



Interface: Language, Ecology & Gender in North East India

Sabreen Ahmed



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**Edited by
Sabreen Ahmed**

Exceller Books



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8| A Resisting Female: Reading Temsula Ao's "Three Women" Through a Feminist Lens

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Keywords: Nature, Female Bonding, Patriarchal Structures

"Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard-stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination; stories that are jokes, and sometimes prayers; and those that are not always a figment of the mind but are, at times, confessions."

--Temsula Ao

The early part of this century has ushered in a group of Indian women writers who have dismantled the stereotypical order of expression and representation. In this context, a few women writers writing in English from Northeast India deserve critical attention on several grounds. The most prominent reason is that these writings focus on some unexplored areas of experiences, such as regional conflicts, violence, and women's exploration of new ideas in relationship, love, sex and marriage. Secondly, the writings bring in a female perception into social, literary and political issues of Northeast India. Thirdly, it is for the first time that India witnesses several women writers rediscovering their native cultures, folk tales and beliefs in the poetic and fictional genres of the English language as seen in the writings of Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao and Esther Syiem. These writers have foregrounded women's views, experiences and issues, and have laid the foundations of a tradition of women's writing in English from this region. The fiction, and especially the short fiction produced by the

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women writers from the Northeast, has been able to capture the diverse realities confronting the region through their narratives. Besides exploring the "women's question" and women's issues in the regional contexts, women's short fictions in English have proliferated on the cultural production of the peripheral identities of this region. The short fiction is suited well for the women writers as this mode provides ample scope to the minority and subaltern groups to resist the hegemonic and homogenising forces. They have effectively used the art of story-telling through the medium of short narratives as the flexibility of this literary mode facilitates the expression of subversive agendas and construction of alternative discourses. The women writers from the Northeast have similarly found the short story, an effective mode to foreground the female perspectives on diverse issues.

Temsula Ao, is a well-known poet, short story writer and ethnographer from Northeast India. She is a recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award and also the Padma Shree in 2007. Her collection of short stories entitled, *These Hills Called Home* depicts a deep understanding of the human condition. The second shortstory collection called *Laburnum for my Head* has won her the Sahitya Akademi award. Most of her stories describe how ordinary people, especially women, cope with the diverse experiences of injustice, discrimination and violence. They also exemplify powerful portrayals of female protagonists as strong, resourceful, self-willed, responsible and committed individuals.

The short story, "Three Women" is the story of Martha, her mother Medemla and her grandmother, Lipoktula. A single truth about Lipoktula's past affects the life and story of all these three women who represent three different generations. Medemla falls in love with a boy called Imsutemjen, son of Merensashi. And when she lets her mother know these details through a letter, the mother's world is turned upside down. This is because she cannot let this relationship materialise into marriage. It is because of her hidden past – that Medemla was her and Merensashi's daughter out of wedlock. The impending marriage would imply an incestuous relationship and Lipoktula somehow succeeds to break it up

without the outer world knowing the real cause. Medemla boldly accepts the rejection of her lover but remains unmarried. She then decides to adopt a child, who later was called as Martha, her daughter. By using the first person narrative in this story, she has, in fact, exposed very blatantly before us, the thoughts and feelings of women. In our society a man can be sexually aggressive, he can desire for a woman's body whenever he wants; but women's sexual desires need to be submissive and entertained only at the mercy of the male. People hardly realize that sexual desire and its pleasure are a part of men and women's very nature. Lipoktula as an old woman recounts "*the inevitable force that draws a woman towards another man*" (78).

Lipoktula's husband was away on a job and it was that force of nature which made her submit to Merensashi. And this submission was possible only in Nature's lap (in the crop field) not in the social construct made by men (at home). She does not regret that moment, 'the demanding power of such love', throughout her life except that because of her hidden past, Medemla, her daughter had to remain deprived of such love (in the sense that she had 'never felt that way to Imsu' because nature would not permit them), and the pleasurable pains of motherhood which she and Martha experienced. Lipoktula thus dismantles the patriarchal subjugation of women imposed by men on women in some specific ways, and steps forward to lose herself in the mystifying experience of nature. These women are confronted with complex dilemmas, doubts and conflicting consequences leading them to either to submit or to counter it retaining their esteem in some ways. The story is told primarily from a woman's point of view highlighting complex emotional impulses and personal frustration and angst against the social and cultural milieu. They choose to tread on "the road not taken" by women in general without compromising or submitting their self-respect. It is ironically presented in a manner where men are in the margin and least involving. The story is told in an autobiographical mode where each of these three women begins to tell their life story in the first- person narrative – Martha's story, Medemla's History and Lipoktula's Secret. After this, a sequence of brief narratives followed by these three women sharing their

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personal rather dark secrets. This brief narrative is followed by a concluding epilogue. The confessional tones of the stories reveal their private experiences as mothers and daughters and the ties that bind them through the bond of motherhood and daughterhood. The vital concern in each of the women's life is the mother-daughter bonding and relationship that changes in perspective with time. Their lives are seen in the context of a 'female world' that is very different from the larger world of male concerns. These women, all in their own specific ways illuminate and expand the sense of actual possibilities. The interdependent network of close female filially actually strengthens their bonding as both mother and daughter and most importantly as women. Their account of life manifests the social, ideological and cultural concerns that affect a woman. Each of them confronts a situation that is sensitive and central in women's life. Martha's innocence is shattered when her identity is questioned and challenged. Medemla's love story comes to an abrupt end when her fiancé breaks off their engagement. After this break up, Medemla withdraws emotionally from men. By this time, Lipoktula's secret remains a secret. Each of the three narratives of these women belonging to three generations records the challenges that they meet at different stages of their lives. However, these individual narratives also explore the bonding that women share and how that can be a source of strength to overcome their difficulties.

A critical study of the selected short story called "Three Women", explores the moment of crisis that these three women as is specified in the very title itself undergo in their lives. It can also be undertaken with a view to exploring women's negotiation and interrogation of the discourse that legitimizes the public/private dichotomy and gendering of the spaces. Women in her private space, her negotiation with the institutions like marriage, family, motherhood, female desire forms the core of concern and attention. The manner in which women are exposed into the public sphere along with the interface of the two domains of public and private life is what truly matters for these three women. It extols motherhood as the "ecstasy" and a sense of "completeness" that

they experience is vividly described in the narrative. This story mystifies the experience of being a mother – an experience that is believed to be ecstatic and incomparable to any other feeling a woman may dream of. The story presents vivid images about the experience of childbirth from a female perspective while highlighting the joy that is associated with it. In the Epilogue, she writes, “The baby’s wet and slimy contours as it surges through the passage produces such a sensuous effect on Martha that she will always remember it as more sublime than the transient ecstasies of sex” (79). Martha’s own mother and grandmother is beside her at this moment as they “ceremoniously lay the baby next to her, in a ritualistic acknowledgement of her motherhood” (80). The experience of being a mother is therefore “sublime” and hence it is consequently understood to be a matter of regret if one is deprived of the “pleasurable pains of motherhood” (Laburnum 79).

Lipoktula, the oldest generation in the story, however, could not reveal her dark secret before anyone. She chooses to remain silent so as to protect herself and her family from social stigma and humiliation. She, however, has to pay a price for it, by designing a break up of her very own daughter with Imsu, in order to stop an incestuous marriage. Medemla, as a consequence, gives up any relation with other men. She later confronts with a situation in her workplace as a nurse, where a girl child is left abandoned by her biological parents. She looks after this forlorn child and is drawn towards her emotionally. She then adopts this child, risking her job and finally leaving it for her. She is deeply disappointed and sad when she discovers that her daughter, Martha is pregnant by her classmate, Apok. But the grandmother, Lipoktula understands this “law of attraction” between a man and a woman and proposes for an immediate wedding of Martha with Apok. All these three women, however, share some experiences and decisions that question the stereotypical patriarchal structures.

8.1. Conclusion

The story tells of a woman’s “terrible secret which comes full circle, changing her daughter’s and grandmother’s lives as well as her own”. The conflicting emotional states that these three women experience in different situations of their lives emphasise the bond

that women share among themselves. The underlying female consciousness of these women seeks cultural, political, social and artistic freedom in a very unconventional way. The prologue and the epilogue significantly describe childbirth scenes. The present story is a celebration of a ritual that reinforces the ties between mother and daughter, the woman-to-woman circle where an older woman with instinctual knowing and the wisdom of her experience helps a young mother to bring a new life into the world. This short story combats the forces of subjugating women by defying the stereotypical role and exposing women's private experiences as mothers and daughters. It stresses on the courage of women who decides to resist the forces of patriarchal hegemony. It records the survival strategies adopted by these women to combat and defend against the various complexities of subjugation and resistance.

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