

Resistance and Resilience: Naga Women's Voices in Temsüla Ao's *These Hills Called Home*

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Abstract

Tribal women of North East India have long endured the compounded burdens of colonial intrusion, postcolonial state violence, and patriarchal traditions. Yet their voices and lived experiences often remain marginalised in both historical narratives and literary discourse. Temsüla Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) intervenes in this silence by foregrounding the stories of Naga women caught between insurgency and militarisation. This paper argues that Ao portrays Naga women as doubly colonised—subjugated by both patriarchal customs and militarised repression—while simultaneously reclaiming their agency through resilience, memory, and acts of defiance. Drawing upon postcolonial feminism and trauma studies, the paper analyses selected stories to show how Ao resists the reduction of women to silent victims and instead recasts them as witnesses, survivors, and cultural agents. Through close readings of narratives such as “The Last Song,” “The Jungle Major,” “The Night,” and “The Curfew Man,” the paper demonstrates how Ao's fiction unsettles stereotypes and contributes to a feminist re-imagining of North East Indian literature.

Keywords

North East India, Naga women, postcolonial feminism, trauma studies, narratives of resistance, voices of resilience

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Introduction: Locating Naga women within postcolonial feminist and trauma discourses

The category of “North East” is not a neutral geographical descriptor but a colonial and postcolonial construct shaped by conquest, cultural assimilation, and state-sponsored marginalisation. Literature from the region, therefore, often emerges as a form of testimony and resistance, voicing the struggles of its people to safeguard their cultural and political distinctiveness. Within this discourse, however, the roles and experiences of women remain underrepresented. While feminist movements in the West have secured spaces for women’s expression, many tribal women in peripheral regions such as Nagaland continue to struggle against persistent forces of silencing. Patriarchal traditions, militarised conflict, and systemic exclusion from dominant narratives combine to marginalise them. This exclusion is not only political and cultural but also profoundly gendered, as women find themselves pushed to the periphery of both nationalist struggles and patriarchal authority.

In recent decades, however, a notable shift has emerged. Women writers from North East India—including Easterine Kire (b. 1959), Mamang Dai (b. 1957), Mitra Phukan (b.1953), and Temsüla Ao (1945–2022)—have asserted a strong presence in Indian English literature. Their works challenge colonial legacies, interrogate indigenous patriarchy, and bring to light histories long suppressed. Among them, Temsula Ao stands out as a significant voice, articulating the complex realities of Naga women negotiating the crossfire of insurgency and militarisation. Her fiction not only records their suffering but also underscores their resilience as they endure violence and dispossession while continuing to preserve cultural memory and a sense of agency.

Hélène Cixous famously reminds us that writing represents “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought” (Cixous 879). Ao’s stories embody this idea, transforming both personal and collective trauma into literary testimony that unsettles the dominant narratives of state and tradition. This paper draws on postcolonial feminist perspectives and trauma theory to argue that *These Hills Called Home* portrays Naga women as doubly marginalised—oppressed simultaneously by colonial/state power and indigenous patriarchy—yet equally foregrounds their resilience and capacity for agency. By situating Ao within these critical frameworks, the discussion shows how her narratives move beyond ethnographic description to theorise women’s agency as an act of cultural resistance. In this way, Ao’s work re-centers women’s voices, long confined to the margins, as vital to re-imagining Naga identity and the broader struggle for survival and resistance.

Temsüla Ao and the politics of representation

Temsüla Ao holds a crucial place in the literary traditions of North East India. A poet, short-story writer, ethnographer, and critic, she used her craft to capture the histories and anxieties of her community during some of the most turbulent moments in Naga life. Her achievements were recognised with awards such as the Padma Shri (2007) and the Sahitya Akademi Award (2013), among others. Yet, it is not these accolades that define her legacy as much as her ability to give voice to the lived realities of the Nagas—particularly women—whose experiences were often absent from dominant narratives of insurgency and counter-insurgency. As Zahan notes, Ao became “the guardian, the voice, and the mirror of the Naga society who brought the everyday lives of the Nagas, blurred between insurgency and counter-insurgency in front of the world through her poetry, short stories, and memoirs.”

Her debut short story collection, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, comprises ten stories—“The Jungle Major,” “Soaba,” “The Last Song,” “The Curfew Man,” “The Night,” “The Pot Maker,” “Shadows,” “An Old Man Remembers,” “The Journey,” and “A New Chapter.” Together, they paint a harrowing portrait of life in Nagaland, caught between state violence and nationalist insurgency. Yet Ao’s narratives do more than chronicle political turmoil; they probe the affective dimensions of suffering, silence, and survival. By placing Naga women at the center, she resists the masculinised tropes of resistance literature that often reduce women to symbolic figures or secondary victims.

Here, the insights of postcolonial feminism are especially illuminating. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, the subaltern woman is “doubly in shadow”—subordinated by both colonial power and indigenous patriarchy (Spivak 287). Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques how women from the global South are too often homogenised as passive victims rather than understood within their specific cultural and political contexts (Mohanty 337). Ao’s stories resist these homogenisations by presenting women who endure violence but also craft fragile yet meaningful forms of agency. By placing Naga women in this doubly marginalised space, Ao answers Spivak’s provocation of whether the subaltern can speak by showing that they not only speak but also reframe the memory of violence.

Equally relevant is the perspective of trauma studies. Cathy Caruth contends that trauma represents both an unassimilable wound and a demand for testimony (Caruth 4). Ao’s fiction exemplifies this paradox: while her characters bear scars of displacement, rape, and loss, their voices, however fragmented, carry the weight of collective memory. By narrating trauma, Ao transforms silence into

testimony, allowing her female characters to emerge not simply as figures of suffering but as cultural agents whose stories embody resilience.

Thus, Ao's literary project can be read as a double intervention: against the erasures of nationalist and state-centric histories, and against the gendered exclusions within her own community. By amplifying women's voices within a war-torn landscape, Ao demonstrates how literature can both document and reimagine the lived realities of marginal women.

Patriarchy and 'double colonisation': Roots of Naga women's subordination

Any discussion of Naga women's resilience must begin by acknowledging the long-standing structures of suppression within Naga society itself. Pre-colonial and colonial ethnographic accounts frequently portrayed Naga women as playing an integral role in agrarian labor and community life, yet their social and political visibility remained limited. Temsula Ao notes that such marginalisation is deeply rooted in cultural history, where Naga polity evolved on the "principle of exclusion of women from all seats of governance" (Ao, *On Being a Naga* 47). These patriarchal structures rendered women indispensable to community sustenance yet dispensable in matters of authority.

Traditional customary laws institutionalised such gender hierarchies. Land inheritance was restricted to men, village councils excluded women, and women's voices were systematically silenced in community deliberations. I. Watitula Longkumer emphasises that "an indigenous Naga woman is twice subjugated: by the patriarchal social system on the one hand, and on the other, by the stringent tribal laws and customs that restrict her participation in larger social activities by limiting her resources and opportunities" (Longkumer 8). Similarly, Veio Pou, citing Eyinbeni Humtsoe, observes that "the Nagas have not been able to do away with cultural forces where it concerns the emancipation of women from cultural chains, which are embodied in customary laws" (Pou 89).

Ao's short stories dramatise these inequities with particular force. In "The Pot Maker," Arenla's reluctance to pass on the arduous craft of pottery to her daughter is overridden by the authority of the village council, which reminds her husband that "it was her duty to teach her daughter the skill that was handed from generation to generation for the good of the entire village.... Anyone refusing to do so will be considered an enemy of the village" (Ao, *These Hills* 62). This episode underscores how women's labor is essential to sustaining cultural continuity even as their autonomy is suppressed by patriarchal institutions.

The same silencing is visible in matters of matrimony and sexuality. In "The Jungle Major," Khatila's consent carries no weight when her father is

berated for marrying her to Punaba, a man deemed socially “mismatched” due to clan and class differences. The episode reveals how female choice is irrelevant in marriage negotiations, where male authority determines alliances and women’s voices are erased. Likewise, in “The Night,” Imnala is doubly punished for her pregnancies out of wedlock—vilified by the village court and abandoned by the men who wronged her. Ao writes that the “village custom gave the aggrieved party [the man’s wife] a lot of leeway: to hurl abuses including physical assault” on the accused female (Ao, *These Hills* 46). The man is valorised as a “true man” for acknowledging paternity, while Imnala is branded immoral. Her mother recalls her own mother’s words—“Remember, in our society a woman must have the protection of a man even if he happens to be blind or lame” (Ao, *These Hills* 53)—a chilling reminder of how patriarchal values are internalised and transmitted by women themselves, perpetuating the cycle of submission.

Colonialism exacerbated these inequities. Missionary discourses reinforced gender binaries by privileging the “civilising” of women into domesticated Christian roles, further restricting their public participation. Simultaneously, colonial administrators overlooked women in their documentation of tribal governance, reinscribing their absence from formal political life. The result was a layered form of subordination that persisted even after Independence.

Analyses by Longkumer and Pou highlight the layered nature of Naga women’s marginalisation, spanning both domestic and political spheres. Their research shows that while women play an indispensable role in sustaining households and communities, this centrality rarely translates into visibility in public or political life. This contradiction—being valued in private yet excluded from collective decision-making—exposes a persistent pattern of gendered exclusion. When questions of sovereignty and nationalist aspirations surfaced, women were further sidelined, reinforcing their double burden under patriarchy and militarised state structures.

This ongoing exclusion connects with postcolonial feminist critiques of “double colonisation.” Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford coined the term to describe how women in colonised societies are subordinated both by imperial powers and by indigenous patriarchy. Gayatri Spivak extends this critique by suggesting that the subaltern woman “cannot speak” within dominant frameworks that structurally deny her voice. Yet, Ao complicates this supposed silence: her characters—Arenla in “The Pot Maker,” Imnala in “The Night,” and Khatila in “The Jungle Major”—speak in fractured, painful, but unmistakable ways, defying both colonial erasure and patriarchal dismissal.

The roots of suppression in Ao's stories are not limited to descriptive portrayals of cultural patriarchy. Instead, they serve as a lens to examine how the logic of double colonisation continues to shape contemporary realities, where women's marginalisation is reproduced through overlapping structures of power. By drawing attention to these dynamics, Ao creates space to re-imagine Naga women not as peripheral figures but as central actors in narratives of survival and resistance.

Militarisation and the gendered burden of trauma

While patriarchal customs formed the deep roots of Naga women's subordination, the advent of armed conflict and militarisation generated new and more brutal forms of trauma. As Dolly Kikon argues in *Life and Dignity: Women's Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Dimapur*, sexual violence in Nagaland must be understood within a pervasive "culture of impunity" that legitimises everyday abuse while simultaneously burdening survivors with a "culture of shame and trauma" (Kikon 20). In this environment, women are rendered vulnerable not only to the excesses of the state and insurgent groups but also to the silencing forces within their own communities, where justice often collapses into suspicion and blame. Conflict thus intensifies what postcolonial feminist critics describe as "double colonisation": the simultaneous subjection of women by patriarchal custom and militarised state power.

As Duncan McDuie-Ra notes in his study of violence against women on India's militarised frontiers, the region's political history—partition, insurgency, counterinsurgency, and the sustained presence of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act—has normalised violence and entrenched patriarchal masculinity (McDuie-Ra, "Violence Against" 322–345). Insurgent groups, he observes, often mirror this violent masculinity, leaving women doubly exposed to state and non-state actors alike. Ao's narratives reflect this grim reality, where militarisation amplifies gendered vulnerabilities and deepens the scars of everyday life.

Temsüla Ao's stories resonate with this paradox, presenting women as both victims of state and insurgent violence and as the silent repositories of community memory. In "The Last Song," Ao portrays the tragic fate of Apenyo, a young woman brimming with talent and the dream of becoming a singer. For Apenyo, singing is more than a personal passion; it symbolises freedom, creativity, and the articulation of identity in a world constrained by violence. Her voice, filled with promise, becomes a symbol of fragile hope amid turmoil. Yet this hope is brutally shattered when soldiers capture and torture her. The silencing of her song becomes a cruel metaphor for the way militarised regimes crush women's aspirations. In ending her life, the soldiers erase not only her body

but also her voice and future—a double loss that captures how conflict extinguishes possibility itself.

The violence resonates even more deeply through her mother, Libeni, who is forced to bear witness to her daughter's suffering. Libeni's pain is twofold: the raw grief of a mother watching her child violated, and the despair of being powerless to intervene. Ao conveys this anguish with measured restraint, making visible how trauma spreads beyond the immediate victim to engulf those bound by love. As Cathy Caruth observes, trauma often takes shape in the belated witnessing of another's wound—the unbearable awareness of what has been seen but cannot be undone (Caruth 8). Libeni embodies this unbearable burden, carrying the memory of her daughter's silenced voice as her own wound. Her grief becomes emblematic of the “secondary trauma” that women in conflict zones repeatedly bear—not only losing children to violence but also being compelled to stand as powerless spectators. Through Libeni, Ao makes visible the deep scars that haunt mothers in militarised landscapes, where private grief is inseparable from political violence.

“The Jungle Major” offers another haunting vignette of conflict through the character of Khatila, whose peaceful domestic life collapses when her husband joins the insurgent underground. Left alone, she faces profound insecurity, balancing her loyalty to him with the suspicions of both villagers and Indian soldiers. Her vulnerability intensifies when soldiers threaten her for withholding information about her husband's whereabouts, one of them leering: “We know how to deal with women like you” (Ao, *These Hills* 4). Khatila is cautioned even by her village elders to sever ties with her husband, leaving her isolated from both family and community. Ao powerfully depicts the precarious position of women like Khatila, who become pawns in the contest between insurgents and soldiers. Her plight echoes what Duncan McDuie-Ra describes in his study of Northeast migrants in Delhi as the hyper-visibility and invisibility of women in conflict zones—visible as objects of scrutiny yet invisible as political subjects (McDuie-Ra, “Provincial Men” 119-143). Although McDuie-Ra situates this paradox within the urban politics of migration, the framework is equally resonant in the militarised landscape of Nagaland. Women like Khatila are simultaneously over-exposed to suspicion and threat while excluded from political decision-making, exemplifying the layered marginalisation that characterises life in zones of protracted conflict.

The dark underside of counter-insurgency is further elaborated in “Soaba.” Here Ao turns to the psychological trauma inflicted upon women through the corrupt and violent systems that emerged during prolonged conflict. Imlichuba, a notorious ex-cop turned “Boss” of the Home Guards, transforms

his household into a site of moral decay. His wife Imtila, once content in her domestic role, is forced into the shadow of his notoriety. Friends and relatives begin to avoid her, and her home is overrun by her husband's lawless associates: "she 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" (Ao, *These Hills* 15). Unlike Khatila, who suffers from her husband's absence, Imtila suffers from his corrosive presence—his belligerence, moral decline, and emotional unavailability. The arrival of the "idiot" boy Soaba provides her a fleeting respite, as she transfers maternal affection to him amidst the chaos. Yet when Boss accidentally murders Soaba in a drunken rage, Imtila's fragile world collapses again. Ao's depiction of Imtila's estrangement within her own home underscores the psychological abuse endured by women in militarised societies, revealing how trauma is lived not only through direct violence but through the erosion of trust, intimacy, and belonging.

In "The Curfew Man," Ao portrays Jemtila, whose life is shaped by the double weight of militarisation and gendered expectations. When her husband Satemba is left disabled and jobless, she becomes the family's sole breadwinner, taking on strenuous labour in town. Yet Satemba, troubled by his dependency, accepts the dangerous role of a government informer, exposing the family to further risk. Ao notes that Jemtila "was by no means ignorant of what was happening all around them and how circumstances were forcing innocent, peace-loving people to turn to means that they would not ordinarily employ, just to stay safe and alive" (Ao, *These Hills* 38–39). Her lonely vigils waiting for her husband's return capture the silent anxieties of women navigating survival amidst militarised uncertainty. Jemtila's story highlights how economic precarity and patriarchal insecurities intertwine, burdening women with both material and emotional trauma.

Finally, in "A New Chapter," Ao presents Merenla, a widow who tries to rebuild her life through a small pumpkin business. Her efforts, however, are sabotaged when her cousin Nungsang betrays her trust, forcing her into financial and emotional despair. Merenla's struggles highlight the mental pressures and stereotypes imposed on women in traditional societies, where economic independence is discouraged and women's decisions are often undermined. Kikon's observation that women in Nagaland are reminded constantly of their limited economic power and punished for overstepping it resonates deeply with Merenla's fate. Whether it is Arenla seeking opportunities for her daughter, Jemtila supporting her disabled husband, or Merenla pursuing modest economic autonomy, Ao shows how women are systematically constrained by both patriarchal norms and the disruptions of conflict.

Taken together, these narratives underscore how Naga women in Ao's fiction endure multilayered traumas—physical, emotional, and psychological—amidst insurgency and militarisation. Yet their stories are not merely chronicles of despair. By giving narrative form to their suffering, Ao transforms silence into testimony, allowing trauma to be acknowledged rather than erased. As trauma theorist Judith Herman asserts, “survivors testify not only to victimisation but to the endurance of the human spirit” (Herman 181). Ao's women exemplify this duality: caught in the crossfire of history, they remain vulnerable yet resilient, silenced yet speaking, subordinated yet enduring.

From victims to agents: Voices of defiance and resilience

Temsüla Ao's *These Hills Called Home* not only portrays the profound suffering and marginalisation of Naga women under patriarchy and prolonged insurgency but also reimagines them as resilient figures of agency. Her characters signal a transformative shift from voiceless subordination to defiant participation in shaping their own destinies. Chankija describes this shift as the emergence of the “new Naga woman,” while Rengleen Kongsong notes that Ao's fiction presents “marginalized characters who not only present their side of the story ... but also recount the strength of these women who came out triumphant with their humanity intact” (Kongsong 67). These women complicate the stereotype of the silenced tribal female, embodying resilience amidst oppression and affirming the possibility of change even in fractured landscapes.

Khatila in “The Jungle Major” exemplifies the boldness of Ao's heroines. When soldiers arrive to capture her insurgent husband Punaba, she defies both fear and expectation. Instead of the “cowering woman” the Captain anticipates, they confront “a disheveled but utterly defiant person who displayed no agitation” (Ao, *These Hills* 6). Her clever ruse—disguising her husband as a servant—foils a meticulously planned military operation and saves not only her family but the entire village from catastrophe. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, Khatila embodies the kind of agency that Mohanty highlights, resisting representations of Third World women as passive victims and asserting an active subjectivity within oppressive structures. She becomes a living critique of militarised masculinity, showing that ordinary women, through wit and resilience, can undermine structures of power.

Jemtila in “The Curfew Man” demonstrates equal courage in confronting both patriarchal and political power. On discovering that her disabled husband has been coerced into working as a government informer, she refuses to remain silent. She directly challenges the S.D.O., demanding her husband's release from a job that endangers his health and dignity. Though saddened by the cost—her

husband's permanent disability—Jemtila's intervention showcases a moral strength that redefines the role of wife and caregiver. Her insistence on justice reflects Judith Herman's idea that trauma survivors reclaim power not through denial of suffering but through moral clarity and courageous action (Herman 41). Jemtila's voice demonstrates that women's resilience can dismantle both the intimate oppressions of domestic life and the larger structures of political coercion.

In "Soaba," Imtila represents the despair of women trapped in destructive marriages, yet she also exemplifies resilience through endurance. Married to the notorious "Boss," her home becomes a space of humiliation and chaos. Friends and relatives withdraw, leaving her estranged in her own household. The murder of Soaba—the boy who briefly filled the void of affection in her life—deepens her trauma. Yet Imtila chooses to "pick up the broken pieces of their former life and create a new order from the pathetic remains" (Ao, *These Hills* 20–21). Kali Tal argues that trauma continues to shape survivors' lives long after the original event, creating what might be described as an "afterlife of trauma," where survival itself testifies to the human will to endure (Tal 122). Imtila, like many of Ao's women, reclaims humanity from the ruins, embodying a resilience that transcends despair.

Imnala in "The Night" confronts a different kind of violence: the moral policing of her community. Ostracised as a "fallen woman," she faces relentless criticism for bearing children outside wedlock. Yet instead of succumbing to shame, she resolves to support her parents, educate herself, and provide for her children. She chooses to "face her accusers with her head held high" (Ao, *These Hills* 54), compelling even Alemba, her betrayer, to acknowledge his responsibility before the village council. Imnala embodies Spivak's subaltern woman who refuses silence, transforming stigma into defiance. Her story critiques the patriarchal codes that equate women's worth with sexual purity, showing that resilience lies in reimagining identity beyond societal judgment.

Merenla in "A New Chapter" brings yet another dimension to Ao's portraits of resilience, this time through economic struggle. Left a widow, she attempts to rebuild her life with a modest pumpkin business, only to be undermined by her cousin Nungsang's betrayal. Her decision to cleanse her home by throwing out the pumpkins becomes a powerful metaphor—an act of rejecting despair and reclaiming dignity. As Dolly Kikon observes, women in Nagaland are constantly reminded of the limits placed on their economic power and are often punished when they attempt to move beyond them (Kikon 2015). Merenla's story exposes these systemic barriers to women's financial autonomy,

but it also highlights her determination to begin again, showing courage in the face of betrayal and economic subordination.

Together, the figures of Khatila, Jemtila, Imtila, Imnala, and Merenla reflect Ao's vision of what might be called the "new Naga woman." They embody what postcolonial feminist thinkers identify as the refusal of "benevolent subordination," choosing instead paths of defiance, negotiation, and cultural renewal. Confronted with militarisation, patriarchal exclusion, social stigma, and economic insecurity, these women refuse passivity. Their endurance, resourcefulness, and acts of defiance transform trauma into resilience, and silence into testimony. Read through postcolonial feminist and trauma theory, these characters articulate agency within systems designed to oppress, while also showing how survival itself becomes a narrative of both pain and hope. In giving them voice, Ao dismantles stereotypes of tribal women, positioning them not at the margins but at the center of Nagaland's cultural memory and history of resistance.

Conclusion: Memory, resilience, and the postcolonial feminist vision

Temsüla Ao's *These Hills Called Home* places Naga women at the very heart of histories that have long been dominated by the stories of men, warfare, and sovereignty. Through figures such as Khatila, Jemtila, Imtila, Imnala, and Merenla, Ao unsettles the stereotype of tribal women as silent sufferers. She presents them as resilient actors who defy, endure, and renew. Their voices speak not only of the weight of patriarchy and militarisation but also of the possibilities of agency that persist even in fractured and hostile environments.

Read through a postcolonial feminist lens, these women embody what critics like Spivak and Mohanty describe as "doubly colonised" subjects—silenced by both state violence and indigenous patriarchal structures. Yet Ao does not allow them to remain voiceless. By narrating their daily struggles—whether in households, village arenas, or militarised landscapes—she reclaims them as agents who contest subordination and reshape the meaning of community survival. In doing so, her fiction challenges colonial constructions of the "tribal woman" while also questioning the patriarchal narratives within Naga society itself.

From the perspective of trauma studies, Ao's stories transform personal suffering into shared testimony. Apenyo's and Libeni's grief, Khatila's endurance under suspicion, Imtila's estrangement within her own home, and Merenla's economic struggles all reveal the layered psychological and cultural wounds of prolonged conflict. Yet their survival—fragile though it may be—enacts what Judith Herman calls the reclamation of dignity through resilience. Ao shows that

trauma does not necessarily end in silence; it can instead become testimony, a way of inscribing women's suffering into history rather than allowing it to be erased. By bringing women's voices to the forefront, Ao enacts what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory": the passing down of trauma and resilience that sustains cultural identity across generations (Hirsch xx).

In weaving together these narratives, Ao offers more than literary testimony: she presents a vision of cultural renewal. Her women emerge not as passive relics of a broken community but as active participants in its reimagining. They embody the paradox of resilience—bearing scars of violence yet refusing to be defined by them. By situating their voices within postcolonial feminist and trauma frameworks, we see how Ao reclaims subaltern women as central to the cultural memory of Nagaland, transforming silence into speech and suffering into strength.

On a final note, *These Hills Called Home* reminds us that the story of Nagaland is inseparable from the voices of its women. Their testimonies compel us to acknowledge both the costs of violence and the enduring power of resilience. In amplifying their voices, Ao not only unsettles patriarchal and colonial silencing but also contributes to the ongoing project of reimagining identity, memory, and justice in postcolonial societies.

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