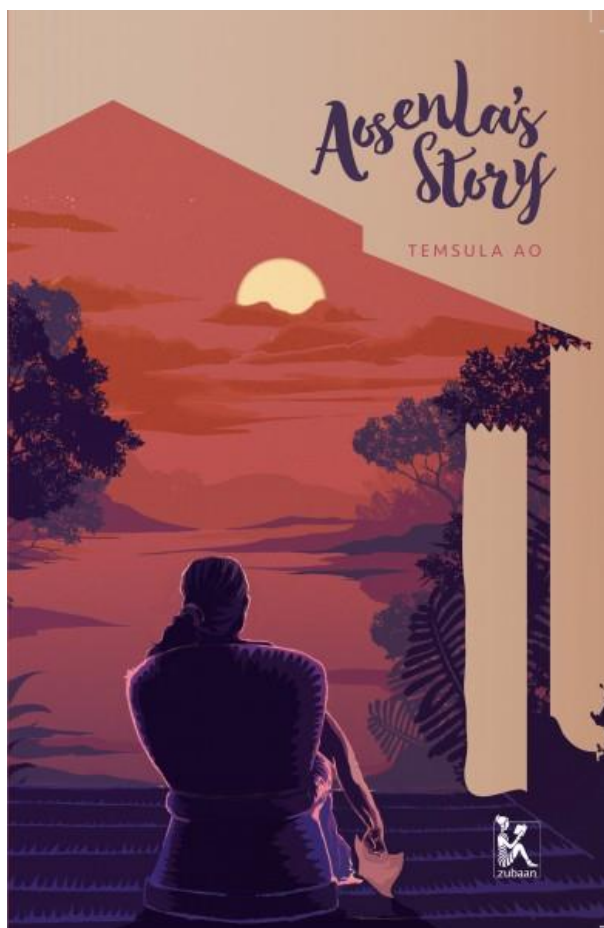


Temsula Ao, *Aosenla's Story*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017. 203 pp.
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“To be in the shadows forever: how comforting that would be.”
(*Aosenla's Story* 4)

In her very interesting personal memoir, *Once Upon A Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2014), noted writer Temsula Ao states that writing for her is an “attempt to exorcise [her] own personal ghosts from a fractured childhood that was ripped apart by a series of tragedies” (*Once Upon A Life* viii). Ao’s work bears testimony to the constant negotiation with political coercion, contested identities, violence and insurgency, and the resultant social re-alignments in the lives of the people of Nagaland. Ao writes from a space that bears the scars of violence but also

contains a space that allows interaction with and introspection upon questions of the self in the context of the larger Naga identity. Her latest offering, a novel titled *Aosenla's Story*, traverses the familiar but deeply disturbing spaces of the domestic in the lives of women, particularly from the North East of India and, in this case, Nagaland.

The novel opens significantly with a wedding invitation, thereby immediately enabling the writer to create a space to examine the protagonist's own marriage and thus propelling the narrative. The story centres on an extraordinarily strong-willed woman called Aosenla, the young wife of a socially prominent person, who continuously struggles to come to terms with the realities of her married life. A bright student who reads Hemmingway and Dostoyevsky and listens to eclectic music, Aosenla belongs to a highly respected clan of Nagaland but given her family's poverty she is married against her wishes to a much older person who is wealthy but whose clan-status is lower than that of Aosenla's. Aosenla had refused to consent to the marriage which spelt disgrace for the groom's family and so her father took matters in his own hands for "one never knew what an influential and rich family would do to safeguard their prestige" (*Aosenla's Story* 14). This little detail is greatly significant for it highlights how the privileges of clan-status and honour in traditional societies are being slowly but gradually replaced by wealth and its accompaniments. Despite their social standing Aosenla's in-laws (particularly her overbearing mother-in-law) were acutely aware of their clan-status so that they could never completely "control" their educated daughter-in-law. Aosenla manages to hold on to her own in her in-laws place, her sense of security derived from her knowledge of belonging to a more powerful clan than her husband. This incident becomes an important moment of self-assertion for the young woman who had until now chose to turn blind to husband's womanising ways and alcoholism.

However, Aosenla's exercise at self-assertion does not totally divest her of certain unwelcome experiences in the family. Despite her in-laws' resolute refusal to acknowledge her presence, she attempts to adopt the ways and manners of the rich and thus validate her place in the upper echelons of the society. However, the futility of this exercise becomes evident when she becomes a victim of verbal abuse and marital rape. Devastated to the core, it is the death of her son at birth that pushes Aosenla to once again resume her search for self. Her friendship with Kilang, the family doctor and the arrival of her husband Bendangmeren's illegitimate daughter are moments in the narrative when Aosenla displays strength, dignity and quiet reserve. She refuses to bow down to the demands of social and marital obligations and continues to exercise her right to live her life on her own terms. Her journey from self-doubt to self-realisation becomes significant as she navigates the veritable minefield of patriarchy, cultural barriers and social taboos to emerge from the shadows of obscurity into a space of self-awareness.

The novel raises vital questions even as it attempts to subvert some of the established customs of society. In *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) Easterine Kire reminds us,

girl children are never considered real members of the family. Their mission in life is to marry and have children and be able to cook and weave cloth and look after the household. If they got married, they would always be known as somebody's wife or somebody's mother, but never somebody's daughter. (24-25)

Aosenla's endeavours to acquaint herself with the literary and musical greats gratifies the reader to see a young woman from the forgotten hills attempting to transgress compromised position in far-flung Mokokchung. The reader grows with her and experiences her loneliness, her self-doubt and the strange familiarity of the situations represented even as she desires to do something meaningful and make her "self" known.

Towards the end of the novel, Aosenla's journey transports her beyond the realm of the domestic and the mundane. Amy Tan, in *The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Wring Life* (2001) reminds us "We can choose what we should believe, we can choose what we should remember. This is what frees us, this choice frees us to hope" (*Once Upon A Life*). The narrative universe of *Aosenla's Story* is centred on this hope, and gives voice to subaltern existence and experience of the female who is threatened into silence and oblivion by the socio-cultural powers that be. The plot engages predominantly the spatial location of the individual within relationships and the society in the general context. Notions of identity, contested subjectivities and marginality – issues that reflect on the everyday realities of life – are negotiated with a sense of self-distancing. Aosenla is able to objectively comprehend her truths. The socio-cultural politics that underlie her experiences reaffirm and reiterate her selfhood through the strategic allocation of space, its contestation and exercise of power. The notion of the self operates at several levels – within the relationship shared between the protagonist and her parents, her husband, her in-laws and the society at large. The individual's subjective reality at a microcosmic level is reflected primarily through Aosenla. Through her, Ao questions the predominant worldview regarding gendered conventions and the corresponding ideological notions that engender the self at every level of existence. Aosenla's resistance to the dominant practices of inclusion and exclusion may be seen as a reflection of her empowered self. In her exercise of decisive powers she has been empowered to live her life as she chose, overcoming the silence and passivity of her marginal status.

Works Cited

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