
**Representation of Terror and Trauma in “An Old Man Remembers”
from *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* by Temsula Ao**

Gaijeanthui Gangmei
Student, Garden City University

Paper Received on 15-03-2026, Accepted on 28-04-2026
Published on 30-04-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.236

Abstract:

Temsula Ao's "An Old Man Remembers," from her acclaimed collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, presents a harrowing account of violence and terror experienced during the Indo-Naga conflict. The story captures the memories of an aged narrator who recalls the brutality, fear, and moral chaos that consumed his village. Through the old man's perspective, Ao constructs a powerful narrative of human vulnerability amid political turmoil. In the midst of widespread suffering, the boundary separating victims from perpetrators fades, revealing how violence transforms everyone it touches. The story does not merely depict physical violence but also delves into its psychological and ethical repercussions—how terror infiltrates the conscience and lingers as an unhealed wound in memory. The old man's recollection becomes an act of confession and remembrance, symbolizing the burden of guilt carried by survivors of wartime atrocities. By interweaving personal trauma with the larger history of the Naga people, Ao exposes the lasting scars of violence that define the region's collective identity. This paper examines how Ao transforms memory into a narrative tool to uncover the stories of the dark days of the Indo-Naga conflict, which are not known to the younger Naga generations.

Keywords: Indo-Naga conflict, memory, displacement, insurgency, post-colonial

Introduction:

Nagaland, which is widely known as the "Land of Festivals," was once troubled by violence and political unrest, which caused tremendous damage to the region. The 1950s, 60s, and 70s witnessed the rise of revolutionary armed Naga groups that believed in the formation of a separate state or nation from the Indian Union. The region was under British dominance before India gained its independence but was handed over to the Indian government after independence on 15th August

1947. This led intellectual and elite Naga men to initiate an armed resistance and revolutionary movement. The Indian government sent the Indian Army to suppress this movement and bring the region under its control. However, this led to extensive bloodshed and violence, and it was the innocent Naga people who bore the brunt.

Temsula Ao, in her work *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, inspired by the turbulent period of Naga history, describes the bloodshed, suffering, and brutality of that time through different stories. The Indian Army reached remote villages and used authoritarian tactics to suppress the movement. The army issued strict warnings to villagers, threatening serious consequences if they assisted resistance groups in any way. The army arrived in villages just before the festive season and shot people mercilessly, forcing villagers to flee their homes and hide deep in the forests (Kumar 19). Villagers ran away from their homes, were separated from their families, and lived in constant fear of pursuing soldiers.

“An Old Man Remembers” narrates the memories of an old man, Sashi, who endured immense hardship during his youth. He and his friend were forced into the jungle, separated from their families, and joined the armed resistance group to escape the pursuing Indian soldiers (Kumar).

“While Imli and Sashi were in school attending classes, they suddenly heard a great roar—children and women crying and running towards the jungle to escape from fireballs. Even schoolchildren were targeted and directed to the forest to safeguard their lives. Sashi never shared these incidents with anyone” (Kumar and Padmanabhan 43). The two young men were separated from their parents and spent their first night in the forest. They later woke to find underground men pointing guns at their heads. They were taken to camps and recruited into the Naga army. The two young men spent a year in the underground camp and eventually escaped when the army discovered their location and raided it. They reunited with their families, which brought both joy and sorrow.

The story “gives an account of the troubled times of Naga history. The independence movement was in full swing, and even the remotest villages were not spared. For the village people, it was a deeply troubled period because they were involuntarily involved in the conflict between overground and underground forces. The Indian Army showed little mercy or understanding, worsening the situation and making life miserable for villagers—a life filled with constant fear and pain” (Gupta 142).

For Sashi and his friend Imli, childhood was prematurely taken from them, and they were denied the happiness and joy that should have defined those years.

This period in Naga history is not widely remembered by the present generation of Naga people, but for older generations who lived through it, “the prime of their youth was a seemingly endless cycle of beatings, rapes, and the burning of villages and grain-filled barns. Forced labour, village grouping, and constant movement from one hideout to another in deep jungles to escape pursuing soldiers turned young boys into men who survived to fight, many losing their lives and others becoming ruthless killers” (Ao 93).

The old man Sashi “never wished to share his sufferings because he felt that it might affect the present generation both physically and mentally. However, he later realized that he was wrong and that what his friend Imli had said was correct” (Kumar and Padmanabhan 42).

In his old age, Sashi was accompanied by his grandchildren, who took turns staying with him. One day, his young grandson asked him a question that struck him deeply—whether he and his friend Imli had killed many people during their jungle days. This question stirred dark memories that he believed had been buried. “He never spoke about his jungle days; it was as though that phase of his life was consigned to a dark place in his heart and would be buried with him when his time came” (Ao 92). Eventually, Sashi decided to tell his story to his grandson. He said, “This is the first and the last time that I shall speak about these things. They have given me nothing but pain all these years, and therefore I did not want anyone to know about them...” (Ao 97). He recounted how his childhood was taken from him, how he joined an underground group, and how he was involved in several armed encounters with the Indian Army. He later sustained a gunshot wound to the leg and was compelled to surrender to receive medical treatment.

When their camp was attacked by the army, Sashi and Imli escaped and returned to their families, who were still hiding in the jungle. However, it was not long before news arrived of army patrols in the area. While relocating to another hideout, Sashi proposed laying a trap for the patrols. Though the idea initially seemed absurd, he managed to convince the elders. He and Imli then separated from the villagers to execute the plan.

It was here that Sashi and Imli took the most extreme measures. When the patrol arrived at the farmhouse where the trap was laid, the two young men “took aim and, as planned earlier, sprayed bullets into the vague figures from two different angles... five bodies lay sprawled on the mud floor, now black with their blood” (Ao 107).

Sashi continued his account, stating that he and Imli were later captured by an underground patrol and spent a year with them. During this time, Sashi admitted, “I do not know how many soldiers died or if anyone survived the assault at all... it was only when our side suffered casualties that we thought of the dead and the wounded” (Ao 109). The two friends had become hardened rebels and killers.

Sashi's final act in the underground group occurred when they ambushed a convoy carrying Naga representatives who were attempting a settlement with the Indian government—an act considered betrayal by the underground. During the gunfight, Sashi was hit by a stray bullet, forcing him to surrender to the Indian government for medical treatment. “But I recovered only to find that both Imli and I had to spend some time in jail because we had taken up arms against the Government of India and had to pay the price” (Ao 111).

They were later released and returned to their village. By then, many of their peers had been killed, and Imli's father had passed away. Sashi struggled to lead a normal life due to the trauma he had endured. “If I have survived and seem normal, it is because of the love and friendship of Imli and the devotion of your grandmother, who understood my secret pain and sustained me with her unquestioning love” (Ao 111).

By narrating his memories, Sashi brings back to life the turbulent period of Naga history—how he and his loved ones endured suffering, violence, and loss. Their childhood was taken away and replaced with guns and bullets. His memories reflect a time when the Naga region was engulfed in violence, forcing villagers into hiding, punishing innocents, and plunging the region into turmoil. Through Sashi's story, Temsula Ao educates younger Naga generations about the suffering endured by their people and illuminates this painful history through her powerful storytelling.

Work Cited:

- Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Zubaan, 2006. Print.
- Kumar, T. Raam, and B. Padmanabhan. “Nagaland as the Home for Existential Dread: A Critical Study on the Select Stories of Temsula Ao.” *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 9, no. S1, 2020, pp. 40–45.
- Gupta, Dhriti Sundar. “Representation of Violence in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*.” *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, vol. 2, 2014, pp. 140–142.

RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

www.rjoe.org.in | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

Impact Factor: 8.373 (SJIF) | Vol. 11, Issue 2 (April/May&June;2026)

Bharali, Champak Kumar. "Political Trauma among Common People Reflected in Selected Stories of Temsula Ao." *Drishti: The Sight*, vol. 9, issue II, Nov. 2020–Apr. 2021, pp. 108–112.

How to Cite this Article:

Gangmei, Gaijeanthui. "Representation of Terror and Trauma in 'An Old Man Remembers' from *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone by Temsula Ao.*" *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2026, Oray's Publications, pp. 232–236. DOI: 10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.236.