



## 'Singing' as a Symbol of Cultural Continuity and Resilience in Temsula Ao's "The Last Song"

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### Abstract

Stories emerging from war zones often represent the most heart-wrenching narratives, capable of transporting readers into profoundly traumatic experiences. The violations inflicted upon women and children not only breach human rights but also leave enduring scars that can last a lifetime. Temsula Ao stands out as a prominent voice among women writers from Northeast India. Ao vividly depicts her home state of Nagaland and its women, culture, and identity against the backdrop of insurgency and nationhood. She writes with sincerity to reclaim the ethnic identity and heritage of the Naga people. Singing is a significant cultural element for the Naga community. It symbolizes collective joy and marks new beginnings, such as the start of a harvest. In her short story "The Last Song" (2006), Ao employs this cultural motif, as the main character Apenyo sings her final song until her last breath when an army captain rapes and kills her mercilessly. In light of this harrowing narrative, the paper aims to examine singing as a form of cultural resilience in response to physical assault and power dynamics. It is portrayed as an initial act of non-violent retaliation. Also, the study intends to critically analyze how those designated as protectors of the land transform into agents of destruction, jeopardizing innocent lives and their peaceful environments.

**Keywords:** conflict, gendered violence, insurgency, rape, cultural resilience

### Introduction

Temsula Ao (1945-2022) was a distinguished Indian poet, fiction writer, and ethnographer hailing from the culturally rich state of Nagaland. Her literary oeuvre is diverse. It encompasses evocative poetry collections, engaging short stories, and profound

ethnographic studies that dive deep into the human experience. Among her most celebrated works are *These Hills Called Home* (2005), a poignant exploration of her connection to the land and its people, and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), which showcases her rich, lyrical voice. In recognition of her significant contributions to

literature, she was honoured with the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013, both testaments to her impactful influence as a writer.

Temsula Ao's writings are based on Naga culture, traditions, and the complex struggles its people face. Being a woman writer, Ao promotes the Naga identity and heritage, ensuring that the stories of her people resonate with a broader audience and are echoed through time. 'The Last Song' is a short story from her collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home* (2006). This narrative vividly portrays the cultural and emotional landscapes of the Naga people, focusing on identity, oppression, and resilience through the experiences of Naga women affected by violence and exploitation.

War zone narratives often evoke deep emotional responses, particularly highlighting the violations faced by women and children, which leave lasting scars. Temsula Ao is a prominent voice among women writers from Northeast India, depicting her home state of Nagaland and its culture against the backdrop of insurgency. Through her writings, she aims to reclaim the ethnic identity and heritage of the Naga people.

Singing, a significant cultural element for the Naga community, symbolizes collective joy and marks new beginnings, such as the start of a harvest or any cultural event. In her short story "The Last Song" (2006), Ao employs this cultural motif, as the character Apenyo sings her final song until her last breath when an army captain rapes and kills her mercilessly.

Studies on Temsula Ao have focused primarily on trauma and memory. In recent years, research studies have shifted to intersectional approaches:

Chang and Singh (2590-97; Longkumer) demonstrate how Ao exposes the continuation of colonial "civilising" violence in independent India.

Feminist scholars like Das and Sen; Brar and Khanna; Sen and Dahiya, and Bora have studied

the "double marginalisation" of tribal women – oppressed both by indigenous patriarchy and by the militarised Indian state.

Works on oral tradition (Ao, The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition; Kikon; Jamir) emphasise that Naga songs function as collective memory banks; silencing a singer is therefore synonymous with cultural genocide.

The paper synthesises these aspects and extends them by centring the motif of singing as an embodied, gendered, and decolonising practice.

In the context of the short story, the objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine 'singing' as a form of resilience in response to physical assault and power dynamics.
2. To highlight the gender discrimination against women in the Naga patriarchal society.
3. To locate the unrest due to conflict and the colonial legacy in the postcolonial context of the story.
4. To critically analyze the role of the designated protectors of the land and their deliverance.
5. To study Temsula Ao's role as a writer to uphold her Naga culture and identity.

This study examines the short story to uncover various layers of cultural, political, and gender-based resistance woven into the narrative. It highlights the symbol of 'singing' as an act of cultural resilience, especially when confronting physical attacks and oppressive systems. The story places this act within the context of gender discrimination common in Naga patriarchal society, emphasizing women's marginalization and their fight for agency. It also reflects ongoing unrest stemming from historical conflicts and colonial legacies that influence the sociopolitical landscape of the postcolonial Naga experience. A critical look at the so-called 'protectors of the land' reveals complexities in their roles and the consequences of their actions or inactions in delivering justice and defending the community. Lastly, the study

highlights Temsula Ao's literary effort to preserve and express her Naga culture and identity, providing a strong voice that opposes erasure while celebrating indigenous traditions. Through this detailed analysis, the research explores themes of trauma, resistance, and cultural pride, showcasing Ao's impact on both regional and national literary dialogues.

The study combines close reading with postcolonial theory (Frantz Fanon on the psychology of colonial violence; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on subaltern speech and strategic essentialism) and transnational feminist theory (Chandra Talpade Mohanty; bell hooks). Historical and ethnographic sources on the Indo-Naga conflict and Naga oral performance provide contextual depth.

### **Discussion**

#### **1. Singing as Cultural Resilience and Non-Violent Retaliation:**

In Naga tradition, songs belong to the community and to the ancestors, never to an individual. The Ao Naga traditional songs have polyphonic notes where the singers would participate in singing in layers. These songs are known for their harmonizing effect and binding of the indigenous Naga people. The collective singing of these songs produces a choral voice, highlighting the unity of people and standing up for their community.

In the story, the patriarch and father of Apenyo-Zhamben was a solo singer and performer at their church in the village. Apenyo seems to have inherited this talent of singing. Ao writes: "It seemed the little girl was born to sing" (These Hills, 23). Apenyo's talent is recognised early; she becomes lead soprano and is nicknamed "our singing beauty" (25). When soldiers burst into the church, the pastor commands the congregation to sing "so that we show we are not afraid" (27). The collective hymn becomes an acoustic shield to prove that they were not afraid of any forces that would disrupt their peaceful existence. The mental strength that accompanies the chorus is a sign of cultural resilience.

Apenyo's solo continuation after she is dragged into the vestry is the emotional and political climax:

All this while, the girl was heard singing the chorus of her song over and over again... singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice to God in heaven. (28)

Apenyo's solo performance reinforces the communal ownership of the songs. She was in charge of singing the lead inside the church. Her solo song was more of a communal responsibility despite her vulnerability. Her songs became the resilient voice of her people and village against the military forces. Apenyo's refusal to scream or plead is the subversion of the perpetrator's sexual violence. As rape is identified as a war tool:

Wartime sexual violence is one of history's greatest silences and one of today's most extreme atrocities. In many contexts, sexual violence is not merely the action of rogue soldiers, but a deliberate tactic of warfare. It displaces, terrorizes and destroys individuals, families and entire communities, reaching unthinkable levels of cruelty against women of all ages from infants to grandmothers. It can leave the survivors with emotional trauma and psychological damage, physical injuries, unwanted pregnancies, social stigma and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV. (UNIFEM, 1)

Apenyo's song reclaims the church—originally a site of colonial evangelism—as an indigenous sacred space. The captain's later insanity ("he thought he could still hear the young girl's singing tune") proves that the voice penetrates the perpetrator more deeply than bullets ever could (29). The song of the dying Apenyo haunted him throughout his life. This is clear evidence of the victory of the Apenyo's spirit and song over the aggressive and violent act of the captain.

## **2. Gender Discrimination within Naga Patriarchy:**

The Ao Naga society is patriarchal, adhering to traditional patriarchal norms. Women are often marginalised and gender politics is evident in society. The Ao Naga men form the dominant structures, and their decisions shape culture.

In the text, even before the arrival of the army, Libeni and Apenyo are socially vulnerable because they lack a male protector after the death of the patriarch Zhamben. The social status of a widow in any patriarchal society has no importance or value. A woman without a man is under strict social vigilance and criticism. Libeni, after her husband's death, is asked repeatedly by her relatives to remarry: "Many of the relatives told her to get married again so that she and little Apenyo would have a man to protect and look after them" (24). Widowhood in Ao-Naga society (despite widespread Christianity) still carries a stigma. This intra-community patriarchy intersects catastrophically with state violence, leaving mother and daughter doubly exposed (Sen and Dahiya).

## **3. Colonial Legacy in Postcolonial Struggle**

The soldiers replicate colonial tropes: indigenous people as "savages" sheltering "terrorists," sacred spaces as legitimate military targets, and women's bodies as spoils of war. Burning both the old animist-style church and the new Baptist church symbolically erases pre-Christian and Christian Naga identity in one stroke (Longkumer). The act of burning these sacred places shows their attempt to erase the history and identities of the Ao Naga people before and after the independence of India. Singing bridges traditions and cultures. By blending the ancestral sounds and Christian influences, Apenyo's singing of the song works as a vehicle for a syncretic Naga identity. Apenyo's song becomes a woven archive of voices standing beyond the physical erasure of sacred architecture.

## **4. Predators in the guise of Protectors:**

Ao's bitterest irony targets the Indian Army. Officially tasked with "protecting" national integrity, the soldiers become the greatest threat to civilian lives, food security, places of worship, and cultural continuity. The military forces, though their duties were to restore peace and save lives, worked towards erasing ethnic identities and cultural continuity. The captain's descent into madness and the burning of the village expose the moral bankruptcy of militarised "nation-building."

## **5. Temsula Ao as Cultural Guardian**

By writing in English and reaching mainland and international readers, Ao performs what Spivak terms "strategic essentialism"—temporarily deploying a unified "Naga" voice to counter erasure. However, there is a risk of homogenizing and blurring the internal diversity of Naga communities. It can also flatten the nuanced textures of the lived experiences of the different tribes within the Naga community. Ao's works counterattack this erasure by using local idioms, myths, folktales, and the English language. This way, Ao shows how her writings can be placed in global literature, maintaining intra-Naga heterogeneity.

## **Political History of Nagaland and Ao's "The Last Song":**

Temsula Ao's homeland, Nagaland, is situated in the northeastern part of India. It is the sixteenth state of India. The region is not only geographically isolated but also culturally distinct. The lack of awareness and indifference towards the cultural aspects of the northeastern states is a significant barrier to their integration with the mainland. Ao has tried to bridge the gap through her writings. She narrates her stories boldly and effortlessly. These writings often reflect the unfortunate experiences of the Naga people, who have suffered due to the violence inflicted upon them by the Indian Army in the pursuit of insurgents in the region. 'The Last Song' is one such story that leaves a deep pain with the readers of the atrocities done to women.

The Naga independence movement in India is a diverse battle for recognition of Naga identity and autonomy. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, the movement attempted to establish a distinct nation for the Naga people,

who live in northeastern India, primarily in Nagaland and parts of Myanmar. The movement has been defined by a call for self-determination, which stems from historical concerns about colonialism, cultural preservation, and political marginalization.

The protracted conflict associated with the movement for Naga independence has established significant repercussions for the populace, with a pronounced impact on women:

**1. Displacement and Psychological Distress:**

The violence linked to the independence struggle has resulted in substantial displacement and psychological distress among the Naga community. Women frequently bear the severe consequences of these adversities, confronting challenges such as the loss of family members, economic precariousness, and disruptions to social structures.

**2. Participation of Women in the Independence Movement:**

Women have assumed essential roles in the Naga independence movement, engaging actively as both participants and caretakers within their communities. Their efforts have encompassed organizing protests, contributing to initiatives aimed at peace-building, and advocating for their rights. Such involvement has significantly challenged traditional gender dynamics and has increased the visibility of women's issues amidst the broader context of the struggle for independence.

**3. Exacerbation of Gender-Based Violence:**

The ongoing conflict has intensified occurrences of gender-based violence. Numerous women have suffered as victims of violence, including sexual assault, especially during confrontations between insurgent groups and state forces. This pervasive violence remains largely unaddressed, thereby perpetuating a cycle of trauma and fear throughout affected communities.

**4. Demonstration of Community Resilience:**

In the face of these adversities, Naga

women have exhibited remarkable resilience. These women have established various organizations to address critical health, education, and economic empowerment issues. Such grassroots initiatives not only cater to immediate necessities but also foster long-term social transformation.

**5. Preservation of Cultural Heritage:** In addition to their roles in community support, women have been instrumental in safeguarding Naga culture and traditions amidst the turmoil. They have assumed positions as educators and leaders, ensuring the continuity of cultural practices and languages for future generations.

Singing holds a significant place in Naga culture, particularly within the context of its oral traditions. Community living, singing, and celebrations play important roles in shaping their culture. The short story depicts the simplicity of the common people who work, sing, and celebrate together. They are bound together by this bond of brotherhood among them and are God-fearing people who firmly believe in doing good to others. The Naga people have their ways of fostering their culture while embracing Christianity, by weaving cultural beliefs and practices.

Apenyo's song serves as a beacon of hope and expression for the villagers, representing their struggle to affirm their identity. The colonial legacy imposed by the Indian army casts a long shadow throughout the narrative. The soldiers' treatment of the villagers—characterized by coercion, violence, and dehumanization—reflects historical realities in Northeast India, where colonial oppression marginalized local communities. Apenyo's death represents the colonial efforts to erase the voices and cultures of the indigenous populations perceived as inferior and menacing.

The resilience and resistance of the Naga villagers against military (colonial) oppression shine through in this tale. Apenyo's defiance, expressed through her song, stands as a powerful symbol of this resistance. Her brave choice to sing, even under the threat to her life and dignity, reflects the Naga people's

determination to uphold their cultural identity, despite being ultimately silenced. Her courageous legacy endures in the hearts of villagers and future generations, illustrating that cultural resilience can prevail even in the toughest circumstances.

The chaos created by the conflict in the village is recorded as:

"More people were seen running away desperately, some seeking security in the old church and some even entered the new one hoping that at least the house of God would offer them safety from the soldiers." (Ao, These, 28)

The atrocities done to women like Apenyo and her mother are recorded by Ao in the following quotes:

"... he bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body, using the woman's new lungi afterwards, which he had flung aside, to wipe himself. The small band of soldiers then took their turn, even though by the time the fourth one mounted, the woman was already dead." (Ao, These, 28)

The consequences of the army captain raping the innocent village girl had a detrimental effect on him, driving him to insanity. His hands were shaking. He thought he could still hear the young girl's singing tune. He commanded the burning of the church, reducing both churches, their granaries, and some village houses to ashes. Ao depicts the captain's actions as inhumane and contemptible. The supposed defenders of the land and its people revealed themselves to be the true disruptors of the village's peace and harmony, all for the unintentional payment of taxes to the rebel group.

The departure of soldiers from the village occurred alongside their apprehension of prisoners. The necessity for the sexual oppression of women diminished in the context of their initial objective of detaining these individuals. Nevertheless, the colonial legacy, particularly the instillation of fear within the psyche of the indigenous population, is manifest in the actions of the Army Captain and his subordinates. Rape is employed as an instrument of both colonial and patriarchal

oppression, serving to silence women and undermine their dignity.

This perspective conveys that the act of raping women embodies a profound expression of gender violence. Such acts illuminate the minimal or non-existent value assigned to women within a patriarchal framework. The phenomenon of sexual violence against women, particularly in the Northeast, emerges strikingly with the overarching theme of suppressing insurgency. Consequently, the implications of these actions extend beyond individual instances, revealing systemic issues rooted in power dynamics. Thus, the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy perpetuates a cycle of violence that seeks to dismantle the resilience of women.

Community living and celebrations are integral parts of the Naga people and their culture. The short story throws light on the simplicity of the common people who work, sing, and celebrate together. They are bound together by this bond of brotherhood among them and are God-fearing people who firmly believe in doing good to others. This statement suggests that singing serves a dual purpose for women: it's a way to express and maintain their culture, and it's also a source of strength and perseverance in the face of adversity. The "resilience" aspect implies that singing might be a coping mechanism, a form of empowerment, or a way to connect with others and build community in challenging circumstances.

The last song of Apenyo became an immortal song for the whole village which was remembered by the young generations through storytelling. The valiant act of Apenyo shows her might and strength, her powerful and unwavering spirit against the perpetrators. Thereby, singing serves as an acoustic shield against the colonial forces that tried to destroy and erase their history and culture.

### Conclusion

Temsula Ao's "The Last Song" is a deeply moving short story. The analysis confirms that the act of singing is more than just a cultural feature of the Naga people; it has become their non-violent weapon against physical aggression and authoritarian power structures. The main idea of the research is that Apenyo's opposition to her aggressor in her last, repeated chorus is her ultimate power of resistance, thus allowing

her to take away from the rapist the pleasure of dominating her. Her voice haunts the offender so much that the army captain ends up losing his mind, as "he thought he could still hear the young girl's singing tune".

The paper also brought out the issue of gender discrimination and double-layered marginalisation of Naga women. The mother and daughter, Libeni and Apenyo, are two social figures who become vulnerable because, in a Naga society ruled by men, they do not have a male protector. Thus, patriarchal Naga society combines with state violence in such a way that they are left exposed twice. This struggle presents the cruellest of ironies that those who were called "protectors of the land" are turned into "destroyers," thus putting at risk not only innocent lives but also cultural continuity. The violence, which includes the burning of the church, is an attack on the Naga identity as it both preaches the erasure of the pre-Christian Naga culture and the Christian one.

Finally, the current research observes Temsula Ao as an important figure who safeguards the culture. By opting for the English language, she enacts "strategic essentialism," thereby uniting under one "Naga" banner the voices that would otherwise be lost in the ashes of burned villages - songs, myths, and memories. In the story, cultural survival is pronounced through Apenyo's courageous act of singing. She continued to sing even when her life and dignity were at stake. The story of her brave fight lives with the villagers. It continues to offer hope to future generations as a powerful reminder of the Naga people's tenacity and their determination to safeguard their culture.

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