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Refashioning the Feminine: Representation of Women in Temsula Ao's Select Short Stories

Dr. Suja Mathew

Since time immemorial, women have been marginalised and discriminated against in all the patriarchal societies in the world. Patriarchy believes in the domination of men over women and expects women to be subordinate and submissive to men. Even in marriage, women are objectified and considered as a medium to give birth to their children in order to continue the legacy of their families. Traditional Indian society is not different from this; it expects chastity, obedience and subordination from its women. Marital rapes are also not that rare in a society where man-woman relationship is considered as one of power. The present paper attempts to explore the representation of women in the select short stories of renowned Naga writer and academician Temsula Ao. The paper offers a foregrounding on how the feminine self in Ao's stories shatters the stereotypes by exercising agency even within oppressive structures, leading to a subversive stance. The stories selected for this study are "The Saga of a Cloth," "The Tombstone in My Garden" and "Three Women," taken from the two collections titled *Laburnum for My Head: Stories* and *The Tombstone in My Garden*. The paper explores the oppression and discrimination women, especially married women, face in their families. It also probes into the forms of resistance that these women put forth as a natural response to the exercise of power.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, patriarchy, oppression, resistance, motherhood

Gender has always been a means of discriminating and marginalising human beings in all patriarchal societies. Being physically powerful and dominating, men controlled and subjugated the other genders and donned unquestionable status in the family as well as society. V. Geetha in her work *Patriarchy* argues:

Patriarchy rests on defined notions of masculine and feminine, is held in place by sexual and property arrangements that privilege men's choices, desires and interests over and above those of the women in their lives and is sustained by social relationships and cultural practices which celebrate heterosexuality, female fertility and motherhood on the one hand and valorize female subordination to masculine authority and virility on the other. (Geetha, 2006, p.8)

As Kate Millett states in *Sexual Politics*, "Patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale" (Millett, 2016, p.33). Women's bodies were often considered as territories to be conquered and colonised, and violence has always been resorted to as a means so that men could easily subjugate women.

Marriage as an institution often ensnares women by thrusting on her so many responsibilities attached together with it. Simone de Beauvoir, in her work *The Second Sex*, states: "Marriage is traditionally the destiny offered to women by society. Most women are married or have been, or plan to be or suffer from not being" (de Beauvoir, 2010, p.211). Feminism, as a movement, has stood for the rights of women throughout the ages, fighting against the oppression and marginalisation that they have suffered for long. Since time immemorial, women have endured the anguish of being treated as a powerless slave. The financial dependency on her husband or father has left her in a vulnerable position. A perennial and vehement struggle from the part of women has been there to establish their rights in the contemporary society. Yet, traditional Indian society expects chastity, subordination and obedience from its women. Resistance is an integral part of power relationships, of domination, subjugation. Michel Foucault views power and resistance as not oppositional, but sees domination and resistance not as binary but as integral parts of each other: "Where there is power, there is resistance, or rather consequently, this resistance

is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1990, p.95). Hence, inherent to the system of power relations, one can identify social relations which normally lead to different forms of resistance.

Temsula Ao (1945-2002) was a Professor, poet, short story writer and ethnographer, who was awarded the Padma Shri in 2007. One of Nagaland’s renowned folklorists and academicians, she was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013 for her short story collection *Laburnum for My Head*. Woven around the life and culture of the Naga community, her works often transmit the memories and wisdom of the people to the coming generations. She vehemently fought against the categorisation called North East Literature, as she knew how culturally diverse and varied the different communities in those seven states are. Her other works include *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, *Once upon a Life*, *Book of Songs*, *Aosenla’s Story* and *Tombstone in My Garden*. Set in the backdrop of the beautiful lush green of the North East, they explore the complexity of human emotions: “The simplicity of the language hides the complexity of emotions and themes she has written about, and the stories linger on long after the pages have been turned and the book closed” (Rai, 2013). The present paper investigates how Ao represents the women of her community in her short stories. The stories selected for this study are “The Saga of a Cloth,” “The Tombstone in My Garden” and “Three Women” taken from the two collections titled *Laburnum for My Head: Stories* and *The Tombstone in My Garden*. It enquires whether women are subjugated by patriarchal domination and conditioned to be submissive and silent. The paper also probes into the forms of resistance that the women resort to as a natural response to the oppression and marginalisation that they are subjected to.

“The Saga of a Cloth” is set in the context of the exile of a boy from the village and the moorings of his grandmother on the occasion. The secret of her mutilated funeral supeti (traditional funeral cloth) reveals yet another face of the woman’s life to the readers. Repasongla, the grandmother of the story, has always been perturbed by the violent and aggressive nature of her husband, son and grandson.

Living alone with her grandson Imlijongshi, she had to often compensate for the misdemeanours of the boy by paying the stipulated fines imposed by the village authorities. Repasongla had to cope up with the inconsiderate and brutal nature of three generations. Her husband, a typical product of the male dominated patriarchal notions, died at a fairly young age as a result of a drunken brawl, leaving her with a son and two daughters. The harsh and troublesome life of years have not hardened Repasongla, who is a compassionate and kind woman able to understand Jongshi's loneliness and resentment at his exclusion from his own clan. She had to plead with the village elders many a time not to banish the unruly and untameable boy from the village.

The story portrays how rape is considered a means to conquer a woman, as it is the exercise of power over women's bodies. The most beautiful and accomplished girl of the village in her youth, Repasongla loved Imdong. Lolen, a bad-tempered guy, knowing very well of their relationship, stalked her everywhere. On the night of the community fishing trip, when all the male folk were away, Lolen raped her brutally: "He was brutal and ferocious in his lust. I do not know how many times he climbed over me muttering, 'You will carry only my seed, no one else's'" (Ao, 2022, p.36). How women are considered as a land to be conquered and sowed with the seeds of men so that they could get more generations to continue their family legacy is evident from the attitude of Lolen. Women are considered mere objects that are part of men's property and Lolen wants to snatch her from Imdong by physically conquering her through sexual violence. The story portrays male patriarchs who are authoritative, powerful, aggressive and assertive, attaining their goals by hook or crook. The death of Imdong which was seemingly an accident, was plotted by Lolen effectively.

The revenge and resistance that the seemingly meek woman is able to exhibit is beyond imagination. Repasongla is not able to resort to explicit forms of resistance; she secretly avenges for Imdong's death by marrying Lolen and passing off Imdong's child as his own. The worst that she gives him is the marriage where there is no love, regard or respect. The ultimate revenge that she takes is at the time

of his funeral when all the suppressed feelings come out. She cried her heart out: “Not out of grief but out of some relief from my miserable life with this monster, now laying in state inside the gaudy coffin” (Ao 2022, p.47). She wanted to declare to the whole world the wretched life that she had been leading with him:

I wanted to take off my supeti and drape his still body in it as a public declaration of all the pain Lolen caused me while he lived. You see, in our culture, such a gesture is the ultimate insult that a woman can inflict on a man or husband for their wrongdoing. It is a symbol of emasculating him in public. But I had restrained myself many times before on account of Sunup. (Ao, 2022, p. 47)

She restrained from doing that publicly, thinking about her son and decides to inflict a private revenge on him, performing “something symbolic to assuage [her] inner anguish suffered at his hands for so many years” (Ao, 2022, p.47). She cut off all the tassels from her supeti and bundled them along with his funeral body cloth. Finally, she could be peaceful as “she felt avenged for all the atrocities he had inflicted on [her] and [her] soul was finally at peace” (Ao, 2022, p.48). With this symbolic means of revenge, she strips him off all the masculine power and domination. The writer showcases how women are able to be ultimate winners though their resistance may not be explicit or overt many times.

“The Tombstone in My Garden” is a story that unfolds through the stream of consciousness technique in the first-person narrative. Being the reminiscences of an old woman in her declining years, the story is about how the strained relationship with her husband has been made permanent with the tombstone placed in her garden, making her days tense and uneasy. Lily Anne, the protagonist of the story, tries to revolt against the injustices meted out to her in her life, by ignoring the tombstone as much as she could, leaving it to be attacked by weeds and assorted bird-shit. The tombstone was installed in a prime spot in the garden “with much acrimony and ugly family drama” and she tried for a long time to suppress her negativity and “managed to view the inert monument with some ambivalence” (Ao, 2022, p.92). But these mixed feelings did not last long. An avid gardener in her youth, she ignored her garden itself and found pleasure in weeds

covering the tombstone: “I now inwardly encourage them to shroud this ugly piece of stone commemorating the life of the degenerate man who was my husband of many years and who lorded over a family living in constant fear of his whims and evil temper” (Ao, 2022, p.93). The power and authority exercised by the man has not led to respect or love, and after his death, he is put to oblivion. Families become a barren land without any love flowing there.

Men mostly imbibe the patriarchal values of male domination and women subjugation and consider their wives as means for procreation only. In this regard bell hooks comments: “Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (hooks, 2000). Lily Anne’s experience was not different at all. After marriage, she was not touched by her husband for almost a month and she began to doubt whether he was impotent or she was repulsive in any manner. Lily was different from many other women in being daring enough to confront the situation by asking him directly. The response was brutal and aggressive. Without saying a word in reply, he tore her clothes apart and raped her:

He strode to the door, bolted it and returned to where I was sitting. With a contorted face, that sucked all my breath out of my soul, he tore my clothes apart. Stripping him naked, he took me by such force that I screamed out in extreme pain. But that was not all: he kept me locked to his huge body most of the night and got up only when he had to replenish his glass of whiskey. (Ao, 2022, p.115)

Even sex becomes a punishment to women, where there is no tenderness or love, just violent overpowering of body leading to injuries in body as well as mind. Lily Anne had to stay in her bed for two days to get healed of the visible bite marks and internal lacerations.

Lily Anne is a resisting woman who does not want the patriarchal society to train her sons as its typical members. She had realised very clearly the role of a mother in training her sons and hence, when a son was born to her, she decided: “I’d never let my son become like his father” (Ao, 2022, p.116). She wanted to break the

patriarchal chain of oppression and subjugation. Though she had to maintain the façade of a happy married life before others, she could practice internal resistance that got manifested in silent, yet powerful changes resulting in a hopeful future for her sons. As a wife, she assesses herself as continuing the typical pattern set by her mother, “because after brief interludes of resistance, I always surrendered to the whims of the man who was my husband” (Ao, 2022, p.117). But as a mother, she was loving and caring and feels contented that both her sons are doing well in their colleges and they do not have any bad habits. The author intends to highlight the need of bold mothers who are strong-willed enough to envisage a new world for their children free from oppression, exploitation and subjugation.

Lily Anne is able to exercise some power, though limited, in her household because, different from most other women, she owns the house where they live. It was a condition that her father insisted upon while fixing her marriage and got the agreement signed on a paper from the boy and his family that he would live in that house after marriage. When her husband died in a drunken brawl, it creates only inner relief in the wife and the sons: “‘Good riddance,’ I thought, and would have happily removed the eyesore and relocated his mortal remains to the earth in the community graveyard where he was initially supposed to be buried” (Ao, 2022, p.93). She had to yield to the obstinacy of his family members and agree to place the tombstone in the garden, but could resist the attempt to emboss his photograph on the plaque. She screamed out loudly that she would “not only dig up the grave but also torch the entire house and compound,” if they tried to impose his face on the stone (Ao, 2022, p.93). One of the sole delights in her life was tending to her beautiful front garden. The tombstone being placed in one of her favourite spots in the garden, she stopped tending to that at all: “But the day when the ugly monument was installed, I inwardly said goodbye to my garden” (Ao, 2022, p. 94). The way she could react to the oppression and torture from her husband was by choosing to cut all connections, even with the tombstone.

The patriarchal society does not provide its women with the agency to make their own choices. While at the university, Lily Ann’s

friendship with Yalan was misunderstood by her father. He created a fuss there and demanded that “Yalan be expelled from the university for taking advantage of a young girl’s naiveté and innocence” (Ao, 2022, p.109). The patronising attitude of the men makes them think that they are more proficient in taking decisions for their daughters. When it came to matters of marriage, she was not given a choice at all. Her mother also complied with her father in this attitude: “Listen to what your father has to say. I am sure that whatever he has done, it is for your own good. So shut up and sit down” (Ao, 2022, p.112). The miserable life with no choice at all leaves her with the thought: “I wish I was born a man” (Ao, 2022, p.113). The disparity and segregation between men and women lead women question their own identity as women. They live without loving themselves. Even though Lily Anne was able to exercise her power to some extent, she knew that a thorough revamping of the system was not possible, and she had to be content with small and gradual forms of resistance:

And then a strange idea struck me like a bolt of lightning: what if I remove this monstrous tombstone, and relocate it in the family plot where my parents are now resting? The more I pondered over this question, the more convinced I became that such intruding markers would be difficult to remove because we live in a milieu where such markers still define who we really are. (Ao, 2022, p.118)

It is not a radical feminism that the protagonist puts forth, it is a cultural feminism where men and women understand their positions and live in a symbiotic coexistence.

“Three Women” is a story woven around the birth of a baby, raising serious questions regarding motherhood and discussing the different aspects and layers of motherhood as a phenomenon. The author attempts this discussion by traversing through the memories of three generations of women: Martha, Medemla and Lipoktula: daughter, mother and grandmother respectively. Contrary to the usual domestic oppression and resistance, the author presents three women who have exercised their agency to take their own decisions. Other than being rebellious or revolting, they are independent and autonomous when it comes to crucial junctures in their lives. The story concentrates

on the strong bond shared by these three women. The story is narrated from three perspectives, that of the three women. It is the granddaughter Martha who starts the narration by pointing out her difference from other children in appearance. They used to taunt her by calling her “coolie” and laughing at her dark complexion and strange features. Being smart and intelligent, Martha herself has noticed how her hair is different from that of her mother and grandmother. It is from her classmates that she knows she is not the biological daughter of her mother. In the mind she feels one with them, though looks differently: “At that moment I wanted to scrape off my dark skin and rearrange my strange features. I wanted to look like them because I always felt, thought and spoke like them” (Ao, 2009, p.65-66). Relationship is not about blood ties, it is more about love and mutual caring.

Medemla, Martha’s mother is a bold and strong woman, working as a nurse in the government dispensary. She is a strong-willed woman who has not budged from her decision to remain unmarried since her long-term fiancé Imsutemjen broke off their engagement due to parental pressure. In a society where marriage is thought to be inevitable, Medemla shocks everybody by choosing to be single:

Though there were good proposals after the break-up, I rejected every single one without a qualm, much to the consternation of my parents. They were shocked that I would do such a thing, especially in a case or two where they had tentatively given their consent to the boys’ parents. When it became apparent to everyone, my parents included, that I was determined to remain single, they simply left me alone. (Ao, 2009, p.67)

In a traditional society that supports family and marriage as an institution, Medemla stands out unique as a single woman who adopts a child. She could go ahead with her decisions as she was financially independent, being a working woman. Also, Medemla’s mother gave her the permission to adopt the child if she was convinced that such a step would make her happy.

The conventional patriarchal notions regarding women and girl children come out in the story of Martha’s birth. She was the

daughter of a woman who came for delivery where Medemla worked. The woman died during childbirth, as her husband refused to give consent to a Caesarean section. Hence, the woman who had lost much blood and was near collapse, succumbed to death after delivering the baby. Hearing the news, the husband broke down and cried at first, but his attitude changed knowing that it was a girl child:

When he learned that the child was a girl, his entire demeanour changed. He stood up in a rage and railed against the nurses, the hospital and above all against a cruel God who had denied him a son. When he was asked what he was going to do with the baby girl, he shot back, ‘What will I do with another girl? Do whatever you want; I don’t want to see her ever, she who has killed my wife. (Ao, 2009, p.68)

The typical patriarchal society that considers girl children as a curse and sons as a boon is depicted by the author here. His wife was valuable for him as a machine that could produce offsprings for him. He abandoned the baby as he did not want another daughter; he was broken because, with his wife dead, he lost the chance of having a son.

Motherhood is more about nurturing and caring, other than the blood relation that ties the baby and the mother. Temsula Ao drives home the point by portraying the lovely and strong bond between Martha and Medemla.: “For some inexplicable reason I became attached to her from those early days and when she started to coo and smile, my heart was captured by the serenity and beauty of her smile ... It was as if some unseen hand was forging a bond between my lonely self and this abandoned child” (Ao, 2009, p.68-69). It was a preposterous idea from the part of a single unmarried woman to adopt an orphan girl, that too with the hurdle of genetic and cultural disparity. Medemla was an Ao-Naga, twenty-six years old, with medium height and fair complexion whereas Martha was extremely dark, with aboriginal features and thick curly hair. Yet, the bond she felt towards that baby was strong enough to overcome all kinds of obstacles. Martha also shares same feelings towards Medemla and her mother. She says: “Mother, I may look different from you or grandmother or from all others in the village but I feel no difference in

my heart” (Ao, 2009, p.71-72). To this, Medemla replies: “Just as you feel, I am your real mother” (Ao, 2009, p.72). The woman who becomes daring enough to nurture the motherly feelings in her heart by adopting an orphan kid ignoring the criticism of the society becomes the symbol of an empowered new woman in the world.

Lipoktula, Medemla’s mother, has kept a secret in her heart for long that ultimately ruined the happiness of her own daughter. For most men, women are just objects for sexual gratification, and they do not hesitate much to satisfy their desires without seeking the consent of the woman. One day when her husband was away, Lipoktula was raped by Merensashi and Martha is his child. She internalises the guilt and blames herself for not resisting more vigorously: “I began to condemn myself. I sat in the water for a long time as though to wash away the sense of shame and guilt overtaking me” (Ao, 2009, p.74). Women are always conditioned to think that they are responsible for the sexual assault on them. Hence, she hides the truth from everyone except her mother, and together they decide that it is better to hide certain truths than destroy relations. When Lipoktula knows that the fiancé of Medemla is Merensashi’s son, she meets the man and asks him to stop the marriage. This leads to Medemla’s decision to remain single forever and later adopt Martha. Growing up, Martha gets pregnant by her classmate and marries him. With their baby born, there is yet another mother added to the family. Different types of motherhood and mothers, as exemplified above, are discussed by the author in the story under consideration.

To be brief, the paper emphasises on how the feminine self in Ao’s stories shatters the stereotypes by exercising agency even within oppressive structures, leading to a subversive stance. The stories selected for study depict how the domineering patriarchal forces subjugate women through their conditioning over many years. Physical abuse that extends to violent and brutal torture is nothing new to the women portrayed in the stories. The unbalanced power relations existing in the society have led the men to believe it as their right to physically assault their wives. Even in marriage, sex becomes a brutal and forceful torture for many. But, wherever there is power, there is resistance, and these women resort to their own ways, mostly implicit

or covert, of resisting the oppression imposed on them. They are not women who are accomplices in the conniving schemes of patriarchy to continue the exploitation through generations. They are representatives of the strong-willed women who want to change the system by breaking the chain of oppression. Though they are brutally tortured, the men are not able to destroy their will power, which gives them a final chance to take revenge upon the perpetrators for all the injustices meted out to them. The different layers of motherhood are explored in the stories. It is communicated that education and financial independence help in empowering women to be autonomous in their choices. The author attempts to refashion the feminine identity from one of submissive and silent victim to a resisting, revenging independent individual.

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