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Banality of Violence: (Mis)Remembering the Past

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Abstract: *The interaction between dissimilar cultures, languages and traditions is a fertile site to evaluate how identities, borders and belonging is defined. The literary representation of these spatial and temporal negotiations provides an insight into the narrativization of the past, present and future. By critically examining Temsula Ao's short story "Soaba", I will interrogate the portrayal of a contact-zone that is steeped in conflict and quotidian violence. Here, Mary Louise Pratt's notion of contact-zone becomes a crucial tool to evaluate the encounter between competing claims to authority and authenticity. I suggest that Ao's narrative departs from normative anticolonial narratives of national identities to illuminate the distinct confrontations between "metropolitan" and "peripheral" lives and life-worlds. Yet, I propose that Ao recreates hierarchical binaries in her representation of the past, and risks reproducing the "noble native" trope that obscures the complex and dynamic history of negotiating modernity in the postcolony. Through this paper, I reassess Ao's authorial intention and execution of the act of remembering and representing a past before the consolidation of a nation-state. Drawing on the notion of necropolitics and slow violence, I demonstrate that Ao's story highlights the banality of both slow and spectacular violence in the quotidian life of the local inhabitants. By doing so, her short story interrogates the normative ideals of progress, development and modernity, and foregrounds the coercive manner of assimilating indigenous populations.*

Keywords: Contact-zone; postcolonial; modernity; eco-criticism; necropolitics

Introduction

In July 1987, the Assam Rifles[1] – the oldest paramilitary force of the Indian Army founded back in 1835 under the British Empire – launched "Operation Bluebird". Their aim was to punish members of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, an armed secessionist group which had earlier killed nine soldiers and looted ammunition in an attack on a military outpost. What followed was a protracted series of "arbitrary arrests, detention and torture of hundreds of villagers in and around Oinam," and alleged extrajudicial execution of at least fifteen men in the Senapati district of Manipur ("Operation Bluebird" 2). The report by Amnesty International documents the testimonies of eyewitnesses detailing the brutal executions, sexual violence, human rights violations, and

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rampant intimidation faced by the villagers. Such incidents are routine in the Northeast, and a reminder of the necropolitical order instituted by the military and law enforcement agencies in this contested region of India.

In this context, "Northeast" refers to the eastern frontier of India sharing national boundaries with five countries, namely, Nepal, China, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. It is in the Eastern Himalayan region comprising the Indian provinces of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Sikkim, and Tripura. The area remains a site of secessionist struggle since 1947, when India attained independence. The actions of the Indian Army in this region are exempt from legal challenges owing to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of 1958. This act places the action of the Indian armed forces beyond the scope of judicial scrutiny. AFPSA is in force in most parts of Northeast India as well as Jammu and Kashmir.

The experience of living life under the shadow of the resulting state violence informs much of the literary works produced by writers from this region. This is particularly true of the works of Temsula Ao who is an anglophone writer, poet, and ethnographer from the Ao tribe of Nagaland. In her writing, Ao engages with subjective realities of the Ao-Naga communal life to archive their traditional beliefs, virtues, and practices, and raise awareness about them. She is a prolific writer of short stories, poetry, novels and was awarded the Padma Shri (2007) as well as the Sahitya Akademi (2013) for her literature. Ao, navigates the lives of ordinary people caught in the nebulous network of national security, anti-state insurgent groups and the subsequent changing face of Naga communal life that underwent, in her words, "birth by fire" (x). The origin of the Naga movement is typically traced back to 1918 when the Naga Club was formed to bring together several tribes under one umbrella. The Nagas have continued one of the most protracted armed struggles in the Indian subcontinent and assert their difference in terms of race, language, history, culture, and traditions. When the Simon Commission of Britain visited Kohima in 1929, the Club appealed to exempt the Naga Hills from its suggestions for political reforms in India. Since Indian Independence in 1947 the Indian Government has stationed armed forces in Naga areas and engaged in violent suppression of demands for Naga independence. The ongoing movement continues to involve armed struggle against the Indian state and has gone through several phases demanding independence and autonomy of the Naga areas (Kikhi 2020, 46).

In this essay, I examine Ao's portrayal of the militarisation and violent abuse of the indigenous population in her short story "Soaba" published in her 2006 anthology *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. In this collection of short stories, she foregrounds the lived conditions of a turbulent historical of state consolidation. "The Lost Song" focuses on the brutal rape of a young girl by the military and the motif of the song is deployed as a mode of remembrance as resistance. Similarly, "The Pot Maker" highlights the folk practice of handcrafted pottery and collective art as a traditional practice.

Other stories in this collection such as "The Jungle Major" and "The Curfew Man" foreground the uncertainty and violent conflict affecting ordinary people caught in the matrix of dominance between underground rebel forces and state military forces. Each story is permeated by the brutal horrors of a landscape changing politically, economically and culturally. Keeping in line with the journal issue's focus on the concept of the "contact-zone", this paper limits its scope to focus on the story titled "Soaba", to examine the power-dynamics underpinning individual and collective subjectivities constituted in a contact-zone. The history of militarization in Northeast India, the insurgency movements, and questions of national security in the borderlands of Eastern Himalayas are beyond the scope of this paper. This paper spotlights the consequences of these conflicts between competing powers and how it *produces* a necropolitical lifeworld. I suggest that the story signals the necropolitical reality of Northeast India by blurring the binaries between human and animal existence, between slow violence and spectacular violence, and between an exploitative external state and the corrupt native elite. I suggest that the narrative foregrounds the protagonist's corporeal self as a violent "contact zone" to demonstrate the encounter between a dominant metropolitan community and the local indigenous community in the postcolony, and interrogate the rationale of progress and development. In the second section, I draw on and re-evaluate Rob Nixon's characterization of "slow" and "spectacular" violence by examining the brutal alterations to the landscape and displacement of the indigenous tribes in the narrative. In the third section, I propose that Ao's fiction departs from normative anticolonial narratives of national identities to illuminate the distinct confrontations between "metropolitan" and "peripheral" lives and life-worlds. At the same time, I contend that Ao's portrayal reveals the complicated nature of representing contact zones as she highlights the brutal aspects of transculturation while succumbing to reproducing a romanticized narrative about the past.

The Body as a Contact-Zone

"Soaba" is set in the late 1960s, when the Naga secessionist movement was at its height and instances of military violence and ethnic hostilities were a part of daily life in Nagaland. The titular character Soaba, meaning 'stupid' in the Ao language, is introduced as a simpleton who has little grasp of language and poor social skills. He works in the house of a former police officer, referred to as Boss, and his wife, Imtila, in a small town in Nagaland. He is attracted to the Boss' majestic house and flamboyant cars, but soon discovers that it is a site of brutal torture where villagers are regularly brought in for interrogation to gather information about the underground armies that have emerged in Nagaland to fight for Naga independence from the Indian state. Soaba is accidentally shot by the Boss when the latter's fears about being displaced as a leader takes a violent turn. Except for Imtila, who is fond of him, no one else attends his funeral, and his death is never investigated.

Soaba's trajectory mirrors the numerous so-called 'encounters' that take place in the region where military excesses like Operation Bluebird enjoy legal impunity as a matter of national security. 'Encounter' nominally describes a military engagement with an enemy at an unexpected time and place. However, through the Indian state's attempts to crush the Maoist Naxalite movement and the various secessionist struggles in the Northeast and Kashmir, the term has virtually become co-extensive with 'extrajudicial killing'. This apparent expendability of human life points to the category of "necropolitics" that Achille Mbembe posits in the context of the postcolony. Mbembe notes that the distinction between the "ends of war" and "the means of war" collapses in the colony and that colonial "warfare is not subjected to legal or institutional rules" (Mbembe 2003, 25). In this way, he points to the coloniality of political power in the sense that the postcolony has not moved "post" colonialism but continues to deploy the same scripts. Building on Giorgio Agamben's "state of exception" and Foucault's idea of biopolitics, Mbembe expands the debate on politics to assert the role of violence and the resultant construction of a state of emergency as legitimizing condition for exerting this violence in order to maintain sovereignty. Examination of the necropolitics in "Soaba" shows that the protagonist's death is accidental, the attitude towards it is unapologetic, and ultimately it is rendered insignificant. This illustrates the experience of indigenous tribes in the postcolony, which Mbembe defines as a "[h]istorical trajectory – that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves" (2001, 102).

In *Conscripts of Modernity* David Scott notes, "Anticolonial stories about past, present and future have typically been emplotted in a distinctively narrative form, one with a discursive story potential: that of *Romance*" (7), which would raise similar expectations of Ao. However, within the necropolitics of the Indian postcolony Soaba is not a romantic hero. He suffers a tragic death, and the other characters are visibly impacted by his untimely passing. For Raymond Williams, the action of tragedy has always been linked to the action of history and is often a reaction to disorder (2006, 88). In Ao's engagement with the history of Nagaland's social and political upheaval, she employs the tropes and convention of the tragic form to problematize our notions of postcolonial identity, history and development. After all, for indigenous communities the experience of being policed by the Indian state and its allies takes the form of terror.

"Soaba" navigates the continuous conflict between state and non-state rebel groups and the collusion of middlemen to benefit from the resulting chaos on both sides of the conflict. The titular character's original name is Imtimoa but because others cannot understand his fragmented speech, he is called Soaba, meaning 'stupid'. "Imtimoa" in the Ao language means a blessing but ironically the character is presented as someone "destined to be caught up in the whirlwind sweeping through the land and creating havoc in people's lives"

(9). Soaba speaks incoherently, performs minor chores, and embodies the disorientation of the common masses trapped in the upheavals of the Naga society and politics. His bewilderment at the new disruptions in daily life and his constant dismissal by others symbolise the treatment meted out to indigenous populations. The majoritarianism of mainland India racializes them as primitive and stupid because it does not make an effort to understand what may be unintelligible at first. Even when he does not fully grasp the full extent of situations, he *senses* their meaning. He infers that the word s*oaba* is not a well-intentioned name and demands his name be changed to *Supiba*, a word he overhears the Boss use to call someone a "stupid bastard" (14). Even when he seeks redressal for his mistreatment, he tragically fails. This dereliction alludes to a larger failure to seek redressal or justice for the abuse meted out by the Indian state towards the indigenous communities in Nagaland.

But whether called "Soaba" or "Supiba," the figure of Imtimoa remains equated with low intelligence. His incomprehensibility to others denotes a disability, suggesting the collective incapacity of disenfranchised people to engage effectively with the violent intrusion of the state. For both Imtimoa and the disenfranchised, disability is effected from the outside. He is reduced to animal-like characteristics such as, "rolling on the ground, playing tricks with sticks and stones" (15). Words and actions fail him when threatened and he "growl(s) like an animal" and "is totally unaware of any reality except hunger and thirst (9). As a consequence, he turns to nonverbal signs, resorting to excited gestures to indicate fear and anger, which appear to allegorize the deprived existence that has been enforced in the region as a result of its disproportionate militarization. As one critic has noted, Soaba's naivete and incoherence are "larger comments on the systematic stunting of people's hopes and aspirations in Nagaland" (Arora 2019, 12).

In her foreword to the anthology, titled "Lest We Forget," Ao briefly states two primary objectives in writing the book. She decisively outlines her intention to *remember*, to communicate to the reader that this anthology would function as an artefact to recollect the history of the Naga Secessionist movement in the 1960s. The first objective was to revisit the unacknowledged pain of the Naga community caught in the struggle for secession and self-determination. The second goal was to capture the ethos of Naga cultural life for younger generations for whom traditional culture was becoming "irrelevant in the face of 'progress' and 'development'" (x). To disrupt the dominant narrative of state development and a tourist-friendly biodiverse Northeast region, Ao focuses on the quotidian, gradual diffusion of the conflict as well as the sensational violent aggressions perpetrated both by the state as well as native insurgent groups. In "Soaba," Ao explores the failure of the Naga struggle for autonomy. Fraught with bloodshed, warfare and corruption, the foreword notes that the revolution "started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought

to overcome" (x). Through the fates of Soaba, Boss and Imtila, a narrative of despair regarding the endless cycle of violence and corruption is foregrounded. Regardless of who gains sovereign authority – the external Indian state or the factions of native groups – the lives of ordinary people seem to be embroiled in a continuous lived reality of harassment, humiliation and exploitation.

My interest lies in the interstices of Ao's metanarrative through which I investigate the motivations that animate the portrayal of this profound moment in Nagaland's history. Ao's scepticism of neocolonial enterprises is best articulated in the concluding lines of the story: "Thus ended the tragic tale of Soaba, who, like a bewildered animal, had strayed out of his natural habitat into a maze that simply swallowed him up" (21). The rhetoric here implies that if Soaba had not *strayed*, that is, had he remained within his familiar village community, he would have been safe. The seduction of the town, then, connotes the allure of rapid modernization, one which does not take into account local specificities. This is further underlined in her foreword, where she states that the "sudden displacement of the young from a *placid* existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and confusion in urban settlements is also a fallout of recent Naga history and one that has left them disabled in more way [sic] than one" (x, italics mine). In the struggle for Naga self-determination, the "maze" is the fractured sense of loyalty and belonging. The competing claims to sovereignty, represented by the concentrated power of the military, the secessionist underground rebel groups, and interstitial subgroups, like the ones headed by the Boss, create an implosion of social and cultural values where figures such as Soaba are treated as sub-human and become unintended casualties.

The term "placid" here must be noted with caution. It reveals Ao's nostalgia for an undefined time predating the years of revolutionary conflict. She remarks that "Our racial wisdom has always extolled the virtue of human beings living with nature and with our neighbours" (xi). However hilly upland regions in peripheral areas like Northeast India are part of what Scott calls "shatter zones" in the Southeast Asian massif, where geographical inaccessibility and self-governance have led to an accumulation of "bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity" (7). This complexity refutes Ao's romanticised depiction of the past as a harmonious social and ecological utopia. This depiction of rural lifestyle echoes with the insinuation that Soaba's tragic end was inevitable, cementing the binary between rural and urban. Ao, thus, reverses colonial binaries but does not overcome them. She re-articulates them in a hierarchy, privileging a nostalgic version of a past civilization as the superior model.

In "shatter zones" such as 1960s Nagaland in Ao's story, the concept of a contact zone becomes a critical tool to evaluate the processes of transculturation and assimilation. Mary Louise Pratt conceived of the phrase "contact zone" to "refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of

power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today." (1991, 33) The encounter between the postcolonial nation state and the indigenous population is depicted by a narrative of moral and political tragedy where the latter is brutally coerced into erasure of identity, language, and tradition. The figure of Soaba mimics the quotidian confusion of the civilian – the inability to articulate oneself in the face of continued displacement and extraordinary violence as a metropolitan idea of development threatens to subsume a peripheral one. Soaba's fascination with speeding cars, for example, is distinguished from aspiration because he does not fully discern what these symbols of wealth imply, nor does he covet them. His sense of wonder comes from his curiosity and the novelty of the situation.

The spatial and temporal notion of a "contact-zone" is not limited to the specific geo-political location of Nagaland. It is embodied in the corporeal existence of Soaba – his perplexed mannerisms, speech (the lack of it) and ultimately his death symbolize the asymmetrical relations between the centre and the periphery as well as the violence ensuing from that transition. The manner of Soaba's burial is a potent indicator of this apprehension regarding the overwhelming potential of erasure by the dominant state hegemony. Imtila dresses Soaba's corpse in the "Boss' best suit," mirroring the sudden, violent death of native culture and old traditions, engulfed by the new traditions. His death evokes the perils of surviving in a contact-zone, the risk of succumbing to the terrorizing forces of transculturation and assimilation. Apart from the pallbearers, only a reluctant pastor and Imtila are present at his funeral, and he is "buried in a far corner of the town cemetery" (19). The reference to a pastor is an additional reminder that imagining a homogenous, peaceful past of Nagaland would be a flawed exercise. How does one delineate a point of origin or authenticity? There remains a contested history of the region as a fertile contact zone between indigenous faiths centred around animistic traditions, and the spread of Christianity with the arrival of missionaries in the Nineteenth Century.

But a contact zone can also be a site of renewal and revolutionary interrogation. Soaba's burial reveals the radical ways of resistance that minoritized communities adopt, to reclaim and reassert their identity. Despite attempts to "remove all signs of Soaba's existence from the compound" by burning his cot and clothes, the incident of his death radically alters both Boss and Imtila. His violent erasure provokes both of them to reassess their actions and their relationship. Soaba is buried in the corner of the cemetery, thus effectively denied a central position even after his violent "senseless death" (22). Although consistently situated in the periphery of Boss' home, Soaba's existence in life and in death challenges the status quo in the house. Much as Soaba's body is denied a place in the centre of the cemetery, or by extension in the dominant narrative of development in the Northeast, it is present in the perimeter of collective consciousness, resisting *complete* erasure of the past. Ao

thus delves into the lived experience of the Naga people to offer a glimpse of how the central government's regime steeps it into violence, corruption, and an acute sense of despair. In doing so, she presents the grand narrative of development and modernity proffered by the Indian nation-state as hollow. But even as it negotiates the entanglements of violence, gendered structures and exploitation, the narrative also offers space for hesitation and hope that the old ways may yet survive the onslaught of change. This optimism regarding the tenacity of tradition and communal spirit pivots away from the dominant narrative of conflict dominating literature from the area, and it affirms the persistence of indigenous voices and communities who will survive their consistent eclipsing by dominant narratives of history, memory, and culture.

The changes in the socio-economic conditions are reflected in the changes of Soaba and Boss' names as well. No one remembers their original names. Imtimoa and Imlichuba become Soaba and Boss respectively: they are different identities that indicate their new roles in this transitioning society. Unlike Soaba, who exhibits animal-like characteristics, Boss displays machine-like qualities of rigidity in his mechanistic performance of tasks assigned by the state. In both situations, Boss and Soaba are stripped of human individuality and mutate into nonhuman archetypes. The change of names for both characters reveals the psychological consequences of navigating a reign of terror, enforced by the military, rebel groups, and middlemen. It signals the change in the socio-political context that has abruptly penetrated local life.

To define the novel ways in which the state perpetuates colonial discourse, Mbembe argues that colonisation legitimised by equating the native principle and the animal principle (2001, 238). By doing so, the native is defined and domesticated in terms of the radical otherness of an animal, conscripted into a language of servility and moral depravity – in opposition to the colonizing conquerer. Soaba highlights this principle by blurring the boundary between human and animal. He strays into Boss' house, lives on the periphery of the compound and is excluded from customary activities. He can perceive the torturous pain of villagers at night in the house without understanding who gets tortured by whom or why. When Boss points a gun at Imtila, his wife, Soaba performs his singular act of bravery by shielding her, almost like her guard dog. It is through Soaba that the metanarrative reveals a personified reaction to the explosive breakdown of meaning, human and animal identity, and orderly stability. Soaba's death, however, is treated as inconsequential and "the actual circumstances of the death [are] never fully investigated nor talked about" (19). The trivialization of his killing articulates the banality of death vis-à-vis the lived reality of Naga life, and by extension, the reality in other states where lives are lived under the necropolitical order instituted by the postcolonial Indian nation-state. The Northeast Indian borderland areas have been governed as an exception to the rule of law and replicate colonial patterns of Othering communities from these peripheral

regions as 'uncivilised' (Baruah 2005, 60). Here, Ao's portrayal of Soaba's death reveals two crucial points. First, it highlights the quotidian experience of peripheral characters who are rendered voiceless. Second, it stresses the swift erasure of nonconforming identities or cultures as inconsequential collateral damage in the pursuit of larger desires for 'development' and homogeneity. Both these assertions are indicative of colonial attitudes that are reproduced in the postcolony.

The ironic inversions of the names from their significance in the Ao language allude to the reality of living with extraordinary violence and sweeping coercive transitions. Soaba, originally Imtimoa, is now a figure of abjection, who witnesses daily brutalities within the Boss' household. Imlichuba, the Ao name of Boss, would approximately translate to 'a peaceful king' or 'a serene higher authority'. This is especially ironic since Boss is decisively neither tranquil nor regal. Instead, he incites torture and terrorises the community. Imtila would approximately translate to 'a big, strong village'. However, she is lonely, confined and powerless in her circumstance. Significantly, all names share the prefix "im," which is derived from the Ao word *yim*[2] for village and all these characters share a history of displacement from their native villages and of navigating the new socio-political reality that has upturned their lives. The antithetical contrast between their names and realities reflects the broader ironies of displacement in the pursuit of livelihood, of impoverishment in the quest for economic growth, and brutal violence in the campaign for law and order.

Ao traces the source of this disillusionment to the Indian nation-state, which recruited native volunteers into what became known as the "flying squad" to counter rebel secessionists. Wresting control of Nagaland meant creating an alliance with complicit natives who were provided arms, ammunition, alcohol, and legal impunity. As "self-seeking entrepreneurs," they colluded with the nation-state to terrorise other members of the community (12). They were designated as Home Guards by the government and functioned as "extra arms" that could guide the armed forces through the landscape and the local community's culture. These middlemen were

> beyond the law and civil rights and who would also "guide" their [the state's] forces who were so pitiably uninformed not only about the terrain on which they were fighting and dying, but also about a bunch of people so alien to them that for all they knew, they could have come from another planet! (12)

Here the narrative highlights the state's aversion to the indigenous population and its blatant alienation from the local landscape, community, and customs. Equipped with massive convoys and excessive power, the state contracts local militias for its reign of terror. As Mbembe argues, terror is "almost a necessary part of politics" and can be invoked to conflate the interests of the state with those of the people (2003, 19). This delegitimises the agency of individuals and communities as political bodies and subsumes heterogeneous realities under the

abstract rhetorical hyperbole of national security. Mbembe uses the term "fiscality" to make the entanglements of the *longue durée* of colonial experience palpable in three ways across the economic restructuring of the postcolony. These include the appropriation of livelihood, the allocation of profits, and coercing the colonised into obedience (2001, 66). For the indigenous Naga population, this results in a perpetual state of terror where human life is reduced to less than human existence, and human rights and aspirations are eclipsed by grand narratives of growth and security.

The Boss, who is the head of a group in the "flying squad," is an archetypal corrupt figure. Drunk on the excesses of alcohol, power and money, his house is the site for torturing people to gain information about rebel groups. His quick ascent to the top leadership position reflects in the wealth he amasses. This enables conspicuous consumption by constructing a bigger house, wearing more expensive clothes, and buying bigger cars. Significantly, his character blurs the binary of an external abusive state power and the abused native. His squad "be[comes] disquieting elements in the power struggle between the two warring groups" of the state and the underground army (12). For the Boss, the story provides a linear movement of superfluous masculinity where his alcoholic inclinations and unhinged power propel him to become increasingly more violent, more distant from his wife and insecure about this position. Along with Soaba and Imtila, he, too, is a victim of a transition where the state military is given legal impunity that legitimises violence against the racialized locals.

Soaba's death marks a critical moment that transforms the Boss' behaviour and clothing. His earlier boisterous and aggressive mannerisms are replaced by a morose listlessness, "as if a vital string had snapped in his evil genius when he pulled the trigger that night" (20). He used to wear three-piece suits for his parties but after the accident, he is never seen wearing a suit again, pointing towards a rejection of the power symbolised by a suit. The suit becomes a crucial symbol of colonial power and influence but the Boss is ultimately disillusioned with its grandeur. Here it is important to note that he shot Soaba after a misunderstanding about a potential coup, when he feared that one of his subordinates would usurp his position. The act of unintentional murder forces him to confront his implication and culpability in the reign of terror. The fear that he may lose power drives the Boss to act recklessly, but it is this futile death that forces him to comprehend the excess of death and torture in his actions. Yet he continues his public persona as *a* boss since "the government saw to it that he did not altogether lose his former standing," but when he now harasses locals, they sense that the "sting had gone out of him" (21).All his performance of hypermasculinity in his treatment of his wife, the locals, his colleagues and subordinates is rendered into a futile exercise and his power is exposed as an empty husk. Mbembe notes that in the absence of clear indicators of power, a parallel economy of tax extortion emerges, fuelled by military impunity. It is difficult to ascertain who actually *has* power (2001, 82). Boss, for instance, is the local leader. However, he is powerless when compared

to the state that has successfully wielded him as an extension of its regional dominance without delegating any legal authority or responsibility. But Boss also evades any legal liability with the help of the state. As an "extra arm," the Boss' power, his utility, and indeed identity, is predefined as the extrajudicial enforcer of sovereign power.

The government's nonchalance and the political competition for power reveal the extent of lawlessness undergirding the state of exception in the region. It resembles colonial practices of legal impunity, military excesses, and foregrounding racial difference between the coloniser and the native (Mbembe 2003, 24). For the government, the indigenous population is perceived as alien and savage, to be treated inhumanly. This can be read as an instance of Mbembe's "death-worlds," where unique forms of social existence are created in which "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead* (2003, 40)." By pursuing the same violent exploitative processes of the colonial empire, the peripheral Northeast region of postcolonial India remains an Other to the consciousness of the postcolonial Indian nation-state.

The necropolitical violence on display in the public realm also registers in the domain of the private and shapes the intimacy between the Boss and his wife, Imtila. For Imtila, "a prisoner of her husband's notoriety," their home is the site of coerced obedience, infidelity, and alcoholism and reflects the breakdown of law in the public realm. She moves away from the parties as well as their bedroom and resents the expensive fashion and ornaments that she must wear to adhere to the image of power that her husband projects. The incessant raids and violence undertaken by "her husband and his lackeys," eventually numb her to the brutalities of torture and sexual harassment around her. She can "[feel] only a deep sympathy for the unfortunate women" (16). But even as the labyrinth of violence permeates her personal and political life, Imtila's negotiation of the aftermath echoes the attitude of resignation that most people adopt in conflicted circumstances. After Soaba's death and the consequent decline in the Boss' mental health, she moves back to their bedroom and attempts to rekindle her relationship with the Boss. She feels obliged to help him, despite their tumultuous past, by, "creat[ing] a new order from the pathetic remains" (20). Her inability to forsake her abusive husband and the distressing situation at home despite her contempt for both, her husband and home, sheds light on the inertia of the situation. Through Imtila, Ao demonstrates the collective pathos of ordinary citizens caught in a dialectic of nationalism and alienation.

The story mentions the existence of Boss and Imtila's children only once in the beginning and never again. The deliberate absence of the children in the plot's action articulates an overarching preoccupation with survival and coping with daily violence. If conventional representations of children signify the qualities of youth, adventure and learning, their absence indicates the impossibility of striving for these pursuits in the midst of trauma and conflict.

Against the backdrop of revolutionary upheavals, the joy of childhood, leisure and creativity are eclipsed by the state-sponsored politics of emergency. In their circumstance, Boss can only fixate on terrorising people to gather informants for the Indian state while Imtila is preoccupied with avoiding Boss and his group. Imtila is initially described as someone who "would have loved" to take care of her husband and children (12). Yet, the complete omission of children in their story reveals how Boss and Imtila have had to prioritise their individual identities; the boss is a local figure with power while Imtila fails to mark out a separate identity for herself and remains his miserable wife. This is especially significant because in a traditional society, the emphasis of their married life would have been on the upbringing of their children. This change, to prioritise politics and power over a "domestic" life by the Boss, reveals the cost of the Naga revolution that affected everyone, regardless of their participation in the pursuit of power.

Banal violence in the contact-zone

"Soaba" presents the collapse of Rob Nixon's postulated binary between slow violence and spectacular violence. Nixon defines slow violence as the gradual, attritional impact of development and climate change, usually occurring in poor nations, while spectacular violence refers to instantaneous, sensational moments of violence that receive global attention through media coverage (Nixon 2011, 2). Abrupt demonstrations of sheer authority are predicated on the spectacle of power, such as the Boss' displaying of his gun and showing off of his large following and steady supply of alcohol. The home of the Boss is a site of spectacular violence which is immediately recognisable in the nightly shrieks of humans who are abused; it evokes memories of incidents such as Operation Bluebird. Instances like Soaba's death or the torture of locals are moments of abrupt and dramatic violence that acknowledge the ubiquitous state violence that marks the socio-political landscape of Nagaland. Both seek to erase the history and culture of the Ao Nagas from the landscape under the guise of development.

Rob Nixon also discusses the idea of "spatial amnesia" to refer to "unimagined communities" who have been intentionally invisibilised to "[maintain] a highly selective discourse of national development" (150). Micro-minorities like indigenous tribes are abruptly displaced, eliminated and diminished within the nation, in order to pursue inherently discriminatory policies of growth and progress. For Soaba, Imtila, and even Boss, their lives, bodies, and identities as indigenous inhabitants are dismissed as unimportant, viewed purely in terms of their utility. In "Soaba," we find every character threatened with the terrifying possibility of death by the state or extrajudicial elements. In some instances, it is the Indian army seeking to punish the community, like in Operation Bluebird, for protecting and supplying resources to the underground groups. Often it is the latter that extorts resources, fines and "donations", i.e. bribes, from the common folk. As the conflict between the

Indian state and the underground rebel groups escalates, the narrator notes how "a new vocabulary also began to creep into everyday language of the people. Words like convoy, grouping and 'situation' began to acquire sinister dimensions (10)." Herein 'situation' acquires meaning specifically as "the fall-out of the struggle between two opposing forces [the invading army and the underground army]" (11). With the increasing securitization and militarization of the area, armed deployments and bands of "extra arms" became a common sight and a part of everyday reality. The escalating militarization of language in the conflicted area marks the mapping of the region in terms of resource extraction and territorial integration.

Even in terms of mobility, Soaba and Imtila's movements are dictated and monitored by the state or its "extra arms". Soaba is "given a free run of the compound but [is] not allowed inside the house." He stays in the compound because he "forgot that he had wanted to go out at all" (14). As her husband's power and authority grows, Imtila's range of independent travel diminishes. "She could not go out anywhere without a bodyguard and her friends or relatives could not come to the house freely like before" (15). Both find their radii circumscribed by administrative directives and their autonomy to travel or interact with people severely curtailed. Their constraints encapsulate the restrictions placed on the larger indigenous community by assertions of border security and resource accumulation. Soaba *forgets* that he can leave the compound, demonstrating the tedious banality of a death-world where humans are reduced to a living death-like existence. Even the freedom to move outside the house is delimited by the inability to imagine or remember the space outside the compound since all attention is fixated on the conflict and action within the house.

W.J.T. Mitchell translates landscape into a verb and defines it as "not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed" (1994, 1). It is not an external entity but, rather, intimately connected to human history, affecting what kind of habitation, agriculture, livelihoods, and human-nonhuman interactions take place (DeLoughrey 2011, 265; Mukherjee 2011, 69). In many of the stories in Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, the different protagonists take refuge in the forests; the hilly terrain serves as a haven from either the Indian Army or underground groups, or both. But in "Soaba," Ao clearly demarcates the town and the forest as separate zones of warfare. "The 'fight' taking place in the jungles did not reflect the conflict of interests that was eating into the moral fabric of a society where friendship and loyalty were the casualties" (12). The dense vegetation and impenetrable terrain of the jungle, therefore, is portrayed as a site for weaponised war where the army and rebels contest Naga sovereignty. The town, on the other hand, is the locus of a struggle over cultural identities, where "friendship and loyalty were the casualties" (12). The involuntary migration of inhabitants from their places of origin, in Ao's narrative, shows

the Naga landscape exposed to the ruthless exploitative practices which ruptured the Naga community's indigenous beliefs and practices.

Spivak, in her "Afterword" to Mahasweta Devi's writings, notes that the task of the postcolonial situation cannot be restricted to only contemplating the master-slave framework – it must also interrogate the interpellation of the constitutional subject in the formation of the new nation-state (1996, 279). A significant reproduction of the colonial discourse is the use of development rhetoric to exploit tribal lives and life-worlds. This exercise is relevant to Ao's fiction too, which exemplifies the gradual changes to the hill landscape in peripheral sites and the slow violence of ongoing devastation to people and places beyond the global spotlight. The heightened socio-political tensions interrupt the lives of human communities and slowly intrude into the forests and hills. The conflict reaches into the once-impenetrable environment to carve roads and establish military cantonments to make it more accessible to exert the state's claim to sovereignty. The Indian state's intervention to construct military infrastructure triggers deforestation, environmental degradation and urbanisation, all of which hamper the extant tenor of life. Accidents at blind turns and pollution from the dusty roads are on the rise and attempts by the groups to ambush each other frequently result in civilian casualties, labelled as collateral damage. The "groupings", or forced displacements to new sites, were designed to facilitate extraction and

> Was the most humiliating insult that was inflicted on the Naga psyche by forcibly uprooting them from the soil of their origin and being, and confining them in an alien environment, denying them access to their fields, restricting them from their routine activities and most importantly, demonstrating to them that the "freedom" that they enjoyed could so easily be robbed at gunpoint by the "invading" army (11).

The right to extract resources is closely related to the right of tribal communities to determine what happens on their ancestral land and is intimately connected to issues of territorial autonomy (McDuie-Ra and Kikon 2016, 2). Hilly uplands in the Southeast Asian region have been, in James C. Scott's words, "nonstate spaces," where geographical obstacles prevented nation-states from exercising authority (2009, 13). The displacement of indigenous communities from peripheral locations towards more centrally-based accessible areas accomplished two things. First, their cheap labour could be utilised for developing industries like tea plantations, railways, or coal mining – practices that could be traced back to the colonial era (Baruah 2005, 21; Kikon 2016, 8). Second, the colonizer, and subsequently the postcolonial state, could gain access to natural resources that had been inaccessible so far due to the resistance of the inhabitants. The extraction of resources and the overarching profit motive necessitate the construction of transport infrastructure, the burden of which is borne by indigenous populations and their ancestral lands. For many communities in the Eastern Himalayan region, coal is the most accessible and controllable resource, with convenient methods

of extraction at the local level with minimal regulation. The urgency to join and control access to coal in the region is a major point of contention between indigenous tribes and state authorities (McDuie-Ra and Kikon 2016, 3). In addition, this results in the coerced displacement of indigenous populations that is motivated by the logic of development, which in turn seeks to incorporate their labour, resources, and landscapes within the fold of economic productivity (James C. Scott 2009, 10).

In the midst of this displacement and brutality, both Imtila and Soaba find solace in each other's company within the boundaries of the house. Ao's narrative problematises the binary between the motivations of the "outside" state apparatus and the ambition of the aspirational, upwardly mobile natives. Both are represented as equally coercive forces that persecute disenfranchised people as well as damage the natural environment. Both are exposed as patriarchal structures that dismiss and discredit women, appreciating them only as objects of beauty and aids for domestic labour. This is also reflected in these institutions' treatment of nature as an inert resource to be capitalised upon and extracted for financial and political gain. Although Soaba is identified as male, he does not conform to this masculinist archetype but is depicted as an infantilised character ridiculed for his silliness. Nature and women, as well as non-masculine people more generally, are placed at the receiving end of such manipulative practices.

Dolly Kikon asserts that the internalised narrative of bifurcation between the bad external state and the good native leader in Naga society conceals the structured "violence [that comes to be] embodied as the personal and immediate experience of the family, community, and the larger collective" (2016, 102). "Soaba" blurs this binary to illuminate the manipulation and exploitation by both. And by emphasising the patriarchal nature of both structures of power, it reflects on the gendered discourse of violence by depicting women's position as doubly affected by its diffusion in society. For Imtila, her peripheral, indigenous identity within the institutionalised structure of state power renders her unable to access positions of power or voice her reservations against them. Additionally, her personal space and domestic life are repeatedly invaded by her husband and his group, forcing her to recede away and distract herself with Soaba's antics.

However, in critiquing the above binary, Ao produces a different binary between the lived spaces of town and village, as reflected in the distinction between urban and rural life. Both Imtila and Soaba are described as "simple" folks – a recurring epithet used by Ao to describe people from the village. Their simplicity is substantiated in the text by their loyalty, familial ties, unassuming curiosity and willingness to readily help anyone. The trope of the naïve native here risks underestimating human complexity by romanticising pastoral life as quintessentially blissful. In direct contrast, the urban realm is represented as a sinister space bereft of human connections and fuelled by greed, manipulation and violence. In addition to critiquing the principles of

colonial modernity to reassert alternative models of civilization, Ao risks erasing the turbulent history of ethnic conflict in the region prior to the "external" interventions of the colonial and postcolonial states.

Raymond Williams considers the varied historic interpretations of the city and countryside as inferences to contemplate the nature of human settlements (2013, 1). The country life for instance, denotes distinct lived experiences for tenant farmers, hunters, small peasants, pastoralists, landowners and has various forms of organisation such as tribal and feudal structures. Lived experiences in the city are diverse, too, as there are different kinds of cities designed around ports, universities, industrial corridors, religious centres, administrative centres, and military barracks, among others. In "Soaba," however, a village is imagined with a "homogenous population" and "towns belonged to all tribes" with many "outsiders" from Assam, Bengal, Nepal or Bihar (10). Rural life is characterised as that "of hard work and meagre returns," while new townships were marked by "petty clerks in government offices," teachers and small-scale traders. Such a portrayal suggests highly static, rigid and isolated communities with homogeneous experiences, and projects the village as a harmonious community of honest, hardworking workers while the town is positioned as a locus of capital-seeking individuals who are frequently in conflict. This idealisation of indigenous Naga tribes – an identity that remains contested to this very day – is not only framed in temporal terms of a past prior to neocolonial and colonial devastation. It is also imagined spatially between the ancestral villages as authentic places of origin and emerging townships as external interventions that compromise indigenous values. Such a retrospective radicalism critiques the exploitation and accumulative tendencies of colonial and capitalist ideologies, but absolves histories of tribal hierarchies, headhunting, ethnic conflict and territorial tensions by projecting a glorious pre-colonial past of unity, harmony and comfort.

This brings me back to the question posed at the outset of my paper. How does Ao's fiction depict the past and how does it reflect contemporary conflict? *These Hills Called Home* formulates identity and history in an anticolonial way, but it is also resolutely anti-postcolonial in its articulation – because it disturbs any monolithic definition of what it means to be located in the postcolony. It is deeply invested in narrating the project of postcolonial nation-making and exposing the competing hierarchies and disparities in capital, power and resources *within* the Global South. Through the figure of Soaba as a contact zone depicting the negotiation between distinct cultures, Ao interrogates the pursuits of the state to "develop" the landscape, the people and their traditions. To do this, she engages with two distinct descriptive modes to contemplate the past and the present. The past is reconstructed as an ambiguous, undefined temporal location prior to colonization and nation formation and glorified as a utopian site of innocence and compassion rooted in the village community. In contrast, the contemporaneity of the postcolonial

present and future is expressed with tragic despair and as a time of traumatic upheaval. "Soaba" therefore presents a glimpse of the complicated negotiation of authorial intention in reclaiming a past and constantly renegotiating the legacy of colonial and postcolonial futures.

Notes

[1] The Assam Rifles is a paramilitary force and is a unit of the Central Armed Police Forces. It is tasked with the security of the Indo-Burma border region and has a dual control structure. While the administrative control of the force is with the Ministry of Home Affairs, its operational control is with the Indian Army, which is under the Ministry of Defence.

[2] I am grateful to Arenpongla Jamir for her help in deciphering the Ao language and translating their approximate meanings to English.

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