

## Memory and Conflict in Temecula Ao's *Death of a Hunter*

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### Abstract

The Nagas, a distinct tribal race, were people who had their customs and traditions and were deeply rooted in those structures of living. The Western culture sowed quite a different set of principles and structures of living among the people, which includes education, the tradition of formal learning, and Christianity, a new belief or doctrine quite different from their own. The colonisation or the intrusion of Westernism came to an end in the 1950s, i.e. after the world wars. The post-war Naga society was culturally framed with two sets of ideologies. The in-betweenness of living led to conflicts in memory. Such episodes are captured, individualised, and narrated by Temsula Ao in her short story collection. The story *Death of a Hunter* is the second short story from Ao's collection, *Laburnum for My Head*. Here, Ao narrates the hunting experience of the central character, Imchanok. Imchanok has been engaged in three peculiar hunts in the past. After every hunt, Imchanok loses his spiritual valour and collapses, while the village celebrates him as a brave hunter. The collective and individual consciousness overlaps his memory after each hunt. The reason for such a crisis in his mind is the cultural transformation that the Naga society has undergone in due time. At the outset, the paper tries to discuss the accumulation of collective and individual memory in an individual. Second, the paper explains the conflict that arises

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between the memory of the past and the present, with the help of the story *Death of a Hunter*. Third, the cultural Naga society is pictured with examples for a better understanding of the protagonist's mindset in the story. The paper ends with the theoretical conception that the collective memory in an individual is subject to reframing from time to time.

**Keywords:** Collective Memory, Individual Memory, Naga Society, Morung, Conflict

Memory is "a social phenomenon and grows into a person from the outside world" (Huebenthal 1). It is a collective domain. All the past experiences play a role in shaping one's memory. An individual is born and brought up under a social frame that inculcates in him a memory. These memories are the inheritance from the past for the future, in the present. The glorifying values in a group of people under one social frame, preserve a self-understanding in the collective memory. It is an accrued form of memories from social frameworks such as a family, a society, a community, a group, a race, and so on. These memories guide a person, rather unconsciously, to fit into a certain frame.

Further, these recollections/reconstructions are charged with emotions and help to construct an individual's collective identity. In terms of oral societies, to put it in Jan Vansina's words, "they, on the one hand, will possess stable founding memories and, on the other hand, changing biographical memories" (Huebenthal 3). This she calls a "generational gap" and "floating gap."

Temsula Ao's short stories cover the post-war period. The Naga society's aftermath of the war and the transformed ethical behaviours in the society are mirrored in the stories. The author had also consciously promoted the valuable Naga customs and practices, elsewhere in the collection. The colonial rule had marked the tribal transformation from their unique traditions and customs towards modernity. The transformation had led to insecurity, instability, confusion, and, more probably, inability to rely on an ideology. The tribes from the northeast Indian region, especially the Nagas, are people who have much trust and faith in their own cultural and traditional beliefs.

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The following illustrates the traditional Naga way of life. The Naga people lived in groups and had a very principled life structure. In the geographical area of Nagaland, the Nagas consist of 16 major tribes (Kire, 12) with any number of minor tribes. The construction of morung and its teaching serve as a great example of their moral standards. Easterine Kire, in her book *Walking the Roadless Road*, speaks of morung.

A typical Naga village is divided into khels; each khel would have its morung. The morung was the center for the attitude formation of young people where the young men received semi-military training and were taught war tactics. At the morung, they performed difficult initiation rituals. They also received training in various cultural, arts, and craft skills. Naga oral traditions were kept alive in the morning and passed on from one generation to the next in the form of folk songs, dances, and folk tales. The education system of the morung was highly relevant and utilitarian, serving the practical needs of the people while developing character and a sense of civic duties, community ethics, cooperative labour, and responsible citizenship. (Kire, 32)

The morung was also a charitable centre. It rendered help to the poorer members of the village. They provided help in times of sickness and death. The morung life promoted the quality of classness among the tribes. Every member was treated equally regardless of being from a wealthy family or a low-income family. The morung elders punished evil doers, lawbreakers and spies. The members were taught the principle of sobaliba, which is a complex moral code involving many levels of behaviour. The code includes extending help to people in need, respecting and obeying elders, speaking the truth, avoiding adultery, refraining from false witness, not seeking position, power, and self-glorification, bringing up children on the right path, learning skills, obeying customs and norms of society and a lot more. As a whole, morung had an integral place in the survival of the village through the teaching of values treasured by the tribes. The morung teaching also included the biocentric way of living among Nagas. They lived in harmony with nature. The interference of colonial rule in their lively habits and habitats had shaken the roots. As a result, the cultural/collective consciousness underwent a huge transformation in the North East Indian region in the post-war period.

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As Goswami says, "Though the rule of the colonisers remodelled and remoulded beyond what could be reasonably imagined, it made a profound impact on their age-old customs, and the Nagas did not completely yield to the compulsion. Jostling for space and acknowledgement, negotiating and resisting the impulse to homogenise a distinct cultural form, the Nagas have adopted a synthesis of the old with the new" (*Troubled Diversity*, 1). This stage of in-betweenness had created a conflict in the minds between their own and the thrust ideology. Ao, through the short story *Death of a Hunter*, tries to educate or formulate her society to come out of the conflict they are facing individually and collectively.

The story *Death of a Hunter* is the second short story from Temsula Ao's collection *Laburnum for My Head*. The story setting is the post-war period, ie the period of in-betweenness. It is the transition period of the Nagas from their traditional way of living to that of modernity. The story is about Imchanok, the hunter, and his inner self or the inner conflict he undergoes during his hunts. He "was previously a teacher in the village lower primary school" (Ao, 23). The story begins with the picture of Imchanok, getting ready for his next seasonal hunt. As a hunter, he has undergone three hunts to be specifically remembered. They are the hunting of an elephant, a male monkey, and a big wild boar. The nature and the circumstances that push Imchanok to hunt show that he is forced to do so, and it is not out of his wish or will. The hunting of an elephant was a task assigned to him by the government (an order or a threat) against his will. The second hunt, the hunting of a male monkey, is done with his full valour. However, later, he identifies the monkey with himself, and the urge that he had collapsed a family pricks his conscience. In the third hunt, the killing of the boar, he misses the injured boar, and he is not sure of the hunt. Here, the myth or the superstition behind missing or leaving half killed a hunt haunts his memory. The three hunts disintegrate his conscience.

Hunting was a matter of existence to Nagas. It was a practice that "had social sanction and was accepted by all the people as their way of life" (Ao, 27). "The oral histories of the different Naga tribes laid overriding emphasis on head-hunting as a necessary strategy for the survival of each village community" (Ao, "Head-hunting Some Thoughts", 16). Penzu, a poet from Nagaland, who himself is a descendant of ancient Naga head hunters, says, "There were professional head hunters who took head

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hunting as their game of life, without commiseration or remorse for his killing and bloodshed. They protected the village from enemy attack. They earned personal glory, fame and titles in defence of their respective villages. A noted brave head hunter was treated as a wall for his village" (1). They had a traditional hunting method and it was an accepted social behaviour. The practice of hunting was restricted to certain periods and was seasonal. It was their law to hunt a particular animal at a particular period.

For instance, Wild boars (*Pongi*) were hunted in the month of August and September. These months are the seasons when paddy sprouts and the wild boars that come to destroy the paddy fields are hunted by the people hunters. Tigers/leopards are hunted when the tiger eats the animals domesticated by them. Many types of taboos existed regarding hunting and consumption of the hunted meat. (Imchen, 510 & 511). At the end of the nineteenth century, when the colonial power overtook the Nagas, their way of life was distorted. There began a conflict between approved and accepted behaviour. This is all because of the collective memory.

Imchanok, the hunter, is an individual who was born and brought up in two different social frames – the Naga tradition and the colonial impact. The two different societal memories interfere/intrude on his life throughout until he gives up one for the other. He suffers physically and spiritually and also loses his valour and strength. The two different memory waves push him to choose two professions. He is a hunter, which is, of course, inbuilt in him, on hailing from a Naga society. The formal education imparted as a part of colonialism pushed him to become a teacher. He has been a primary school teacher for some time. He has two professions that have a varied set of principles. The hunting experience of Imchanok shows the conflict he undergoes within himself. The inbuilt Naga cultural traits and the new social construct, i.e. the teachings of his ideology and the acquired ideology, undergo a serious clash within him. This weakens his spirit, body, and mind. Imchanok's persistence to maintain his valour as a hunter is his collective consciousness. The collective memory he has accrued as a Naga. The colonial era might have taught him a different set of ideas. The colonial system trained Imchanok to be a different person, which proved to be the polar opposite of what he learned as a member of the Naga community. Two different ideologies entangle him. The identity that Imchanok possesses as a Naga forces him to cling to his role as a

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hunter. Primarily, he is a Naga and identifies 'hunting' as his responsibility to his community. In all three hunts, Imchanok's physical attitude proves him as a skilled hunter and his mental attitude haunts him as a pitiful citizen.

There are three components or factors that haunt him as a hunter. As per Naga culture, they have certain ethical codes for hunting, as mentioned above in the paper. Imchanok is forced to violate those principles and ethics in the new era. In the elephant hunt, he is forced to hunt by the government officials. "This was a most extraordinary situation, one for which Imchanok was totally unprepared. It was one thing to choose when, where and what to hunt but quite another to be faced with the real challenge (Ao, 23). According to their ethical code, "the primary purpose of hunting was for food, and some animals were hunted to protect crops, cattle, and people from predators" (Kire, 47). As Beulah rightly points out, Imchanok's sense of guilt for exterminating a fellow creature not out of necessity but under compulsions gnaws at his heart, making him listless and morose. It is as if by killing the elephant he has violated nature" (107), that is, his law.

The second component is the recognition of the shared purpose or solidarity. The second hunt is of a male monkey. A group of monkeys destroy the villagers' paddy field, including his own. As a sense of duty, he should hunt the monkeys. A sense of identity of oneness with the beings haunts him immensely and builds in him a pricking consciousness. The third component is that of animism, which in Naga culture is closely tied to their agricultural and hunting way of life. The animistic practices are an integral part of Naga culture and are intertwined with their festivals and daily life, too. The third hunt is the mythical haunt of leaving a boar half-killed. The fearless hunter, Imchanok, was caught in nightmares. He cries in sleep, "Look at him, he is as big as a barn and as black as charcoal...I am afraid... he is going to come after me" (Ao, 37). These nightmares continue for days, and his wife suggests he do some rituals to get rid of this haunt. The ritual was that they had to go to the exact place where he had fired his gun on the animal and ask for forgiveness from the creature. Initially, he dismisses it as that of sceptical and woman-talk. Since the nightmare continues for days, he accepts and performs the ritual. On their way to perform the ritual, Imchanok finds a boar's tooth and some aged bones. He gets into conflict once again. He accepts that there is some magic or solicit in

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performing rituals. Though he does not speak out, it is evident from the sleep he experienced that night. "He had felt a new sensation as if a new power was surging within him. Outwardly, he behaved as if nothing extraordinary had happened, but inwardly, he began to question why it was left for him, the hunter, to discover the remains?" (Ao, 39). Imchanok gets relieved from the night haunt of the half-killed boar. Now, in the first two hunts, the killing of an elephant and the male monkey start haunting him.

"He became listless and morose; some days he would sit by himself and re-live the life of Imchanok, the hunter, and his earlier sense of pride about his skill and reputation as a famous hunter would be replaced by shame and regret... one day when he was alone in the house, he took out his gun from its sack, and dismantled it. The next morning, Thangchetla watched as her husband dug a hole in the backyard, humming a tuneless song. Moreover, in that gaping wound of the earth, he buried the boar's tooth, the dismantled gun and Imchanok, the hunter. (Ao, 39, 40)

The story implicitly highlights the importance or the preciousness of following one's customs and rituals. Imchanok had it he had not been a rational thinker, might be solaced with the rituals he performed on the third hunt. He might have had a good sleep after that. Instead, he starts thinking of his other two hunts of killing the elephant and the male monkey. The haunt continues till he buries the boar's tooth, the dismantled gun, and Imchanok. This hunter metaphorically dictates the communal mythical or traditional belief, the profession, and the identity, respectively. The term haunt he experiences at the end is again a metaphor that indicates the clash in the memory between two different ideologies. Burying his own collective/cultural memory is not his voluntary action. Imchanok does it involuntarily to make his life axis spin or move further, which is understandable by his humming of a tuneless song.

Marcel's hypothetical statement in his chapter, "Maurice Halbach's memoir collective", runs as "social change is an ongoing attempt on society's part to adjust to its environment" (147). Memory works to form a life in common (Assman, 110 & 111). Leichter says, "Collective identity and memory is always in the process of being constructed and is thus always contestable"(116). "Collective memory is continually



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reinterpreted to fit those new conditions...It is as if the collective memory empties itself a bit when it feels too full of difference. Some memories are evacuated as the community enters a new period of its life. (Marcel, 148). Collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulation, writes Sontag (Assman, 38). "Stories will remain in collective memory as long as they are functional for the group and will be only replaced by other stories once they become dysfunctional" (Huebenthal, 4). Though Huebenthal's voice stretches towards the collective memory that exists in a person, the paper takes the latter half of the sentence of 'collective memory becoming dysfunctional'. Imchanok, once culturally marked as a hunter, buries his identity and is prepared to fit into the ongoing, changing modernised society.

The previous papers done on the story *Death of a Hunter* insist that it conveys "the mystic of nature (Mukherjee, 107), embraces the mythical and even the modern (Ali, 19), a dimension to the quest for cultural identity (Beulah, 107), concept of power relations between man, animals, and nature (Kumar, 3), the idea of culture ought to be prioritised over nature (Gogoi 3) and about how a system denies a society its identity, voice or vision (Khatoon, 1).

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