

Everyday Resistance in Temsula Ao's *Aosenla's Story*

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Abstract

The paper tries to underscore the character of the protagonist Aosenla in Temsula Ao's novel *Aosenla's Story* with the aid of James Scott's theory everyday resistance. According to James Scott everyday resistance is highly undramatic and it requires neither outright collective defiance nor rebellion. The actors of everyday resistance are often ordinary people who are powerless and unable to strike back at their oppressors directly. It is subtle, passive and covert. Even the actors are unable to understand that they are part of an act of resistance. The paper closely observes Aosenla's character with the aid of this theory and identifies the various acts of everyday resistances by which Aosenla tries to outshine the so called powerful and emerges out as a woman of newfound freedom and self of her own.

Keywords: Everyday Resistance, Resistance Studies, Oppressed, Marginalised

Temsula Ao is one of the most prominent writers among the North Eastern writers. Aosenla's story traces the trials and tribulations, ups and downs and maturing of a shy, timid and insignificant girl into a woman of identity, independence and self-esteem. The paper analyses the character of Aosenla with the aid of James Scott's theory of everyday resistance.

Resistance studies over the years have attained high interest among researchers owing to its interdisciplinary approach. Resistance studies try to showcase the plight of the oppressed, marginalised or the predicament of those who are dominated by the powerful.

According to Michael Foucault both resistance and power coexist. ie. Where there is power there is resistance and where there is resistance there is power. Everyday resistance is “highly undramatic”(Scott 27) and there is “neither outright collective defiance nor rebellion”(27). According to Scott “elites are able to impose their own image of just social order, not simply on the behaviour of non-elites, but on the consciousness as well” (39). They adopt various forms of defensive mechanisms like “feigning illness, ignorance, incompetence, foot dragging, false compliance, sabotage and so forth” (Scott 52).

Aosenla’s acts of resistance in the form of everyday resistance was accelerated by her sense of being engulfed by various forms of authority or power. In the beginning Aosenla was a very shy, timid and obedient daughter-in-law who never dared to speak up to whatever ill remarks she hears. Like every oppressed she accepts the situation “as a normal even justifiable part of the social order” (Scott 39). But very soon she sprang to action out of the realisation that it was not her own way and that she has an identity of her own.

Aosenla’s method of resistance falls into the category of everyday forms of resistance as it is covert, informal and passive. The actors of everyday forms of resistance are careful as to not cause any danger to their own position. Aosenla as the practitioner of everyday forms of resistance is cautious and careful that it does not hamper with her position as the wife of a rich man and daughter-in-law of an affluent family. According to James Scott “everyday forms of resistance cannot be understood without reference to the ideas, intentions and language of those individuals who practice it”(39). Here one needs to understand the life and intentions of the protagonist Aosenla in order to get accustomed with the form of resistance she practises. Coming from an insignificant background and daughter of poor parents, she was absorbed into the rich family only because of her belonging to the same founding clan. The family was on the lookout for a girl who is meek and submissive and will not question

the boy's wayward behaviour even after the marriage. Aosenla's father couldn't turn down the proposal from an influential family as it was something he couldn't have dreamed of.

The outward domineering appearance of the big house of her in-laws reminds her of the domineering presence of the old couple inside who keeps on interfering into her affairs. As custom requires the newly wedded sons to set up separate households, she was lucky to evade their direct gaze. But as the two houses shared the same compound, they often interrupted her life. Aosenla even dreaded being summoned to the big house. Here one of the defensive techniques Aosenla practises is "quiet evasion" (32). She did not want to be confronted by the people in the big house and thus kept a considerable distance from them. In everyday forms of resistance "the struggle is marked less by massive and defiant confrontations than by a quiet evasion that is equally massive and far more effective" (32). Aosenla is somehow relieved that such evasions had helped her continue her life with some happiness. She wanted to somehow hold on to her life that was forced upon her by her parents. She is not ready to sit and cry over the sudden turn of events in her life.

The practitioners of everyday forms of resistance do not intend to harm or pose any sort of danger to the powerful. They just want to make their existence felt before those who consider them as insignificant. The actors of every day forms of resistance do not even know that they are being involved in an act of resistance as their acts are subtle, passive and difficult to sense.

The actors of everyday forms of resistance are the people who can never ever oppose their masters right in front of them. Everyday resistance is the only mode by which they can show a semblance of resistance. "For most subordinate classes, they have had little prospect of improving their status, this form of resistance has been the only option" (Scott 33).

Aosenla tried to adjust with her new life by loving her husband and in-laws. But things were not as easy as she thought. Her husband Bendang, a very rich business man did

not respond to Asen's sincere feelings. Moreover, he seems to belittle her as a girl from a poor and insignificant background and is of no consequence at all. Asen's romantic ideals of love were "further fuelled by her reading of romantic novels" (Ao 32) and she simply thought of creating a space, a "circle of love" (33) where she will live happily with her husband. As a teenage bride, she thought her life would be like the romantic heroines in her novels who are always triumphant.

In order to get into the finer details of everyday resistance one needs to understand spatialisation of everyday resistance put forward by Johnson-Vintage. Spatialisation means the space or locale from which the actors of everyday resistance practise their subtle resistance. So, space has a greater significance in the study of resistance literature. It is also sensible to look at Foucault's notion of power and resistance. According to Foucault both power and resistance coexist. As power exist everywhere resistance also exist everywhere and hence their multiplicity.

The big house of Aosenla's in-laws is itself a symbol of authority and power. It is from this comfort space its inmates exercise their power upon others. Aosenla's mother-in-law who is referred as the matriarch of the big house is often seen shouting and scolding and giving orders to cook, gardener and other servants of the house. The big house is the space which gives its inmates the power to exercise authority upon the weak and less privileged.

Aosenla who hailed from a poor background often had to bear the ill remarks made by her husband and in-laws. Bendang often compares her with his sisters who are much sophisticated in status and culture. He reminds her that "she would never be on equal footing with his family's status and wealth" (Ao 41).

According to Johansson and Vinthagen "the female body has been recognised not only as a site or arena of power but also of resistance"(10). The protagonist Aosenla in the novel made up her mind to have a makeover of her personal outlook in order to articulate her subtle

resistance. She trimmed her hair, applied light make up on her face and wore fashionable dresses. She also took special care to maintain her physique even after two deliveries. People began to admire her as a late blooming beauty. Here Aosenla is using her “body as a space of power and everyday resistance” (Johansson and Vinthagen 9). She tried meticulously to groom her body and show her husband and sisters-in-law that she can also be in par with them in physical beauty and social status. Here Aosenla is using her body as an object of rebellion against all authority of power that tries to dominate her.

The way she overcome the tragedy of her third pregnancy is worth noticing. She finds fault with herself and her newly awakened sexuality that led her to her third pregnancy. Bendang seemed to reciprocate her love only because he wanted to subjugate his wife once again who had drifted away from him both physically and mentally. But once the pregnancy was confirmed he left her leaving her in a totally bruised state. She was left to the care of a maid while she was hospitalised for delivery. Her mother-in-law visited her every day and “brought many assorted cousins and aunts with her bringing food that she knew Asen would never touch”(Ao 58). Their chatter would linger on topics about women with only daughters and their ill fate. They believed that their talk would aggravate Asen’s grief but contrary to their belief Asen even joined with them in their chatter and never felt hurt at their spiteful remarks. Though they aimed at hurting her she put on a normal face and appeared calm and composed. Such acts of pretending normalcy at the time of difficult situation is a tactic employed by the practitioners of everyday resistance and such acts of resistance helped her to cope up with the situation by not feeling dejected and injured.

Meanwhile she became quite acquainted with Dr. Kilang and took keen interest in the working of his house of destitute- Home. Listening to the woes of poor and homeless Asen felt the need to involve herself with the working of the Home. Her mind yearned to spend a few hours with the people in the Home and do something for their welfare. She nurtured the

idea sometime in her mind and shared it with her husband when the right occasion came. But neither did he give a positive reply to her plea nor did he discuss the matter again. Bendang is a typical patriarchal husband who cannot dare think of his wife going out to work. He thinks it is the husband's role to earn a livelihood and go out and enjoy the wide expanse of the world outside. Asen didn't want herself to be fettered by the chains of household chores. She wanted to establish a niche of her own. She wanted to engage herself with the people outside. So Asen didn't lose a chance to visit her friends and relatives and they in turn visited her for tea or lunch. She also found time to invite her daughters' friends to their home. Asen even hosted lavish dinner parties.

Thus "Asonela's social circle expanded rapidly. The shy timid girl before the third pregnancy seemed to have emerged out of a cocoon, as it were, and was turn....."(Ao 73). Asonela knows for sure that never ever can she improve her status unless she herself strives for it. Her resistance was passive and not in direct confrontation with her in-laws or husband. So they can in no way find fault with her. Her mother-in-law did get annoyed at her comings and goings and accused Bendang for not controlling his wife. They wondered at the rise of this insignificant girl to a woman of eminent social status. She is now invited to prominent families in town and is even offered positions in various civic organizations.

Aosenla slowly flutters out of her cocoon to create a space of her own thereby enjoying equal status with her in-laws. She had never acted violently in direct confrontation with her husband. Her actions are so gentle and passive that she tries to achieve her goal through her acts. Another way by which she articulates her everyday resistance is by not consulting her husband about her doings. She didn't even ask him permission to move in and out of the house nor did she consult him before accepting prominent positions. Aosenla seems to be enjoying this newfound freedom. She was constructing a self of her own and neither Bendang nor her in-laws dared to poke their nose into Aosenla's newfound freedom.

After the loss of her son during the child birth Aosenla tried to gather her spirits by showering her care and attention to her daughters. She spent hours attending to their needs. It was one of her deliberate acts to physically and emotionally distant herself from her husband. She did not attend him during his meals and did not take care of his clothes when he had to go out. She left everything about him to the care of the maid. “These mundane everyday housewifely chores were a thing of past as far as she was concerned” (Ao 93).

Her reaction to the news that Bendang had fathered a child in another woman is remarkable. Like every normal woman who comes to know about her husband’s infidelity towards her she grew fuming with rage but remained calm thinking about the future of her daughters. Aosenla did everything she could do to protect the baby and “ward off the disaster, which threatened to destroy her family” (Ao 112). Aosenla could have revealed this secret out to the world thereby tarnishing them before the society. She could have done much more for what they have done to her. The girl who belonged to an insignificant background now attains monopoly over the entire household. She could have turned upside down the fate of her husband’s family. But her resistance is different. She did everything for the wellbeing of the little child and even participated in the naming ceremony of the child. Until now she was just a shadow of her husband but now, she is someone who is going to determine the fate of the family. During these days Aosenla tried her best to not to meet Bendang face to face and feigned illness many times deliberately to avoid him. Feigning illness is another everyday act by which Aosenla avoided the presence of her husband. She wanted to avoid having dinner with him and pretended headaches constantly in order to avoid this situation so that she can retreat to her bedroom early and dine alone or chat with her daughters.

The latter part of the novel portrays Aosenla as a woman slowly maturing into the matriarch of the family who have a say in every affairs of the household. Moreover, she drifted away from her husband both physically and emotionally. Though they lived under the

same roof rarely did they exchange words. Even Bendang accepted the way she is and left everything to her discretion.

Everyday resistance makes no headlines nor does it require any violent actions or direct confrontations. Analysing *Aosenla's Story* with the aid of James Scott's theory of everyday forms of resistance reiterates the fact that the poor and the powerless are not just hapless victims of authority. But they are active resisters continuing their covert resistance through various modes of everyday forms of resistance. Unlike organised revolts that aim at slow changes everyday resistance aims at getting immediate and quick results. Such types of resistance are sure to bring about a meaningful change in the life of the actors. Critics opine that exposing such covert resistances might be harmful to the actors who perform such forms of resistances. But the subalterns or the poor who are at the receiving ends need to be aware of such hidden forms of non-violent resistances so as to enable them to assert their rights and identity.

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