

# **PROBLEMATIZING HOME IN THE WRITINGS OF TEMSULA AO**

Indrajit Kalita  
Assistant Professor in English

Chaiduar College, Gohpur

## **Abstract:**

There is no denying the fact that home is an abode of peace, happiness and all the basic amenities required for one's living. After the day-long fatigue, people take rest at home and thereby new energy to keep pace with their assigned tasks and move in the right direction. Moreover, one's sense of being 'rooted' is intrinsically related to one's home. But the disquieting factor arises when the assumed concept of home is replete with problems leading the inhabitants think that they are 'aliens' or the much touted 'other' in their own set-up. Life becomes miserable under the same roof and they find it safer to flee their home. Underlying factors for this untoward development are many and varied. What this paper attempts is to discuss those factors and conceivable solutions too in light of the writings of Temsula Ao, one of the most distinguished writers from North East India. Of all her writings, a few short stories are taken to peep into the disturbing aspects problematizing home, particularly in the North East.

Key words: rooted, aliens, other.

## **1. INTRODUCTION:**

North East India has witnessed scores of issues in recent times. Wide ranging issues including insurgency, illegal migration, ethnic clashes coupled with natural calamities like flood, drought etc. have paralyzed the socio-economic and political side in the region. As such, development itself becomes a misnomer if compared to other states like Punjab, Haryana, West Bengal, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu etc. But the most disquieting factor arises when we see policy makers and social scientists clubbing together different states in the region as the 'North East'. (1) It carries little or, to be precise, zero understanding about the region. Problems that arise in a particular state are not the same in another state. For instance, the problem of insurgency in Assam is not the same in case of Nagaland or Manipur. Ideological set up has much to do in coloring their stance in a given location. Thus any uniform framework in addressing the problem falls short in doing justice.

Given the aforesaid scenario, problematics of home or imaginary homelands in the region need wide spread attention and in-depth analysis. In addition, specific approach, based on geographical and ideological conditions, goes a long way in assessing the factors underlying the concept of home. It is for the sake of convenience that the present study may be divided into a number of parts. The first part looks at home in theoretical parlance. Then it shifts its focus on the writings of Temsula Ao, more specially her short stories. While doing that, problems involved in defining home are given due attention. Besides, socio-cultural and historical roots problematizing home are also taken note of. And last, but not the least, the writer's attitude or her philosophy in terms of the problematics of home constitute a major part in the paper.

## **2. METHODOLOGY :**

Methodology used in the paper is purely secondary. Help is taken from books, articles, references, journals, newspapers etc.

### **3. DISCUSSIONS:**

#### **HOME IN ITS THEORETICAL PARLANCE**

Recent times have witnessed a number of approaches and perspectives to discuss home. All this makes the study of home quite interesting and situates it on such a place where home transcends its age-old conceptions and acquires a new dimension. With so many theoretical stances coming up, home no longer remains a 'place' where the family members live under a roof made of all the construction materials only. Thanks to the new approaches, myriad and diverse as they are, the concept of home shifts from material entity to abstract and ideological set up giving rise to scores of discourses. This position bears so much importance that it does not matter whether one lives in an ordinary, dilapidated, e.g. made of thatched roofs, construction or in a multi storied A.C. compartment. What does matter is the entire social, political, economic and cultural milieu cropped up all around the concept of home. Under these factors, concept of home keeps changing and acquiring new meaning in critical discourse.

To discuss the concept of 'home', we may take up various key issues including colonialism, nationalism, partition, exile, post colonialism, historical time, diasporic space, gender, among many others. (2) All this makes the study of 'home' quite interesting as well as complex enough to have drawn wide spread attention in recent times. As such, creative writings also present 'home' as a multi dimensional concept. With the advent of so many critical theories, multi dimensional concept of 'home' acquires new phase all over the world. However, almost all the recent observations and deep analysis are sheer pointers to 'home' as not being a 'safe space' to live in. Writers as well as critics refer to scores of social, political, economic, cultural and ideological issues involved in making 'home' quite 'unsafe' to sustain life peacefully. Coming into close contact with these developments, Homi Bhabha uses the term 'unhomely' to refer to the estranging sense of the relocation of the home in an unhallowed place.(3) By 'unhomely', Bhabha does not mean 'homelessness'. Rather it is such a moment that creeps up stealthily and makes us feel as Henry James' Isabel Archer does in 'The Portrait of a Lady'.(4) As she finds herself in a state of 'incredulous terror' emanating from her dwelling place, people trapped in such conditions experience nothing but anti-human practices all around their home. Under these circumstances they find it more convenient to flee their home so that life could be 'saved' from the dangers of their own set up.

Given the so called 'unhallowed' location, home seems quite untoward for the people concerned. This so happens on most of the occasions. However, the same home becomes the most sought-after place for people living overseas or in diasporic set up. They prefer having home to assert their identity and the sense of belongingness or rootedness. Any prospect of losing one's home in this context results in restlessness and much complexity. Apart from this study area, postcolonial approach to the study of home has become more interesting. Starting from colonial subject matter, partition, refugee experiences, postcolonial studies also engage gender issues, globalization and capitalist dispossession to the study of home. (5) Critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jacqueline Bhabha, Saskia Sassen, among others, have taken to post colonialism in terms of globalization and the transnational circuits of economic and political displacements. Postcolonial North American writers like Michael Ondaatji and Jhumpa Lahiri also take to the nation state's violence, the origin of which may be traced to the concept of home. (6) Their experience of the so called home in the far-off location coupled with the sense of being too far from their original set up make the study of home all the more interesting. Moreover, any discourse engaging home bears new color and dimension in accordance with its location amidst the entire social, political, economic, cultural and ideological developments. Taking all this into account, study of home itself becomes one of the focal points in creative and critical writings alike.

#### **HOME AND THE NORTH EAST**

India's North-East is a region replete with so many diverse and multifarious issues that it opens up new ways of study and observation among thinkers and general masses alike. Insurgency, ethnicity,

violence, illegal migration, governance deficit, underdevelopment, unrest centering the proposed big dams, among many others, are some of the key areas drawing wide spread attention in recent times. Combined all this, the region itself becomes trouble torn where development seems to be a misnomer in the real sense of the term. Apart from this disquieting side, the eye-raising factor is the sheer lackadaisical and not-so sincere attitude of the Government of India to the region. Instead of addressing the problems and sorting out conceivable solutions on logical grounds, the Government's initiatives are largely pro-state and insensitive to the vulnerabilities of the common men and dismissive of the frequent transgression of rights of its citizens by the state. (7) Violation of rights of the citizens has been a regular phenomenon. In the name of combating unrest and terror, draconian measures like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Disputed Areas Act etc. have been imposed reaping little benefits or results. Deeply concerned with these anti human measures, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extra Judicial on summary or arbitrary execution, Prof. Cristhof Heyns recommended the scrapping of these controversial acts. It was further stated in the UN report that a law such as AFSPA has no role to play in a democratic country and should be scrapped as early as possible.(8) Simultaneously, unabated infiltration from neighboring countries, especially from Bangladesh, through porous border has changed the demographic pattern of the region. Crisis has been cropped up, apart from socio-economic and political sides, on land acquisition in the region. Recent unrest in the BTAD areas mostly between the Bodos and the Muslims, has much to do with land, allegedly occupied by the people coming from outside. Alongside this factor, the supposedly Bodo-dominated BTAD areas falling easy prey to the outsiders, mostly Bangladeshis, is an added cause for the unrest. These kind of ethnic clashes foreshadow a grim picture that may erupt at any moment in near future. Similarly in Tripura, the aborigines have been relegated to minority position because of illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

Construction of big dams in Arunachal Pradesh and their adverse impact on ecology and the low-lying areas of Assam occupy a distinct position in the annals of debate. As the dams are being constructed in earthquake prone locations, there lies every possibility of break down at any moment. If this happens, thousands of people will lose their lands, properties, homes and, above all, precious lives. One of the greatest demerits of these proposed dams is the sheer lack of multi-purpose mechanism that may facilitate, besides generating power, irrigation, flood control or navigation. Instead of this, the dams, being constructed by the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation, turn out to be single-purpose 'power only' dams. (9) Centering the dams, protesters in large numbers have come out calling for an immediate halt to the on-going constructions. Organizations like the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), North East Students' Organization (NESO), All Assam Students Organization (AASU) and a host of other people are opposed to the mega dams, but with little success.

Given the aforesaid critical phase the region is passing through, concept of home seems trouble torn and full of complexity. Most of the groups' imaginary homelands and the iron hand involved on the part of the authority have created havoc for the common people, known for their age old affinity with leading a life of peace, harmony and brotherhood. Right from measures like the Operation All Clear, Operation Bajrang etc, people in the region have bitter experience about their home till date. Under the pall of the curfew, normal life gets disrupted now and then. Their own home standing for security, peace and rest, turns antagonist to their life. They are compelled to think that it is for their home that their life is passing through great risk. Casualty seems to be a familiar word in their psyche. Leading a peaceful life is a distant dream. What they can do is just to wait for news whether an unexpected incident takes place all around.

## **HOME AND TEMSULA AO'S WRITINGS**

Home seems so problematic a term, particularly in a trouble-ridden location, that it requires deep speculation and consideration to fathom its multi-layered meaning. With fast changing social, cultural and political milieu, one's recourse to home gets multi-faceted as day progresses and time advances. A

cursory perusal of the writings produced in the North-East region shows their fascination for violence, mostly emanating from the problems of insurgency and extremism. Centering this side, apart from its far reaching socio-political implications, pro-talk and anti-talk factions within the groups cover a considerable part in the literary and cultural discourse in the region. The path of armed resistance and peace through dialogue has been a recurring theme in most of the writings including Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's award winning novel 'Mrityunjoy'. (10) Imran Hussain, Atulananda Goswami, Temsula Ao, Manorama Das Medhi, Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh, Bimal Choudhury are mostly concerned with depicting their perceptions of the traumatic experience of people living in the midst of terror. Despite that, the writers cherish hope that human values will triumph some day and the prospect of peace will find its way to the region sooner or later. (11) Referring to all this, depiction of home by these writers seems problematic to a great extent. Moreover, the bitter experience of the younger generation poised at the crossroads between a traditional way of life and modernity constitute a new phase to the study of home. (12) Most of the writers including Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Mamang Dai and Mousumi Kandali take this side with utmost care and due consideration.

Keeping in pace with the dominant issues cropped up in the region, Temsula Ao has carved a niche in the annals of North-East writing. One of the most powerful literary voices from the region, her commitment to writings carries proficiency and dexterity both in theme and treatment. Tried, as she has done, her hand in poetry, short story and the essay proper, she proves herself a meticulous artist in every conceivable area. However, the most striking feature in her writings, among so many, is the presentation of the problematics involved in imaginary homelands with all their socio-political and ideological dimensions. As most of her writings, mostly the short stories, are based on Nagaland and its adjacent areas, the Naga set up with the separatist bent covers a considerable space showcasing the incalculable toil and suffering that have paralyzed all and sundry. With their age old ethnic alliance transformed into ethno nationalism by the time the British prepared to leave the sub-continent, the pan-Indian nationalism faced a serious setback. (13) Thinking along their ethno-cultural lines, the Nagas, like most of the other tribes, sought for a platform to assert their rights and a distinct identity. For this, they took recourse to arms and ammunitions at the cost of peace and serenity in the region. Having observed this fast growing socio political menace, the Govt. has not sat idle. To combat the anti nationalist elements, forces have been deployed in large numbers engaging themselves in various plans and strategies against the armed militants. As such they cause incalculable suffering to the innocent civilians. Their strict vigil at each and every movement of the civilians goes to the extent of the violation of rights. Following the order of the high command, the forces often resort to fake encounters in which innocent people get victimized. It is for this atrocity meted out by the military and paramilitary forces that people go indifferent to the formers' mission of combating anti nationalist elements in the region. Instead of supporting the forces, they prefer having an acceptable stance toward the militant outfits. Moreover, it is often observed that people are forced by some of the militant outfits to offer financial assistance and also moral support. They act according to the direction of the outfits because the alternative means like the security forces do not come to their help whenever and wherever they have been approached to.

Temsula Ao is very much concerned with difficulty faced by civilians owing to short sighted measures like the curfew and mischievous activities practiced by the government forces. Under these circumstances, one's home or homeland turns out problematic where normal activities cease from the scene. In 'The Curfew Man', Ao presents the problematics of home once curfew is clamped on the locality. In her words:

"...the night curfew was the worst for people living in towns because soon after dark all social activities ceased, even church services or social gatherings had to be concluded ...civilians were shot dead by the patrol parties..." (p. 34) (14)

Touching upon this kind of background, a critical phase in the life of Jemtila and Satemba has been presented. For their poor economic condition, they have to take up those works that do not fit into

their mindset. Jemtila doing household works at the S.D.O.'s residence and Satemba providing information about the whereabouts of the underground militants to the authority make their life troublesome and unbearable. Their endeavor to make home safe and worthy of living goes opposite when one of the members of the outfit threatens him in the strongest terms. Caught between the two opposites, they experience unbearable pain and suffering in life.

In another story named 'The Jungle Major', Ao presents the home of Punaba and Khatila as one beset with so many problems when the former joins the underground outfit. Punaba's motif of joining the outfit is to liberate their homeland from the foreign rule. They take the Central and State leadership as foreigners doing very little good for the common people. The writer says:

"The subject of independence became public talk; young people spoke of the exploits of their peers in encounters with government forces and were eager to join the new band of 'patriotic' warriors to liberate their homeland from 'foreign' rule." (p. 15) (15)

The authority does not sit idle too. It deploys forces that create havoc in the name of combating anti nationalist elements. They become so brutal that ransacking the houses, burning the grain in barns, grouping of the villages including that of Punaba and Khatila, molesting women have been regular occurrences paralyzing common people in every walk of life. Violation of rights is a familiar feature rampant in the society. This strategy of the authority, making one's home problematic apart, accentuates the rage of the common masses and makes them at ease with militant outfits instead of coming for the help of the security forces to eradicate anti nationalist and disquieting elements.

Problematics of home remain quite dominant in most of her short stories. In each of her creations, she takes adequate measure to give it a new look and dimension. For instance, in 'Soaba', she presents the problematics both in public and private arena. Of course, there seems to be close affinity between these two. Their relative existence makes them quite interesting and worth reading. Talking about the problematics in public life, Ao refers to the 'grouping' mechanism deployed by the government forces. Under the purview of this strategy, people lose their ancestral set up and are forced to leave their home. To quote from the story:

"The word 'grouping' had a much more sinister implication; it meant that whole villages would be dislodged from their ancestral sites and herded into new ones, making it more convenient for the security forces to guard them day and night." (p. 11) (16)

This humiliation inflicted on the villagers restricts them from their routine activities and robs them of their freedom-loving mindset.

In the name of combating anti nationalist forces, the Government's military-pronged strategy leading to the formation of 'flying squad' and some other bodies is shown to have created problems for people like the Boss and his wife Imtila in the story 'Soaba'. Being the head of the 'flying squad' meant for collecting information about the underground militants, he creates havoc in the locality. Making their conjugal life unbearable apart, he leads life lavishly with frequent parties involving drinks, making noise, enjoying women etc. All this makes his wife Imtila irritated and she no longer finds their home an abode of peace and happiness. The writer says:

"She (Imtila) could no longer call her home her personal domain, there was no peace and quiet for her or the children because her husband's lackeys seemed to be everywhere, inside the house, in the compound and some even had the audacity to enter their bedroom on the pretext of giving a message to Boss." (p. 15) (17)

The Boss goes so rude that he does not mind shooting Soaba, the title character in the story, down by coming under the impression that he acts as a traitor within his own household. This tragic end of the boy

is a consequence of power imposed by the Government authority. Thus the region itself turns out as a hub of unrest emanating from the socio-cultural and political factors giving rise to multifarious anti nationalist elements. These elements, in addition to posing threat to the sovereignty of the Indian nation state, make life troublesome to all people in general and also to those who are concerned with combating this development in every conceivable phase.

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that Temsula Ao has presented the problematics of home amidst the socio-cultural and political set up. As a new wave for asserting one's rights by taking recourse to armed resistance has swept most of the parts in the region, one's home does not remain a safe haven of peace and serenity. Of course, this growing unrest has much to do with the strategy taken up by the security forces. Instead of initiating multi-pronged mechanism, meant for addressing the real causes of the growing unrest, the Government finds it justified to come under the purview of military strategy with a view to alleviating or combating the problem. This acts just the opposite. Caught between the atrocity of the Government forces and lingering presence of the militant outfits, people face crisis in its multi-dimensional aspects. They find it difficult to sustain life even at their own home. The sense of being the 'other' starts growing up and sheer restlessness prevails in every phase of life. This is what Temsula Ao presents in her short stories. They seem to be convincing documents touching upon various issues that have come into being in the region in general and the trouble-torn Nagaland in particular.

#### 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I acknowledge the space provided by the multidisciplinary journal named the Scholar's Review to take up such a venture. In this connection, I would like to thank the advisers, reviewers and editorial board of the concerned journal.

#### REFERENCES

- 1) Ao, Temsula: *These Hills Called Home- Stories From a War Zone*, New Delhi, Penguin Books India with Zubaan Books, 2006.
- 2) Ao, Temsula: 'Writing Orality' in Soumen Sen and Desmond Kharmawphlang (ed) *Orality and Beyond*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2007.
- 3) Baruah, Sanjib: *Beyond Counter Insurgency- Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India* (ed), New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2009.
- 4) Baruah, Sanjib: 'Dams and Livelihoods' in *The Assam Tribune*, March 3, 2012.
- 5) Bhabha, Homi(1992): *The World and the Home*, Source- Social Text, No. 31/32, *Third World and Postcolonial Issues*, Duke University Press.
- 6) Choudhury, Arupjyoti and Dilip Gogoi(2012): *Marginal Frontier- Select Essays on North East India*,(ed) Guwahati, Bhabani Offset Pvt. Ltd.,
- 7) Daiya, Kavita: 'Home and the Nation- Women, Citizenship and Transnational Migration in Postcolonial Literature', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol.44, No.4, 2008.
- 8) Dasgupta, Anindita(2004): 'Civilians and Localization of Conflict in Assam' in *Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay*.
- 9) Deka, Harekrishna(2012): "India's North East: An Imperial Look" in Arupjyoti Choudhury and Dilip Gogoi (ed) *Marginal Frontier- Select Essays on North East India*, Guwahati, Bhabani Offset Pvt. Ltd.
- 10) Gooneratne, Yasmine (rev)(2007): *In Search Of Home- Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature* (ed) Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar, Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd..
- 11) James, Henry(1975): *The Portrait of a Lady*, New York, Norton.
- 12) Misra, Tillottama(2011): *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India, Fiction* (ed), New Delhi, Oxford University Press