

Vandalized or Venerated: A Feminist Perspective on the Role of Woman in War in Temsula Ao's 'The Jungle Major'

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Abstract:

Women personnel in the military, encounter several gender related issues that are unique to the military sphere. In a traditional male dominated military domain, passive role of a woman can be simultaneously a source of pride and, a source of discouragement. Every significant advancement that a woman makes is unfortunately being ignored due to gender disparity. Moreover, it is vulnerable, that instead of venerating the women for her worthy contribution, she is being vandalised. While discussing the lack of equality in the military, this paper tries to justify the title and explains the irony and the composition of the words 'major' and 'jungle'. This paper also tries to compare, how a woman like 'Savitri' is venerated and Kathila - wife of the Jungle Major, is disregarded.

Keywords: War, contribution, unnoticed, equality, sacrifice, vulnerable

Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* is a collective memory of ten short stories that reflect the turbulent history of Nagaland from early fifties to 1963 till it was carved out of Assam as 16th independent state of India. The unconnected stories attempt to explain Nagas' struggle in negotiating their broken identities and endangered cultural ethos. Temsula highlights the status of Naga women in the midst of post-independent violent battle between the Indian Army and the underground rebels. During this relentless struggle it is said that only men have sacrificed their lives but not women. While proving this opinion wrong, the author tries to express how certain negative and positive characteristics prevail in most of the literary stereotypes of women throughout history. Women are shown as formless, passive, subordinate, selfish and narrow. A good 'wife' is shown as one, who is submissive dependent, supportive, nurturing, comforting, sacrificial, totally confined to household duties and a bad one as strict, dominating, punitive, shrewd and always behind her man or her children.

Since time immemorial, be it in mythology or in any literature, woman's sacrificial services such as a humble act of seasoning lifeless ingredients into a mouth-watering delicious food in the kitchen and leading a long waited solitary life by sending her partner to battlefield, are rarely recognized or appreciated as men are. The immortal services rendered to both genders by woman have not been noticed and have become untold stories. Moreover, several insignificant, infinitesimal acts of a man are exalted and made annals in the history. The patriarchy demands that an ideal woman should gyrate around man's excellencies without having any identity on her own. In Indian society, woman is usually associated with a unique mythological image such as the meek, conservative and docile. Such a woman is often equated to 'Sati Savitri' and is greatly venerated. An attempt of mitigating polarization of these images are actually *hegemonized* by male and established as virtues that must be observed by woman.

'The Jungle Major' a short story in Temsula Ao's anthology of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: stories from a war Zone*, upholds the similar view. The story narrates the spread of militancy and its consequences in the authors' land. The writer artistically brings out the competency of a simple and ordinary housewife Khatila in rescuing the village and her ugly looking husband Punaba- the jungle major, from cruel captivity of the Indian Army.

The beauty of Khatila character lies in accepting and celebrating her marital life

with her husband in spite of the absence of physical, economical as well as social compatibility. Punaba and Khatila were the most mismatched couple ever in the village. Their marriage was strongly condemned by the villagers as there was a lot of disparity in physical appearance and also in the family status. Punaba the protagonist from a minor clan, was short, dark, ugly, illiterate truck driver with meager income while, Khatila was from an educated family of a major clan. She was tall, fair, and the most gorgeous girl in the village. Though many years lapsed, the couple remained childless. They ignored the snide, lewd remarks on their infertility and were happy with their relatively comfortable married life. It happens at times that when two loving souls meet, the inner being of one recognizes the inner being of the other, irrespective of the out-ward appearances and outer senses. It is evident that Khatila has the matured knowledge about the very purpose of the institution of marriage. In many cases, it is observed that during hurdles, woman exhibits more responsibility and possesses the core values of family. The research has shown that either for childlessness or for birth control, woman suffers more. (Renee Huebner, 390)

The role played by Khatila as a courier woman and supplier of provisions in the story strongly establishes that women are no way inferior to man in any walk of life either be it in farming or military. A year after their marriage, patriotism swept the entire land. Exploitation and the atrocities of the armed forces, forced the youth to join the underground patriotic

warriors some voluntarily and some others by force. Punaba also joined them. After three years of effective service, Punaba was made the captain of the rebel army. Khatila remained in the village, engaged herself in cultivation and became the main source of conduit to supply provisions, arms and information to the underground. Though it was arduous and dangerous to his life, Punaba used to make short visits to Khatila, and their love knows no boundaries. In the midst of violence, they appeared to be totally absorbed in each other and rejoiced their married life. It is true that patriarchy has attributed certain duties to men only with the pretense of so-called endowed ability to execute it successfully. The story is an example how in the institutionalization of warfare, the male-dominated military culture had been so deeply ingrained in history that it seems as though men are naturally warlike and protective, while women are naturally nurturing and in need of protection. Women who preferred to hold a position in the military that was not characterized as nurturing or supportive of the men were treated as abnormal, mentally impaired, or morally corrupt, while nurses were readily accepted into the ranks. But debunking this age-old belief, Khatila in the story proves herself as a 'male major' in the jungle like environment.

Military is the area where woman remains uniquely vulnerable to violence and discrimination. The story spectacles how in spite of proving her war waging spirit, a woman like Khatila couldn't escape beyond the sexist treatment by men. As a dutiful woman, Khatila respected the

suggestions of the village authorities regarding Punaba's safety. She was cautioned by the army officer at the clandestine visits of Punaba. Outwardly Khatila seemed normal, happy and as beautiful as ever, so the officer underestimated their relationship and commented as:

"a beautiful woman like her could not be heartbroken over the disappearance of an insignificant man like Punaba from her life..... We know how to deal with women like you,' the officer said giving her a lascivious look."(4)

The story of Khatila showcases the discrimination faced by the north-eastern tribal's since decades, particularly the women. The author has successfully exploited these themes of women concerns through her short stories. Khatila's situation demonstrates, how war and armed force conflicts, compound this vulnerability, intensifying the violations that the women suffer. Instead of recognizing the sacrificial services rendered by Khatila, she was abused by men. During insurgencies, women are ill-treated, murdered, tortured, and attacked along with men, in addition they are also subjected to sexual vehemence. Historically, rape, molestation and other forms of sexual harassments are not condemned, investigated, and prosecuted with the same intensity and frequency as other war crimes. Apart from voicing the sufferings of men during war, the author also echoes the anguish of women too. This short story indirectly debates, the ways of the world in dealing

with the subject of women and war, and tries to justify the real major in disguise.

By narrating and revealing the officer's 'lascivious' intentions for Khatila, the author sarcastically creates another 'jungle' behind. Both men and women of the same clan express their jealous about the impeccable moral and physical beauty of Kalita. They neither contributed anything for their tribe like her nor noticed and appreciated her sacrificial service to the warriors and the villagers. For them the jungle principle 'might is the right' is to be observed. They are the advocators of the slogan, 'Survival of the fittest.' There is no place for women like Khatila. By exhibiting all these evil behaviors, the entire tribal community has created another 'jungle' around them. Therefore, in the actual jungle Punaba may be a man major but to the virtual jungle Khatila is a woman major.

Khatila also debunks the age-old belief in war and military that, the 'office work' became classified as 'women's work,' and the military allowed many women to fill clerical and secretarial jobs in the military. It is a customary that when men prepare to go for war, women began to be hired in many fields preconscious closed to them, as typists, factory workers, telephone operators and clerical assistants. Obviously, men would use this as an excuse to defend that; women are only destined for 'safe' jobs. Indirectly they claim that men are valour and women are weak. But, the story 'The jungle major' effectively portrays Khatila as pragmatic, intelligent, self-reliant woman. During one of Punaba's visit, the

army surrounded their bamboo hut and there was no time and place neither to escape nor to hide. With her sheer presence of mind, Khatila intelligently projected her ugly husband as a dumb servant of hers. She misguided the young army officer and strategically foiled the operation of the mighty Indian Army. The inexperienced Army officer could not recognize Punaba in disguise of a hapless servant, passing by in front of him to fetch water. The author expresses the feelings of Khatila as:

"She was never more grateful than on that particular morning for the ugliness of her husband which had saved not only them but also the entire village." (7)

A sharp-minded, single woman risked her life to protect her husband from being shot dead, the entire village from being ransacked and their barns from being burnt. The situation strongly advocates that one of the greatest qualities required by fighters during war is not physical stamina but instinctive mental plan of action, which is well exhibited by the protagonist Khatila. Simon-de-Beauvoir, is apt when she comments how

'In many cases women are robust and resilient enough to participate in warrior expeditions (97).'

Khatila's spontaneity, alertness and audacity saved many women, children and the villagers from unspeakable tortures. Otherwise, the villagers would have been captured and taken to 'groupings'-the incarceration, which frighten the Nagas more than the bullets. Khatilais a personification of military tactics and so, a real 'major.'

Dominant sects generally fabricate false belief systems that act to establish their power-over position and sustain their separation from subordinate groups. Patricia Hill Collins (1990), an African-American sociologist, discusses the impact of controlling images. She notes that dominant groups tend to create sets of images about themselves and about each of the "subordinate" groups. These controlling images are always false, yet they exert a powerful influence, holding each group in its place and maintaining the status quo. We absorb these images about others and ourselves, usually without fully realizing it....This is part of the way dominant groups mystify their power over practices and entice many of us into cooperation [p. 5]. Another way of domination is mitigating or neglecting the role of women. For example, the nominal role of women in politics can be attributed to a ubiquitous male control over every aspect of a woman's existence in the twentieth century. Sarah Grimke observes:

"Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means of selfish gratification, to minister to

his sexual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill" (1970:127).

Khatila undergoes such kind of treatment when she is not properly recognized and venerated of her sacrifice for the tribe and husband at the cost of her life. Khatila's audacity and intellectual abilities were utterly ignored. Though Khatila remained single, unprivileged, she undeterred bared the stigma of marrying an ugly looking husband. Temsula As successfully portrayed her as a woman of family and cultural values who forfeited her preferences. Despite all the qualitative virtuous efforts, author titled her story as 'The Jungle major' wherein the role of real protagonist Khatila has become insignificant diluting her competencies. As a woman and as a wife Khatila was smart enough in performing her duties but the patriarchal society attributed the credit to Punaba. Similar to the victory of Satyabhama, it is the victory of Khatila's love and devotion, Punaba is only the reason. For instance, the poet Vimala expresses how her unselfish services are simply unnoticed and crowns are given to man even in the kitchen work.

"My mother was queen of the kitchen, but the name engraved on the pots and pans is Father's."(33)

Just as the contemporary working woman professionals face the 'glass ceiling', in her work zone, so also tribal woman lacks her identity irrespective of her skills and abilities.

Although, there is debate on the idea 'sati' by feminists, like Savitri, Khatila in the story needs to be venerated. The sacrificial love of Khatila for her husband can be compared to Savitri's. Savitri and Khatila are pure, more dazzling and beautiful than any other women in their vicinity. Savitri's father was helpless to find a husband and was reluctantly agreed to her daughter's decision of marrying a handsome exile prince Satyavan, who was destined to die after a year of their married life. Khatila's choice of dowdy, illiterate driver-Punaba from a minor clan as her husband, was strongly opposed by the entire village and her father also. Satyavan and Punaba are unmatched to their wives in terms of their physical appearance and intellectual abilities. Not much is known about the valor of Satyavan as a king and lion heartedness of Punaba as a rebel's captain. Savitri left the luxuries of the palace to live with Satyavan in the forest where he used to earn his livelihood as a woodcutter. In the same manner, as was the custom, Khatila left her well to do family to live with Punaba, who earned his livelihood as a dodge- truck driver. Both Savitri and Khatila are content, spending quality time with their partners and rejoiced their married life, despite hardships. They both proved that marriage is not just living together and supporting each other, it strengthens by sharing happiness and

sorrows together. John Gray in his book 'Men are from Mars and women are from Venus' aptly described the nature of woman as:

"Instead of being goal-oriented women are relationship oriented; they are more concerned with expressing their goodness love and caring" (42)

Unlike Damayanti or Draupadi, Savitri and Khatila were independent and tactical. Savitri followed her husband into the realms of dead, impressed and defeated Yama through her intellectual arguments, iron will and quick wit. Every time a boon was given, she dexterously utilized them for the welfare of her in-laws and her parents. Savitri's conviction could fetch her three boons: her husband's life, her father-in-law's eyesight and kingdom, hundred sons to her father. Similarly, during her husband's exile, Khatila was very proactive in leading a reclusive life, never was she submissive. Neither did she fear the tribal patriarchal mindsets nor did she yield to the army officials. She impressed the officers and the village authorities by being polite. Her selfless, spontaneous and audacious decision fetched her three boons: her husband Punaba's life, safeguarded villagers from groupings and the food barns were saved.

In spite of confronting tough times, Punaba did reciprocate his love towards his wife through his clandestine visits. Khatila persuaded him to surrender and later on he was given a job in State Transport

Department. They both set an example in building the family relationships on the pillars of trust, love, compassion, and understanding.

In the Hindu mythology Savitri and Satyavan are greatly admired as renowned couple. Savitri was praised and her name was immortalized as a source of inspiration for being true to her life's mission. Savitri became the epitome of a faithful wife and outshone the world the meaning of marriage and the relationship of husband and wife with her indomitable spirit. The title 'Sati Savitri' to that episode of Mahabharata is being accolade since ages. Indian philosopher and poet Sri Aurobindo transformed the episode of Savitri into a massive epic of spirituality. According to him Savitri conveyed a message of eternal love and hope to the contemporary society.

But it is so unfortunate that woman like Khatila is not that much venerated as Savitri. In practicality, her image is vandalized by men of her own clan, proving that "This has always been a man's world".

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