined the insurgent group. He was compelled to take it as it was the first offer of a job that he had got after coming to Mokokchung. And the other reason was he felt uneasy about the fact that his wife was the earning member of the family. This shows how circumstances were forcing innocent, peace-loving people to confine themselves in a vice-like situation. As Temsula Ao quotes:

"While the Underground agents who had taken shelter there managed to escape, the owner of the house was arrested and beaten up so badly that he later died of his injuries"

It is an irony that Satemba's two smashed knee caps assisted him to free himself from the shackles of the S.D.O. Even his wife felt free because of the smashed knee caps as his injury truly secured his freedom from sinister bondage.

These show the realistic picture and bewildering experiences of Naga people.

"An Old Man Remembers" also adverts to an old man Imtisashi who belonged to the Underground force and whose past was a secret kept between himself and his close friend, Imli. The story unravels the unwanted thoughts within him as he begins to explain the violent past to his grandson.

“We ,too, were young and carefree like you once,but all of a sudden our youth was snatched away from us,and instead of school books we were carrying guns and other weapons of destruction and living in the jungle like wild creatures.”

Temsula Ao gives an account of an entire generation of people like Sashi,Imli and all their comrades and relatives.Their youth was apparently indefinitely cycle of beatings ,rapes,burning of villages and grain-filled barns.Even many lost their lives while running from one hideout to another in the deep jungles to escape the pursuing soldiers.Many innocent and helpless ones were shot like animals.Their youth was claimed by the turbulence,which transformed them into killers.They killed many people.This shows the atrocities meted out to the innocent people and even compelling them to be killers.

It is seen that how ordinary people cope up with violence,how they negotiate power and force,how they seek and find spaces and enjoyment in the midst of terror.It is also seen how women played a pivotal role to free their men from the sheer violence that was prevailing at that time.The women in the stories are depicted as strong and ingenious who could fight for peace and seek safe spaces amidst violence.The stories are like three-dimensional mirror to the Naga society.They touch upon almost all aspects of life,and in the process serve as a window to a people whose rites and rituals,customs and traditions,myths and legends,ritual and beliefs have been generally known.

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