



## **Stories from a Quiet Corner: Human Tenderness in a Landscape of Fear in Tamsüla Ao's "The Curfew Man"**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores how tenderness is represented through emotions and family life in "The Curfew Man" from *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Rather than using political perspectives to analyse the story, this paper examines the domestic and emotional aspects of people's daily lives under the influence of curfews, insecurity and a social climate of fear. Through the characters of Satemba and Jemtila, Ao illustrates the vulnerability, moral unease, quiet concern and day-to-day resilience of individuals living in an environment dominated by military power. This paper asserts that it is a quiet companionship, self-reflection regarding ethics and continued household routines that give "The Curfew Man" its emotional strength, and not some dramatic forms of resistance. A great deal of emphasis is placed upon Jemtila's silent attentiveness, Satemba's internal conflict, and the symbolism of physical harm in the story. By focusing upon these small-scale, close-up experiences, Ao demonstrates the human consequences of violence while keeping her characters away from being defined by their ideologies. In summary, this paper interprets "The Curfew Man" as a profoundly humanistic account where tenderness exists as a fragile yet consistent form of ethical endurance in an atmosphere governed by fear.

**Keywords:** Domestic resilience, Human tenderness, Landscape of fear, Ordinary life, Tamsüla Ao, Vulnerability

### **Introduction**

In *These Hills Called Home: Stories from A War Zone*, Tamsüla Ao's portrayal of people living through extended periods of fear

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and uncertainty is characterised by restraint and deep humanity. Rather than emphasising either political language or large-scale depictions of violence, Ao continues to focus on the individualised emotional experiences of families and persons struggling to create fragile daily routines. In addition to exploring silence, memory, family and relationship dynamics in each story of her collection, she illustrates how long-term difficult situations modify the texture of normalcy in the lives of those experiencing them. In the preface to the collection, Ao remarks that in such conflicts “there are no winners, only victims” and that their consequences can ultimately be understood only “in human terms” (Ao 9). Her emphasis on the lived experience of emotion over ideological position defines the narrative perspective of her collection throughout.

Among the stories in *These Hills Called Home*, “The Curfew Man” presents, perhaps, the most detailed exploration by Ao of the ordinary human vulnerabilities inherent within an environment of fear and uncertainty. The story centres around Satemba, a former police officer who serves as an informant while working under curfew, and his wife Jemtila. Through Jemtila’s steady emotional response, she maintains the fragile patterns of their household. Ao eschews sensationalist motion in her storytelling; rather, she focuses on waiting, physical harm, the silences created by both the absence and presence of others, and Satemba’s and Jemtila’s inner turmoil. For Satemba and Jemtila, curfew is not simply a restriction on movement. It is a state of being that affects Satemba’s daily emotional life. Ao establishes this atmosphere early on in the narrative by observing that “the night curfew was still on because these were troubled times for all in the land” (Ao 39). Although this statement may appear simplistic at first glance, it sets forth an environment where fear has permeated the ordinary routines of daily life so extensively that even basic actions, like going home after dark, waiting for Satemba’s return home at night or walking

through the town at night, have developed emotional significance.

The emotional intensity of “The Curfew Man” stems from neither courageous acts nor conflicts rooted in ideology. Rather, it arises from restraint and simple gestures toward companionship and concern. For example, Jemtila’s watchful, unspoken presence while Satemba is gone each evening represents one of the strongest examples of love and affection presented throughout the narrative: “Every time Satemba went out at night, she kept a lone vigil in the darkness of their small hut and worried until he appeared at the door” (Ao 43). Her quiet endurance reflects what Veena Das describes as a “descent into everyday life” through which ordinary routines become modes of survival and continuity amidst difficult circumstances (15). Furthermore, Ao portrays emotional restraint as a form of ethical strength in the context of family obligation and practical concern for others. Longkumer observes that many stories in the collection emerge from “the hearth in the kitchen place” and remain closely connected to “the everyday life of the Naga people” living amidst fear and uncertainty (122). Therefore, this point can be especially relevant to “The Curfew Man,” where the household develops increasingly into a meagre source of comfort against the mounting worry of the characters.

Satemba has become increasingly morally uncomfortable about his role as an informant. Ao skillfully redirects the reader’s attention from the outside world to Satemba’s internal turmoil. Eventually, Satemba realises that “the real trouble was in his heart” because he now questions both his actions and his profession (Ao 44). In this way, Ao emphasises the concept of vulnerability not simply as a physical threat to safety but both as a psychological and moral anxiety. According to Judith Butler, “loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies” exposed to others and dependent upon fragile human relationships (20). In Ao’s narrative, the fragility

of these connections is often illustrated by the relationship between Satemba and Jemtila. The two maintain a relationship based on companionship and mutual emotional dependency despite the extreme adversity they face together.

This paper demonstrates that “The Curfew Man” derives its impact from the portrayal of human compassion in a climate of apprehension and emotional pressure. Using stillness, waiting, bodily exposure and home-based continuity, Ao illustrates how ordinary people preserve thin lines of humanity under difficult situations. Bharti Arora notes that Ao’s fiction illuminates the “microhistorical textures of individual lives” shaped through everyday negotiations and emotional survival (Arora 3). Likewise, Suganya and Padmanabhan state that “micro experiences of people immensely influence their personal narratives” and reflect the larger emotional consequences of difficult historical conditions (Suganya & Padmanabhan 1). These viewpoints are especially important in “The Curfew Man” since the protagonists’ experiences of fear, care and self-doubt grow more emotionally rich over time. Ultimately, Ao presents tender emotions not as a bold method of protest but as a quiet, profoundly human way of enduring ethically.

### **Curfew, Silence, and the Emotional Structure of Everyday Life**

If the introduction establishes tenderness as the emotional centre of “The Curfew Man,” the story itself gradually deepens this idea by showing how curfew reorganises not only public movement but also the psychological rhythm of ordinary life. Ao presents curfew less as an exceptional political condition and more as an atmosphere that enters domestic routine and alters everyday perception. Darkness, silence, waiting, and interrupted movement repeatedly structure the narrative, creating an emotional environment in which ordinary actions acquire unusual intensity. As the story remarks, “Of these, the night

curfew was the worst for people living in towns because soon after dark all social activities ceased..." (Ao 39). The significance of the observation lies not merely in restriction itself, but in the gradual narrowing of ordinary human interaction. Ao carefully reveals how fear transforms time, space, and movement into emotionally charged experiences.

The narrative pacing of the story reflects this condition of prolonged uncertainty. Satemba's nightly journeys through the town are described with caution and slowness, producing a sustained atmosphere of psychological tension rather than dramatic action. Ao repeatedly emphasises the sensory experience of movement under curfew, where silence intensifies bodily awareness and magnifies apprehension. Satemba moves through darkness with his "bad leg dragging slightly," while every sound appears amplified within the stillness of the curfewed night (Ao 42–43). Such moments are important because they transform the body into a visible register of emotional strain. His damaged knee is not merely a physical injury but a recurring reminder of vulnerability, exhaustion, and diminished security. Ao's attention to bodily discomfort gives the narrative much of its emotional realism, since fear in the story is experienced physically as well as psychologically.

At the same time, Ao avoids presenting Satemba as either a heroic or entirely condemnable figure. His role as an informer places him within morally uncomfortable circumstances, yet the narrative consistently resists rigid judgment. Instead, the story examines how prolonged insecurity gradually produces ethical ambiguity and emotional fatigue. Satemba's growing discomfort emerges slowly through hesitation, inward reflection, and increasing psychological unease rather than through dramatic confession. Ao notes that "never before in his new career as an informer had Satemba seriously questioned his own motives" because he had previously preferred not to think about "the rightness or wrongness" of his actions (Ao 44). The passage

becomes significant because it reveals how emotional exhaustion eventually unsettles moral certainty. Fear in the story, therefore, operates not only externally through danger and surveillance but internally through conscience, anxiety, and self-questioning.

This inward strain becomes especially visible in moments of silence between Satemba and Jemtila. Ao's treatment of domestic interaction remains remarkably restrained, yet this restraint itself becomes emotionally expressive. Jemtila does not interrogate Satemba directly about his nightly activities, nor does the narrative depend upon dramatic verbal confrontation. Instead, emotional understanding emerges through gestures, routine actions, and unspoken awareness. Ao observes that Jemtila "never asked him questions about where he went or what he did at night" and simply waited for his return before quietly serving him food (Ao 43). Such moments reveal how silence itself becomes a form of emotional communication within the story. Veena Das notes that people living amidst prolonged violence often withdraw speech while continuing to preserve forms of ordinary relational life through everyday practice and routine attention (8). Ao's narrative repeatedly captures this quiet emotional discipline through Jemtila's behaviour, where care survives not through emotional display but through repetition, patience, and restraint.

The story reaches one of its most psychologically charged moments during Satemba's encounter in the darkness with the unknown figure who warns him to abandon his work as an informer. Ao constructs the scene without sensational violence, relying instead upon uncertainty, hesitation, and suspended movement. Satemba remains "rooted to that dark space" afterwards, "like a person who had strayed into a minefield" (Ao 45). The simile is striking because it transforms fear into paralysis and inward shock rather than immediate physical conflict. More importantly, the encounter deepens Satemba's

growing awareness of his own emotional and moral vulnerability. The danger he experiences is no longer abstract or distant; it enters his consciousness directly and intensifies the psychological pressure already shaping his life.

Yet even within this atmosphere of fear and emotional fatigue, the story continues to preserve small spaces of human continuity. Jemtila's response to Satemba's eventual injury reveals this most clearly. When she discovers the condition of his wounded knees, she "dressed the wound as best as she could" without outward emotional display (Ao 46). The scene derives its power precisely from its restraint. Ao avoids sentimental excess and instead presents care through practical action and quiet attentiveness. The domestic space, therefore, emerges not as an ideal refuge untouched by fear, but as a fragile environment in which tenderness survives through ordinary acts of patience, labour, and emotional endurance.

### **Injury, Domestic Adjustment, and the Burden of Continuity**

The atmosphere of psychological strain that shapes "The Curfew Man" does not disappear after Satemba's encounter in the darkness; rather, it gradually enters a different emotional phase marked by bodily injury, altered routine, and quiet domestic adjustment. Ao avoids transforming the later progression of the story into a dramatic resolution. Instead, the narrative remains attentive to the ordinary consequences of fear as they continue to affect the rhythms of household life. Satemba's injured knees become significant not only because they register physical damage, but because they interrupt the pattern of movement and secrecy that had governed his existence for so long. The emotional structure of the household consequently begins to change in subtle ways, and Ao carefully traces these changes through restrained gestures rather than overt declaration.

This transformation becomes visible most clearly through Jemtila's response to Satemba's condition. When she examines his injuries, Ao writes that she "saw that it was a peculiar wound" and "understood the significance of this but without saying anything or betraying her emotions" (Ao 46). The passage remains characteristic of Ao's larger narrative method, where silence frequently carries emotional complexity more effectively than dramatic speech. Jemtila's reaction simultaneously contains practical understanding, fatigue, apprehension, and restrained relief. Rather than celebrating Satemba's withdrawal from curfew work, the narrative focuses on the emotional adjustments required within ordinary domestic life after prolonged anxiety. Her care, therefore, emerges less as sentimental devotion and more as disciplined emotional labour shaped through difficult experience.

Ao further develops this dimension of care by emphasising the physical and practical realities surrounding the household. Earlier in the story, Jemtila had already sustained the family through work, patience, and emotional steadiness while Satemba moved through the dangerous uncertainty of curfew nights. In this later movement of the narrative, those responsibilities deepen further. Pou observes that women in Ao's fiction frequently bear "the burden of raising and feeding the family" while negotiating conditions of instability and fear (63). This insight becomes particularly relevant to Jemtila, whose role within the household extends beyond affection into the difficult maintenance of continuity itself. The story repeatedly suggests that survival within such circumstances depends not on dramatic heroism, but on the persistence of ordinary routines, labour, and emotional restraint.

At the same time, Satemba's injury gradually alters the emotional experience of time within the household. Earlier sections of the story were structured around anticipation, delayed return, and nightly uncertainty. With his movements

now restricted, the domestic environment begins to acquire a different rhythm shaped less by suspense than by physical limitation and adjustment. Ao quietly indicates this shift when she remarks that Jemtila “felt unusually light-hearted and free because now that both of Satemba’s knees were damaged, he would no longer be able to work for the S.D.O.” (Ao 46). The emotional force of the statement lies in its irony. Relief emerges not through triumph or security in any complete sense, but through the interruption of a pattern that had subjected the household to constant anxiety. Ao, therefore, reveals how ordinary individuals often negotiate difficult circumstances through partial, fragile, and morally complicated forms of survival.

Importantly, the story does not romanticise suffering or convert injury into symbolic redemption. Satemba’s physical condition remains painful and limiting, while the emotional changes within the household emerge gradually and unevenly. Sanjib Baruah remarks that the “hidden hurt that citizens quietly endure” often becomes part of “the texture of everyday life” within conditions shaped by prolonged insecurity (3). Ao’s portrayal of Satemba and Jemtila reflects precisely this movement of strain into ordinary existence. Fear in the story leaves behind bodily exhaustion, emotional fatigue, and altered domestic relationships rather than dramatic closure or ideological certainty. The narrative, therefore, remains grounded in the lived experience of ordinary people negotiating difficult realities at an intensely personal level.

The later progression of the story also deepens Ao’s interest in quiet forms of resilience that operate without public recognition. Nath observes that Ao’s characters often negotiate restrictive conditions by “carv[ing] out spaces for agency and empowerment” within everyday life itself (274). Jemtila’s conduct reflects this form of negotiated resilience. Her emotional restraint, practical labour, and continued attentiveness

allow the household to maintain a fragile continuity despite injury and uncertainty. Ao's representation of tenderness thus remains inseparable from work, patience, and adaptation rather than idealised emotional expression.

By this stage of the narrative, Ao increasingly shifts attention from immediate fear towards the lingering after-effects that fear leaves upon ordinary life and memory. Satemba's withdrawal from curfew work does not erase the emotional strain that has shaped the household; instead, it reveals how deeply such experiences become woven into everyday existence itself. The story consequently moves beyond the immediate atmosphere of danger and begins to explore how ordinary individuals continue to inhabit, remember, and emotionally negotiate lives marked by prolonged uncertainty.

### **Intimacy, Habit, and the Slow Reshaping of Emotional Life**

As the atmosphere of curfew settles into everyday routine, "The Curfew Man" increasingly reveals how prolonged fear reshapes intimate emotional life itself. By this stage of the narrative, uncertainty no longer appears only through external danger or bodily injury; it becomes visible within habits of silence, emotional restraint, and the quiet adjustments through which Satemba and Jemtila continue living together. Ao's attention, therefore, shifts toward the subtle transformation of ordinary companionship under pressure.

One of the most striking aspects of the story is the way care survives without dramatic emotional expression. Satemba and Jemtila rarely speak openly about fear, yet the narrative repeatedly suggests a deep mutual understanding beneath their silence. Meals are prepared, wounds are dressed, absences are endured, and routines continue despite exhaustion and anxiety. Ao allows these ordinary gestures to acquire emotional

significance precisely because they occur within a world where direct emotional articulation has become increasingly difficult.

At the same time, the story gradually reveals how intimacy itself becomes inseparable from emotional dependence and vulnerability. Satemba's physical weakness and growing moral fatigue expose how deeply his life has become tied to Jemtila's steadiness and care. Butler remarks that "we are, from the start, given over to the other" and therefore vulnerable not only to violence but also to "another range of touch" (26). The observation becomes especially relevant to Ao's portrayal of Satemba and Jemtila, whose relationship continues through quiet dependence, care, and emotional responsibility within an atmosphere shaped by fear. In "The Curfew Man," companionship survives not through dramatic declarations, but through fragile forms of attentiveness sustained within intimate everyday experiences.

Importantly, Ao does not sentimentalise this companionship. Care within the story remains marked by fatigue, apprehension, and unspoken strain. Jemtila's relief after Satemba becomes incapable of continuing his informer work already reveals how deeply anxiety has entered the household. Through such restrained moments, Ao demonstrates how ordinary relationships gradually adapt to emotional pressure while still preserving fragile forms of tenderness and continuity.

### **Memory, Storytelling, and the Quiet Ethics of Survival**

As the story moves beyond the immediate emotional adjustments within Satemba and Jemtila's relationship, Ao increasingly shifts attention toward the ways such fragile experiences are remembered, narrated, and preserved within ordinary life. "The Curfew Man", therefore, derives much of its significance from its careful transformation of intimate suffering and domestic endurance into forms of emotional memory that

resist disappearance beneath larger narratives of conflict. Ao consistently avoids spectacle and ideological rhetoric, choosing instead to focus upon intimate moments of waiting, exhaustion, domestic labour, and moral hesitation. Through this restrained narrative method, the story transforms fragile personal experiences into enduring emotional memory. This literary restraint reflects Ao's larger understanding of storytelling itself. In an interview with Longkumer and Jana, Ao remarks that storytelling for her involves "sharing glimpses of life with readers from different walks of life" so that they may "understand" the experiences being represented (10). The observation becomes especially significant in relation to "The Curfew Man," where emotional understanding consistently takes precedence over dramatic action or ideological positioning. Satemba and Jemtila are, therefore, presented not as symbolic representatives of political conflict, but as ordinary individuals attempting to preserve continuity and dignity during unstable circumstances.

Such emphasis upon intimate experience also explains why the story remains deeply concerned with memory and emotional transmission. Suganya and Padmanabhan observe that experiences shaped by difficult historical circumstances continue to influence "personal narratives" at the level of ordinary life (1). In "The Curfew Man," these experiences survive not through public commemoration but through altered habits, emotional restraint, bodily scars, and quiet domestic adjustments. Fear in the story does not disappear completely; instead, it becomes absorbed into the rhythms of memory and everyday existence. Ao's narrative method is, therefore, less concerned with documenting external events than with tracing the subtle emotional afterlives that such experiences produce within ordinary relationships. The story's quietness becomes especially significant in this regard. Ao repeatedly avoids excessive emotional explanation, allowing gestures and silences to communicate experiences that remain difficult to articulate

directly. Veena Das remarks that violence often enters ordinary life not only through visible events but through its gradual attachment to everyday existence itself (1). Ao's treatment of Satemba and Jemtila reflects precisely this process. Their lives continue through work, routine, injury, and companionship, yet the atmosphere of uncertainty leaves behind emotional traces that cannot be fully separated from daily life. Silence in the story, therefore, functions not as absence, but as a mode of carrying a difficult experience without converting it into a spectacle.

At the same time, Ao's storytelling remains deeply invested in preserving ordinary humanity within such conditions. Longkumer and Jana note that Ao sought to explore experiences that affected "the lives of the Naga people" beyond larger political narratives (3). This concern becomes visible throughout "The Curfew Man," where domestic life consistently remains at the emotional centre of the narrative. The household, however fragile, continues to function as a space where acts of care, labour, and attentiveness acquire moral significance. Ao's representation of tenderness consequently depends less upon emotional idealisation than upon sustained attention to small acts through which ordinary life persists. In this sense, Ao's treatment of conflict differs significantly from many conventional narratives associated with war and violence. Unlike works such as *A Farewell to Arms* or *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which frequently foreground large-scale wartime disillusionment and battlefield experience, "The Curfew Man" remains concentrated upon the emotional pressures of ordinary domestic existence. Ao shifts attention away from spectacle towards waiting, care, bodily exhaustion, and moral fatigue within intimate spaces of everyday life. The story's emotional intensity consequently emerges through understatement and proximity rather than dramatic confrontation. This restrained literary method ultimately allows Ao to preserve forms of human tenderness that remain easily

overlooked within narratives dominated by violence or ideological conflict.

## **Conclusion**

“The Curfew Man” ultimately derives its emotional power from its restrained portrayal of ordinary life lived under prolonged fear and uncertainty. Throughout the story, Tamsüla Ao avoids dramatic spectacle and ideological excess, focusing instead upon the intimate emotional realities that shape the lives of Satemba and Jemtila. Curfew in the narrative functions not merely as an external restriction, but as a condition that gradually reshapes movement, silence, domestic routine, bodily experience, and moral consciousness. Jemtila’s silent vigilance, practical labour, and emotional restraint repeatedly preserve fragile stability within the household, while Satemba’s growing moral unease reveals the psychological burden created by prolonged insecurity. Ao’s treatment of bodily injury further deepens this emotional landscape by revealing how fear leaves lasting traces upon both body and memory. Nonetheless, the story consistently resists romanticising suffering or transforming vulnerability into heroic redemption. Instead, it remains grounded in familiar gestures of care, patience, adaptation, and companionship through which emotional continuity survives amidst uncertainty and strain.

The paper has argued that Ao’s representation of tenderness emerges precisely through this narrative discipline. Emotional restraint, disrupted routine, domestic adjustment, and emotional memory gradually become central expressive structures within the story. Rather than relying upon overt emotional declaration, Ao allows small acts of attentiveness to acquire ethical significance within ordinary domestic life. “The Curfew Man”, therefore, preserves the human dimension of a difficult historical experience without reducing individuals to political abstractions or symbolic figures. By concentrating upon micro-level

experiences of vulnerability, interdependence, and quiet endurance, Ao constructs a deeply humane narrative in which the persistence of shared human continuity becomes the story's most enduring emotional truth.

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