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A Woman's Heart- A Treasury Of Dark Secrets: An Ecofeminist Reading Of Temsulao's Three Women From The Short Story Collection Laburnum For My Head

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Abstract

The northeastern part of India is one of the hotspots for ethnic conflicts and violence. The significant motives for bloody conflict between the Indian Army and the underground armed rebels are perceived political imbalance and desire for a separate nation. Even ordinary civilians are forced to join the rebel groups without knowing the consequences. Temsula Ao is one of the significant English writers from Nagaland who, brings out the existent misery of conflict in her native land. This paper aims to study the psychology of women through an ecofeministic lens. The Dark Secrets their heart holds and the pain they undergo are studied in this paper. Violence is considered a typical condition of human nature, but it often extends to irreparable misery and angst. This paper also aims to bring out the portrayal of women from the marginalised Ao community who finds it challenging to preserve the customs and moral values despite regional revolt.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Domestic violence, Insurgency, Racial autonomy, Marginalised Community, political imbalance.

Introduction

The northeastern region of India is a melting pot where the brown and the yellow races meet, where the tradition and culture of different tribes and ethnic groups mingle, and where there is a rich storehouse of different languages and dialects of multi-ethnic people. There are tribes still following traditional 'animistic' faiths that are 'woven around forest ecology' and profess 'co-existence with the natural world.'

The region is blessed with a unique ecology with its mountains, hills, rivers, valleys, people, myths, legends, rites, and rituals. It is a part of the fantastic tropical rainforest that spreads out from the bottom of the Himalayas to the tip of the Peninsula and the mouth of the Mekong River.

Writing in English from the Northeast as a discourse of self-expression took shape casually in the eighties and the nineties of the twentieth century. The writers writing in English from this region at present are the first generation of writers. They already have attained a legitimate and influential voice by articulating their senses and sentiments and focusing on some of the core issues of the region. The ethos and milieu of their respective communities are some of the dominant preoccupations of these multi-ethnic writers.

Identity crisis and a sense of alienation are some of the dominant features of contemporary politics in the Northeast. Racial autonomy, cultural and linguistic conflicts and the problem of insurgency have been ravaging the region. These are some of the recurrent themes in these writers that bind them in one single thread. Besides issues like an identity crisis, search for roots, self-assertion, or claims for political space, the region's ecology and ecological concern predominantly seem to unite these multi-ethnic writers in a common platform. The works of the writers in English from India's Northeast have many different aspects of the entire ecosystem of the region. The writers celebrate the ecological glory of the Northeast with keen environmental awareness. Although ethnicity is their chief concern as they hail from various ethnic groups, mountains, hills, valleys, people, myths, legends, tribal rites, mystic as well as aesthetic sensibilities, communal violence, and insurgency are some of the dominant and recurring themes in their works. They seem to use ecology consciously as a tool for acquiring an identity that is unique, legitimate and powerful. It is felt that the region's unique ecology has been pivotal in shaping the aesthetic sensibility of these writers.

The fundamental Indian ethos teaches us to be compassionate to nature and live in harmony with it. Living in unison with nature and being mutually dependent on nature has been a tradition of Indian people. The people of Northeast India feel an affinity with nature; they believe in a harmonious relationship with nature. The unique ecosystem of the region plays a pivotal role in shaping such a mindset of the people. It is felt that the unique ecology of the area has been vital in shaping the aesthetic sensibilities of these writers. So, it is hoped that studying their writing from an ecological perspective may even help in understanding this colourful, mesmerising land called the Northeast India—a land which is a tremendous geographical as well as a psychological entity.

Ecofeminism believes that there is a deep-rooted connection between women and nature. This Nature-women connection can be seen from eight different levels — historical connection, conceptual connection, empirical/experimental connection, symbolic connection, political connection, philosophical connection, theoretical connection, and ontological connection. Based on these connections, ecofeminism is broadly divided into six types. They are: Liberal Ecofeminism, Cultural Ecofeminism, Social Ecofeminism, Socialist Ecofeminism, Radical Ecofeminism and Spiritual Ecofeminism. Although these different ecofeminism schools have different ideals and principles, some fundamental points are common to all of them. They all share the standard premise that there is a close connection between the oppression faced by women because of men and the domination of nature by humans. They all have the common goal of liberating both women and nature and creating a new society without any hierarchy or environmental destruction.

Temsula Ao is a northeast Indian writer who hails from Nagaland. Temsula Ao a prominent women writer of Northeast India is known for her poems, short stories and fiction that are set in the lush green forest and hills of north-east India. She writes about her own people, emotions, naga traditions, and

beliefs. Laburnum for My Head is an inspiring short story collection which portrays an intense study of human behaviour and depicts various facets of ordinary men's and women's life. Ao successfully presents women as engaged in complex and challenging social and psychological problems. An analysis of the women characters in her stories reveals the strength of women in different human situations. She delineates them with their variegated mood swings filled with joy and sorrow. The reader also understands the suppressed desires and feelings of the characters. Her women characters are unified with nature, and it is evident in her stories, in some stories women rejoice with and glorify nature then in other stories they are the co-sufferers of nature, and they have untold sorrows and joy and a sense of immortality.

In her collection of short stories, Laburnum for My Head, the story Three Women tells of a woman's "terrible secret which comes full circle, changing her daughter's and granddaughter's lives as well as her own". In the epigraph to Laburnum for My Head, the writer says: "Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard – stories about individual experiences ... and those that are ... at times confessions". Three Women tells the stories of three generations of women who relate their individual experiences and confess dark secrets that have haunted them for years. With a deep understanding of the dilemmas, confusion, and conflicting emotional states that women experience in their predicaments, the writer has brought out a story about three women and their personal testimonies. She has written in a manner and style which emphasises the ties that women share between themselves and give each other the support they do not or cannot share with their spouses or male relations. Told entirely from a woman's point of view, the narrative highlights the complex emotional impulses and personal angst women go through within their social and cultural milieu. With adept irony, the writer has kept the men in the margin and given her women characters' voices and agency. Adopting the autobiographical mode, Tamsula Ao begins the story with a prologue, followed by the three women each telling her story in the first-person narrative – Martha's Story, Medemla's History and Lipoktula's Secret. A second sequence of brief descriptions by the three women concludes with an epilogue.

The confessional tone of their stories reveals their private experiences as mothers and daughters and the ties that bind them through the bond of motherhood and daughterhood. Each woman's narrative highlights various aspects of the mother-daughter relationship, which changes perspective as the person grows and changes. The writer illustrates the pattern of close relationships between women; the bonds that develop as mothers who train their daughters to face life and the help they render in childbirth, nursing and child-rearing and their interdependency strengthens the bond of love they share which remains constant through the generations. Through their personal accounts, the author manifests social, ideological, and cultural concerns that affect a woman. Written with sensitivity about women's diverse situations, the story raises questions about how women respond to their predicament in individual ways. Martha's innocence is shattered when her identity is challenged. Medemla withdraws emotionally from men when her fiancé breaks off their engagement, and Lipoktula's secret remains a secret, so her family unit remains intact. Each woman's narrative presents the female character struggling in her predicament. The underlying thread connecting their stories is women working to overcome their pains, sorrows, angsts, and dilemmas, but the message Tamsula Ao puts across is that the ties women share can be a source of strength to overcome their difficulties. In exploring women's thoughts, feelings, intellect and emotions, there is a female consciousness that seeks economic, political, social, educational, and artistic freedom.

The prologue introduces a young man hovering near the doorway of a humble cottage in a village. He hears the chatter of women who had assisted at the birth. He wants to see the baby, but his

view is obstructed. He must wait. As Martha delivers a new baby, she is surrounded by women. Metaphorically speaking, as Apok waits outside, the door to a woman's world is opened to reveal the most intense experience in the life of a woman – childbirth. Though childbirth is a natural phenomenon, the institution of patriarchy and the literary canon have given scant attention to this natural occurrence in literature since men are not the ones who directly experience this phenomenon. Temsula Ao highlights this aspect of women's life which helps cement the connection between women, especially mothers and daughters. Three women, though distinctively different but “linked through a mysterious bond that transcends mere blood ties” brought together by this occasion, tell us their stories (63).

“Martha's Story” begins with her life as a little girl living with her mother and grandmother in a village in the hills. She was different and not so at the same time. She recalls being called “coolie” and laughed at for her dark complexion and strange features. Whenever she asked her grandmother why she was called coolie, her grandmother would shrug and advise her to ignore it. She endured the taunts but wondered why she had strange, thick, curly hair, unlike the other children. The insults continue when she starts going to school. The other children would refuse to sit near her or play with her. They would giggle when she asked permission to go out, and sometimes, even the teacher could not control their behaviour. Martha says she “was tough even then and wanted to show them I was smarter than all of them and I learned lessons well” (64). Her progress is noted by the teacher, who tells her mother, “Medemla, this child of yours is very clever. One day, she will become someone” (ibid). When she was in Class IV, some girls became friendly with her. One day, Martha asks the girls why they called her “coolie”? They look away, and after some whispering, one of them tells her that she does not belong to the village and that Medemla is not her birth mother. Her confusion about her origins lies in her friends' question: “Haven't you ever wondered why you look so different from us? You speak as we do, but it is not your language. Our mothers have always known this, and they told us” (65).

The shock and horror of this information fill Martha with a dark dread, and she runs home to sit on her bed benumbed. When her grandmother checks to see if she is all right, Martha angrily demands to know who her birth mother is. The older woman withdraws into silence, but Martha asks angrily: “Tell me, who is my real mother?” (65). Martha's ignorance about her origins fills her with shock and horror, and an acute sense of insecurity strikes her as doubts about her heritage and her identity strikes her. Her world is shaken at that moment, and her fear creates feelings of alienation. Despite the maternal care and affection she has received till that moment, she suffers a sense of loneliness and alienation. Her anxiety draws her towards the grandmother, who represents stability in that moment of turmoil. Through the anger and pain, Martha is drawn to the reassuring presence and smell of the older woman, who “smelt like the earth after rain or the smoke from burning wood and sometimes even like crushed leaves” (65). The soothing effect of her grandmother's peculiar body odour and the contact with her body when she was carried on her back with the help of a cloth whose ends were tied firmly across her chest always filled Martha with a sense of security and comfort during her early childhood. But instead of feeling comforted that day, Martha was filled with dread. A dark suspicion like the black lice that infested her hair and made her life miserable when she was younger. She doubted whether her mother and grandmother could rid her of her misery.

Martha suffers an identity crisis when she learns that she belongs to a different community. Her skin, features and hair set her apart, but in her heart, she did not feel different from the others in the village. She wanted to scrape off her dark skin and wished she could rearrange her features. A brooding fear of being sent back to her “real” people away from her loved ones and the village she considered home enveloped her. Her grandmother's silence agitates her further, and with growing anger and

resentment, she wondered how she would confront her mother for withholding the truth about her origins. But she acknowledges they “had shown only love and concern for me all this time” (66).

Martha’s story illustrates the crisis that an adopted child experiences as she grows and learns that she does not belong to the family and that she is not the biological child of her family. The dread and fear mingled with anger and resentment reveal the turmoil for such children when they learn the truth. In such a predicament, she cannot imagine being sent back to her “real” people away from the only family she knows. Her story highlights female ties between women, a child and a foster mother. TemsulaAo emphasises this aspect of maternal love. Martha, an adopted “coolie” girl-child, has been nurtured and reared with love, regardless of her dark skin, strange features, and curly hair. The depth of maternal love transcends race, religion, gender, and ethnicity barriers.

“Medemla’s History” follows. She is Martha’s mother, and she recounts the day she received a “terrible letter” from her long-time fiancé Imsutemjen informing her that he could not marry her because his father was vehemently opposed to their prospective marriage. The intensity of betrayal and rejection was so strong it burned her to the core, reducing her to “nothingness”. She wondered whether some quality in her repelled Imsutemjen’s father. Her busy work as a resident nurse in the hospital where she trained helped her maintain a facade of normalcy. Her father was disappointed and shared her pain, but her mother considered it fortunate that the marriage did not go through. After that, though several proposals came her way, she rejected each one. Medemla comes across as neat and orderly in work and character. She seems in control of herself, but the thought of being abandoned by her fiancé changes her attitude towards men and marriage. She becomes emotionally scarred and chooses to remain single. At this juncture, by some twist of fate, Martha, the abandoned baby of a tea garden labourer whose wife died at childbirth, enters Medemla’s life. Martha’s mother dies soon after delivering Martha in the hospital where Medemla worked. When Maratha's father hears of his wife's death, he is inconsolable but the moment he learns that the baby is a girl, he goes into a rage and curses the nurses, the hospital and a cruel God who had denied him a son. He bursts out in disgust; “What will I do with another girl? Do whatever you want; I don’t want to see her ever, she who has killed my wife” (68). The innocent infant is blamed for the death of the mother. The father rejects his daughter, but it is a foster mother who gives her the love that sees no barriers in the colour of the skin or the texture of the hair. Martha becomes one more addition to the abandoned children in the hospital who are looked after by the Mission. The name Martha was given by one of the nurses after her father rejected her. For some inexplicable reason, Medemla was drawn to the infant whose entry into the world was accompanied by anguish and tragedy. She developed a bond with the baby and would visit her every day. She recalls: “It was as if some unseen hand was forging a bond between my lonely self and this abandoned child” (68-9).

a single, unmarried woman, she considered the risk of adopting a child with genetic and cultural differences. She was a fair, Ao-Naga girl of twenty-six, and the baby was dark with distinctly aboriginal features and kinky hair. Despite all this, Medemla is filled with a maternal desire to make Martha her daughter. Her mother agrees to look after Martha at Medemla’s request, highlighting the abandoned child’s tragic history without mentioning her physical details in a letter. But Medemla’s humanitarian intention is considered with reservations by the Nursing Superintendent of the hospital where she worked. If she went ahead with the adoption, she was told, she would have to leave her job without getting any reference letter from the hospital.

Medemla realises the gulf between what people preach when they talk about loving the unfortunate and what they practice. Her resolve is strengthened. She leaves her service and goes back to her village with Martha. Her parents react with “disbelief, shock and disgust” when they see the dark-skinned bundle that

Medemla brings home. However, their reservations melt under the baby's innocent smile, and they accept her with genuine warmth. The little girl grows under the care of the two women, and Medemla is proud that her daughter is a bright student. She dreamed of sending her to a medical college to become a doctor. But Martha has grown and wants to know who her birth mother is. After explaining the history and eventual adoption, Medemla asks: "So now, don't you think I am your mother though in a different way?" (71). Martha answers clearly: "Mother, I may look different from you or grandmother or all others in the village, but I feel no difference in my heart" (71-2). Overcome by emotions, the women embrace each other, and Medemla assures her daughter: "Just as you feel, I am your real mother. Do you understand?" (72). This emotional exchange is a significant moment in the lives of the three women. The comment: "The three of them just stood there ... as though enacting a ritualistic affirmation of the power of motherlove to mesh the insecurity of innocence in the magic of an emotionally enlarged truth" (72) vividly captures the remarkable link of mothers to their daughters and vice versa on an emotional, physical and psychological level.

"Lipoktula's Secret" ties the narratives of the preceding two and reveals the long-held dark secret the grandmother has guarded for many years. She narrates the problematic life of living off the land and the strain of poverty that drove her sons away to join the army. Her consolation was that her daughter, a bright student, was obedient, humble, and balanced. But Lipoktula's past returns to haunt her. She recounts how she had been raped long ago by Merensashi, the guilt and shame that she experienced, and the despair and anguish she realised she was pregnant. Medemla was born out of that rape, and now, by some cruel twist of fate, she wanted to marry the son of the man who had fathered her. Lipoktula realises she must finally confront her rapist with the truth and stop her daughter from entering an incestuous marriage. When Merensashi, who is now a village council member, is informed, he doubts being Medemla's father. But Lipoktula's information that Medemla had a similar birthmark like his confirms the parentage. She threatened to let out the secret of the rape if Merensashi did not stop the marriage plans. Thus, Medemla's wedding plans were foiled. Lipoktula's secret tells of the private agony of a woman who has been haunted with feelings of guilt for many years over a secret shame. In her recollection, she wonders why she had failed to resist the man. She could not explain her conduct as to why she had not opposed more vigorously. She accepted with remorse her participatory submission to her rapist who violated her twice in half an hour. The question of Lipoktula submitting to Merensashi and keeping her husband in the dark lends doubt to the 'rape', which could have added to her remorse and guilt at having 'cheated' her spouse who unknowingly rears the child born out of this incident.

Temsula Ao highlights the feelings of guilt and shame that a woman experiences in the aftermath of a rape and the lifelong scars of such an incident. When she discovers she is pregnant, Lipoktula unburdens her turmoil to her mother, who shares her heartbreak. Her mother chides her for not evading her rapist. However, she advises her daughter: "You know, it is always wise for a woman to keep a part of the self all to herself, and sometimes she must choose between telling the truth which destroys and living with a lie which may remain a secret forever. I cannot say anything more because it is only you who can make the choice" (75). These words offer little comfort to lessen her confusion and agitation. Lipoktula chooses to remain silent. Her silence reflects the strategy many women adopt to hide such shame. A silence to protect themselves from social stigma and humiliation. In Lipoktula's case, to protect her marriage and family. She agonises over a past, irretrievable incident for which she has a lifelong reminder in her daughter. Medemla is born to the delight of Lipoktula's husband, who longed for a daughter and got one, never knowing that she was not biologically his. As her daughter grows, she is relieved and so is her mother that the child did not look very different from her brothers. Now, with the "terrifying spectre"

of an incestuous marriage staring at her, she takes decisive action. Her daughter's happiness must be sacrificed to avoid the "curse of incest".

The three women continue their narratives in the second phase of the story. Starting with Martha, she discloses her mother's ambition for her to become a doctor. But teenage rebellion leads to resistance to her mother's plan as it would mean being away for many years from her anchors. Martha's promiscuous behaviour spoils Medemla's dreams for her daughter. Martha and her classmate Apok fell in love. Their adolescent explorations of sexuality in premarital sex leads to an unplanned pregnancy. When Martha discloses this, her mother is deeply disappointed. Now, there would be no "proper wedding" and only a small gathering of relatives to formalise their marriage. In retrospect, Martha wondered: "How could one describe the responses of a woman's body to the touch of a man she loved to such a person as my mother, who had never felt the demanding power of such love? And harder still, convince her that once you have tasted love like that, there was no stopping?" (77). Martha's remark raises a question on the casual attitude of a percentage of teenagers towards premarital sex where promiscuous behaviour leads to erosion and degeneration of moral values.

Medemla, on the other hand, reacts with shock and amazement to the news of Martha's pregnancy. When she sees the young couple openly displaying their love for each other, she asks herself: "What is it that pulls a man and woman together and makes them so irresistible to one another? Why did I never feel that way with Imsu?" (77). When Imsutemjen rejected her, she felt dejected and abandoned, but these feelings did not hurt her personally or intimately. She regards her failed romance as a "disruption" in the smooth order of things that sometimes occurs in a woman's life. Her reaction and attitude reflect a personality that followed an orderly daily routine. She was a working woman, a nurse with somewhat antiseptic love life. After the disappointment, she stays away from men but often asks herself: "Am I abnormal or just a different kind of woman?" (78).

In the final intervention, Lipoktula advises Medemla that Martha's relationship should be formalised without delay. Her daughter poses a question for which Lipoktula has no easy answer. She could not understand why Martha and her lover had to indulge in sex before marriage, why they couldn't wait, and what drove them when she had never felt that way with Imsu even when they were alone. The mother cannot explain why the "law of attraction" between a man and a woman did not apply to them and why she had not felt that way with Imsu. From her own experience, the grandmother reflects and observes that: "Since she had never entertained any other man's overtures, Medemla would never experience the impulse that draws a man and a woman into that kind of intimacy" (78). She confesses at the end that when Merensashi violated her, she could not explain her inability to resist his intentions and how an "inexplicable reaction of my body turned my feeble resistance to participatory submission" (79).

The epilogue shows Martha in the labour room surrounded by women, including her mother and grandmother. The exclusively female experience of childbirth is described. As Martha struggles through her labour pains, her man Apok waits expectantly outside. When her baby is delivered, he is welcomed with joy. The scene contrasts markedly with the events following Martha's birth – her mother's death and the father's rage and rejection of a girl-child. The prologue and the epilogue significantly describe childbirth scenes. In depicting the natural phenomenon of childbirth, Temsula Ao describes an experience unique to women, which justifies 'maternal love'; a love as strong and vital as the umbilical cord that binds mother to child. This ritual 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 bring new life into the world. As Martha goes through the pangs of childbirth, the women assisting her to understand her pain in a ritual where menfolk cannot intrude, symbolically brought out in

Apok, who “feeling like an intruder in a sacred ceremony, slips out unobserved” (80). The childbirth experience affected Martha profoundly, who felt it was “more sublime than the transient ecstasies of sex” (79). As she looks at her newborn with awe, she is filled with sadness for her mother, who has never undergone the “pleasurable pains of motherhood” (79). As the older women encircle Martha and lay the baby ceremoniously next to her “in a ritualistic acknowledgement of her motherhood” (80), she is filled with a sense of fulfilment at joining their ranks.

In the story, Temsula Ao explores the mother-daughter kinship and highlights the unconscious bonds that link women to each other in unique ways. When Martha runs to her grandmother in distress after learning of her alien origins, she seeks comfort and security in the earthy odour of the maternal body of her grandmother. When Medemla desires to marry, her mother protects her from committing incest, though at the cost of Medemla’s happiness. Regarding the issue of rape, the writer shows the consequences women suffer and the secret guilt and shame they endure throughout their lives. Incest is looked upon both in the past and the present as a grave crime, a taboo which in ancient times carried the death penalty. Temsula Ao’s women are cast against a socio-economic, and cultural backdrop that sees their status shifting with time. From the experience of her difficult life, Lipoktula ensures that her daughter does not have to suffer financially. Medemla has ambitions for Martha. Through their lives, the writer manifests the dreams of village women who exist in a world order frequently tilted against them in favour of men. In analysing the story, we draw social, ideological and cultural inferences. Social issues such as adoption, rape, incest, gender-discrimination and teenage sex are dealt with. Ideological considerations reveal an erosion of moral and traditional values and “woman” as constructed in a tribal society. As a cultural document, Temsula Ao represents the material considerations in women’s lives, the institution of motherhood, female bonding and ethnic and cultural identity. Her women display the strength that their special relationship as mothers and daughters gift each other by nurturing. They inhabit a world where moral values are degrading, traditions are being challenged, and a variety of social practices are being transposed. In the narratives of the three women, it becomes clear that the community of women across racial and age divides share a bond that ties them in special ways, affirming and supportive of one another. While maternal love remains universal and unrivalled, the bond between mother and daughter remains an enigma. The relationship between women where mothers train and guide their daughters is ongoing, for daughters never outgrow the need for maternal guidance and advisory. They share a psychic understanding and womanly connection that remains constant through the generations. The experience of childbirth is not proportional to this enigmatic bond, as suggested by Temsula Ao in the life of Medemla, a woman who has never gone through the ‘ecstasy’ of childbirth but can still experience the unconditional love of a mother towards Martha. The enigma is again revealed through Lipoktula, the grandmother. She goes through feelings of guilt and disgust after the rape but possesses the heart to love her daughter born of this rape unequivocally and through the unconditional love that the mother and grandmother have for Martha, the adopted “coolie” girl.

Through the testimonies of the three women, Temsula Ao unfolds the private experiences of women who seek to empower themselves despite adversities. Women writers speak a language different from male writers. They articulate women’s experiences from the woman’s point of view where their lives are not devalued and trivialised. In celebrating womanhood, they sing women’s dreams drawn from women’s imagination and raise consciousness to let women’s voices be heard to empower and enrich themselves. The women in Temsula Ao’s world give each other warmth, nourishment, security, sensuality, support, trust and above all, love wrapped in the mantle of motherhood. Martha, Medemla and Lipoktula's bond is strengthened as they welcome a new life. Through the guilt, shame, anger and dark

and secret agonies, they survive their predicaments to forge a relationship cemented with love. The “miracle of new life” reinforces these ties to grant them hope and new meaning in their lives.

Thus, through Temsula Ao's illustration of the detestable lives of the naga people, the reader understands that the effects of insurgency that has lead to never ending problems for the northeast people of India. Temsula Ao employs writing as a weapon to bring harmony and peace. Temsula Ao believes that there is an undeniable affinity towards their ecology in the existence of women, and that is their individuality. Ecological equilibrium has been re-iterated in contemporary works in English from Northeast India. Marginalised in every possible way, the women of these regions have demonstrated an indomitable spirit and agency in coping with the multi-faceted violence that constantly surrounds them.

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