

Eco Criticism in the poetry of Temsula Ao

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Abstract

Temsula Ao is a prominent author of contemporary Indian English literature known internationally as a voice for NagaLand and beyond, and she writes about many ecological issues. In her poetry, Temsula Ao provides evidence of the biocultural identity of the Naga's. The Naga perceive their world as a living entity, where the forest, river, and stone coalesce to become ancestors, guardians, and chroniclers of their history. As part of her analysis through Ecocriticism, Ao critiques the anthropocentric framework created by modern civilization, while at the same time establishes an EcoFeminist viewpoint that equates the destruction of Earth with the destruction of Woman. The central theme of Ao's approach to ecological issues is her rejection of the Western duality of Culture/Nature. In her seminal work, "Stone People from Lungterok", she reconsiders the creation myth of the Ao-Naga, who believe their forefathers emerged from six stones, providing a starting point for an ecocentric worldview. Humans do not dominate nature; they belong to it. The stone represents permanence and the spiritual foundation. To destroy a part of the Naga landscape is to destroy their history.

Keywords: Culture, Nature, Tribe, Modernization

I. Introduction

Eco-criticism is a literary theory that highlights the relationship between literature and the natural world. Eco-critics analyze how texts depict the natural environment, how they depict the ecological balance that exists between various life forms in ecosystems, how they show the impact of human activity on the ecosystem, and how they believe that we have an ethical obligation to the aspects of the ecological world which are not human. Indian English Literature has produced unique examples of eco-criticism, with examples coming particularly from the North-East region of India. To Naga people, nature is not just an environment, but an integral part of their culture and identity, their Traditional Knowledge - these all being forms of their collective memory (William 2019). Eco-criticism in terms of poetic expression from Naga people is demonstrated by Tamula Ao, one of the greatest voices in poetry from the State of Nagaland, whose poetry includes a strong element of eco-critique. As an eco-poet, Tamula Ao has a deep understanding of the connection between human beings and the earth, and the importance of respect and care for the earth, and for its people. In her poetry, Tamula Ao shows how human life and the earth are intertwined and how violence against the earth, and against the people of it, destroys the interdependence that exists between these two elements of life. Tamula Ao's poetry represents an ethical and responsive relationship to both land and memory that is eco-critical and goes beyond romanticism in its regard for nature; it moves toward eco-humanism that is rooted in Naga culture and tradition. Tamula Ao's eco-critical understanding of the world is rooted in her Naga identity; the land, forest, rivers, hills and seasons that surround her are not simply objects to be used by humans; they are part of her own identity as a Naga and part of her responsibility to protect and sustain the world around her.

Naga culture regards the natural world as sacred and observes it with an animistic understanding of the world that embraces living in harmony rather than as a dominant force in the world. Ao's work expresses this view of the world, where we see nature as having a moral and spiritual nature with personified characters that have agency. While the anthropocentric perspective dominates Western models of understanding the world, Ao's poetry takes an eco-centred approach, viewing nature as a complex web of interdependent elements, with humans being a part of that larger whole. This approach aligns with the principles of contemporary eco-critical theorist Arne Naess. Naess's deep ecology philosophy argues that all forms of life possess intrinsic value, and Ao's poetic world view suggests that the preservation of the cultural identity of humans is directly dependent on maintaining the health of the natural world. (Prasad, 2021)

In her ecosensitive critique of the natural world, Ao uses the landscape of Nagaland to illustrate her views as a form of memory. In her poems, the landscape provides an account of the collective memory of her people, showing the duality of tranquillity and pain. The hills, forests, and fields of Nagaland are often used as symbols of sustenance, identity, and the continuation of ancestors, but they are also images of the destructive impact of violence on the land caused by colonialism, military action, insurgency, and the installation of modern societies.

In the poems "The Old Story Teller" and "Lament for an Earth," Nature is seen as a passive victim of human greed and strife. Eco-criticism intersects with postcolonial environmentalism in Ao's work, revealing the connection between political control and environmental destruction. Ao states that environmental destruction is more than just the physical loss of nature, it also represents a loss of culture and spirituality (Chandra, 2021).

Many of Ao's poems can be considered "elegies to the earth," such as "Lament for an Earth" and "Alas for the River". In these poems, Ao chronicles the evolution from a "green, untouched, full-of-life" past to a state of "staggered and confused".

In the poem "Lament for an Earth," Ao uses crude, savage language to present the forest as a woman who has been raped. Referring to deforestation as a form of "rape" indicates her Ecofeminist position. It reveals that the same patriarchal society that attempts to control and domesticate women also pursues ways to exploit and "strip" Earth's resources.

Ao also consistently contrasts pre-colonization and post-colonial pasts through a lens of wholesomeness versus fragmentation. She believes that environmental destruction equals cultural forgetfulness. In her later works, she critiques "developmental" projects that displace indigenous communities and drown sacred lands, turning vibrant ecosystems into stagnant reservoirs of capital.

She views modernization not as "progress" but as a form of "cultural erasure." In "*Blessings*," she ironically notes that the "blind are blessed" because they do not have to witness the physical desecration of the hills—a stinging commentary on the visual and spiritual trauma of seeing one's homeland destroyed. (Lawrence, 2020)

II. Literature Review

Alexander et al. (2020): The way that Temsula Ao conveys her relationship with Nature differs fundamentally from the Romantic Movement's more common notion of Nature as an inanimate entity with healing powers. Through the poem "Earthquake," Ao views Earth as an active participant who punishes people through the force of nature. Ao expresses her views on ecological and environmental philosophy through her poetry, as can be seen in the following poems...

Buell et al., 2020: An important aspect of Ao's eco-critical view of the forest as represented in her poetry can be appreciated by looking at how she understands the symbolism of it. For Ao, the forest symbolizes abundance, shelter, and the sanctity of life, but, increasingly, these qualities are threatened by human exploitation, by the destruction of trees, and by war and militarisation.

Rueckert et al., 2019: Ao does not celebrate the forest as a pristine Edenic landscape; rather, she illustrates the forest as a living being with many vulnerabilities due to the excesses of human habitation and activity. The act of cutting down trees represents the elimination of Indigenous knowledge and core ethical beliefs.

Prasad et al., 2021: Ao critiques the "environmental unconscious," as coined by eco-critic Lawrence Buell, or how modern society has developed without regard to the ecological consequences of their actions; Ao's work exposes the environmental unconsciousness of modern society and makes the reader confront the environmental consequences of our actions through our actions as humans.

Chandra et al. (2021): Ao's eco-critical vision is not devoid of hope. Despite acknowledging ecological devastation and cultural loss, her poetry affirms resilience and renewal. Nature, though wounded, retains the capacity for regeneration, much like the human spirit.

Eco Criticism in the poetry of Temsula Ao

The eco-critique in the works of Temsula Ao provides insight on how modernisation and urbanisation have led to the disconnection of humans from the natural world. Modern technology, consumerism and militarised systems of governance disrupt the way we interact with our ecology, thus the poet expresses their feelings over how the relationship has become intimate to alienated. The poet's theme is echoed in the concept of "the city and the country" by Raymond Williams. Ao's writing offers a new model for practicing eco-criticism; rather than creating nostalgia for the past and longing to go back to it, Ao's work urges remembrance as an instrument of resistance rather than escapism.

Another important aspect of Ao's eco-critical analysis is the authors' parallel between violence done to land and ecosystems and violence done to people. As an author from a country that has suffered from civil conflict for a long period of time, Ao articulates a visual metaphor connecting the blood-soaked soil with devastated

ecosystems. Nature, as represented by the author, is both a victim and a witness; the disparity between the silent voice of nature and the silencing of the voice of the oppressed creates a strain of eco-critical ethics. The environment and social justice are intertwined in Ao's writings, which provide a direct relationship between destruction of the environment and oppression of the people. Ao's work has a strong connection to eco-feminist and environmental justice theories, both of which posit that the exploitation of the earth is sometimes directly correlated to the oppression of humanity. Although Ao does not explicitly position herself as an eco-feminist, her poetic sensibility frequently aligns nature with nurturing, endurance, and resilience—qualities traditionally associated with the feminine.

In her poetry, Temsula Ao uses the practice of bringing together myth and oral traditions, thereby enhancing her perspective from an ecological critical position. For example, by using indigenous myths in her poems, she creates a repository of stories that preserve ecological wisdom about how humans once lived in harmony with nature. These myths are representative of an entire belief system that challenges the epistemologies of modern times that place a higher value on science than on our respect for ecological ethics. Furthermore, Ao is preserving culture and ecology by re-inscribing oral traditions into written poetry. Eco-critiques are thus an act of resistance against the homogenizing forces of globalisation as it threatens biodiversity and cultural diversity. A further implicit argument within Ao's poems is that the loss of the indigenous story is just as damaging as losing a forest or river.

Imagery serves as a key component of Ao's ecological imagination as evidenced in her work. In Ao's poetry, there are numerous images created for readers to experience the textures and scents of nature; such as the rainy earth, swirling winds, fertile ground and changing seasons. The use of these images aims to create a tactile and sensory connection with nature that helps develop what Eco-Critics term 'environmental empathy'. Rather than simply presenting logical arguments on ecological preservation, Ao focuses on engaging the reader's emotions and memories; thus creating an opportunity for them to feel grief when reading about cruelty inflicted on nature. This use of aesthetics supports the belief of Eco-Critics that literature has a responsibility to educate the public about ecological issues through developing emotional responses.

Through a poetic lens, Temsula Ao delivers the ethical responsibility of stewardship of our earth through a poetic expression of art and activism towards nature, social justice, and humanity. By incorporating symbols of seeds, water, and seasons, she illustrates a sense of continue-endurance where the healing of the ecology can happen if we create ethical relationships again through respectful stewardship of the earth. Temsula Ao has a positive theme of eco-criticism where the restoration of the earth through ethical relationships is a greater hope than the need for despair.

Within the scope of the body of Indian English poets, Temsula Ao's contributions strongly stand out among eco-critical contributors to poetry due to her exploration of the traditional narrative of the representation of nature as viewed from a "mainstream" position, to the exclusion of all others due to the historical representation of place. She successfully expands the range of eco-critical discussion to include eco-critical issues related to land rights, cultural survival, historical trauma, etc. As Temsula Ao focuses on the experiences of people and places within the North East, she de-centralizes Dominant Ecological Narrative by establishing the importance of Regional Voices in the Global Environmental Discourse; hence proving that eco-criticism is not a singularly represented concept, but a concept represented through multiple Historical Cultural Representations Unique to Each Individual Regional Voice Throughout History.

Temsula Ao's Eco-Critical repertoire has developed from an ethical perspective that is deeply grounded culturally and resonates politically with our relationship to Nature. Temsula Ao critiques the destruction done to the environment, the elimination of culture, and the violent element of modernity to present an eco-centric vision based in Indigenous wisdom and ecological responsibility. Her work on Indian English poetry not only enhances the genre by including the voices of minority landscapes and communities but also makes a significant contribution to the global ecocritical conversation as well. Ultimately, Temsula Ao's poetry provides a stark reminder to readers that human fate is inextricably linked to Earth's fate and that ecological balance is vital for both the survival of culture and moral responsibility.

As a prominent Naga author and poet/scholar, Ao has developed an eco-cultural consciousness which incorporates the world views of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. "Stone People from Lungterok," a story from *These Hills Called Home* is an epicritical story that represents the intimate connection between the Naga people and their physical environment. The story incorporates the Naga oral tradition, mythology, and collective memory to build an ecological understanding that opposes anthropocentric, colonial, and contemporary exploitative perspectives towards nature. Through the symbolic representation of stone people, Lungterok's sacred geographical location, and the ethical underpinning of Indigenous cosmology, Ao has placed a new theological frame on nature giving it an ancestral connection, awareness, and moral teaching, opposing ecological dispossession and cultural destruction.

The myth of the Ao-Naga tribe's origins is told in "Stone People from Lungterok." According to this myth, the first human ancestors came from six stones located at Lungterok, which is a sacred site in the Naga

Hills. While some may perceive it merely as a piece of folklore, it represents an origin story based on a human ecological foundation — Humans reside on Earth and are rooted in the natural world, as opposed to residing above it. Through eco-criticism, we can understand how these trees, plants, rivers, animals, etc., are part of our history, our present lives, and our future existence. Stone people are alive; they have memories, they provide the sacred gift of life. Therefore, the idea that we originated from the stones is indicative of an ecological perspective that precedes our existence. Where we come from is from the land, and while human existence may have begun with the land and trees, they still provide sustenance to us. In contrast to a dominant culture's extractive worldview of land and natural resources as commodities, the Ao's narrative represents an Indigenous view. This Indigenous perspective is a worldview that views humans as stewards of the natural world rather than an ownership-based relationship.

The landscape of Lungterok is a living archive for both ecological and cultural history. Many eco-critical scholars argue that landscapes are books or text that tell stories of identity, trauma, and resistance.

The hills, stones, rivers, and forests of Lungterok, in the story "Stone People from Lungterok," possess an Indigenous ancestral relationship. As an Indigenous sacred ecological region, Lungterok embodies the interconnectedness of myth, memory, and the physical world. Through his careful use of language, Ao describes this site as deserving of reverence rather than ownership. The stones are the silent witnesses who connect the past with the future and the ongoing experience of culture and life. Thus, Ao's depiction of these stones contradicts contemporary development discourses that view such spaces as obsolete or unproductive.

The story can be viewed through an eco-critical lens, in terms of its emphasis on sacred geographical space, and as it pertains to preserving ecological sites that contribute to Indigenous Identity and Heritage.

A second theme of eco-criticism is the rejection of anthropocentrism. The ethnocentric view of Western literature tends to place an emphasis on human experience at the expense of other forms of life, and they do not engage in any type of recognition of the importance and value of nonhuman entities. Whereas, Ao's story inverts the hierarchical delineation of humanity and nature. In Lungterok, the stones are not simply things; they are the ancestors of the Indigenous people, and they represent the ancestors of all human beings. Each stone embodies an example of biocentrism and ecocentrism (the idea that all forms of life and material objects have an intrinsic value).

Ao's representation of stone people destabilizes human exceptionalism and invites readers to rethink the ethical status of the nonhuman world. Nature, in this narrative, is not something to be mastered but something to be listened to and respected.

Colonial and postcolonial contexts add another layer to the eco-critical reading of the story. Northeast India has historically been subjected to colonial exploitation, militarization, and development-induced ecological disruption. Although "Stone People from Lungterok" does not explicitly depict colonial violence, it implicitly critiques the epistemic violence that dismisses Indigenous ecological knowledge as myth or superstition. Eco-criticism recognizes that environmental degradation is often intertwined with cultural domination. Ao's insistence on preserving oral traditions and ecological myths becomes an act of resistance against homogenizing forces that threaten both cultural diversity and ecological balance. By foregrounding Indigenous cosmology, Ao reclaims ecological wisdom that has been marginalized by colonial and modern narratives of progress.

The story also reflects an ethics of sustainability rooted in traditional Naga life. Eco-critics often highlight how Indigenous communities practice sustainable modes of living through respect for seasonal cycles, communal land use, and ritualized interaction with nature. In Ao's narrative universe, nature is not exploited indiscriminately; it is approached with caution, reverence, and gratitude. The belief that ancestors emerged from the land fosters a sense of responsibility toward preserving it for future generations. This contrasts with capitalist models of development that prioritize short-term gains over ecological health. Ao's eco-critical vision thus aligns with contemporary environmental movements that advocate for sustainable and community-centered ecological practices.

Memory and storytelling play a crucial role in sustaining ecological consciousness in "Stone People from Lungterok." Eco-criticism acknowledges the importance of narrative in shaping environmental ethics. Ao presents storytelling as a means of transmitting ecological values across generations. The elders' recounting of the origin myth ensures that younger generations remain connected to their land and heritage. In a rapidly modernizing world where ecological knowledge is increasingly abstracted from lived experience, such narratives function as repositories of environmental wisdom. Ao's story suggests that the erosion of oral traditions may lead to ecological amnesia, making communities more vulnerable to environmental exploitation.

The symbolic use of stone deserves special attention in an eco-critical analysis. Stones, often associated with permanence and endurance, represent ecological continuity in the face of historical change. While human societies rise and fall, stones remain, bearing silent testimony to time. In Ao's narrative, the stone people embody resilience, reminding the community of their roots and responsibilities. Eco-critics argue that such symbols can foster a sense of deep time, encouraging humans to think beyond immediate concerns and recognize their place

within a larger ecological continuum. Ao's use of stone imagery thus cultivates an environmental ethic grounded in humility and continuity.

Gender and ecology also intersect subtly in the narrative. While the story does not foreground gender explicitly, the act of nurturing memory, tradition, and ecological values is often associated with communal and maternal roles in Indigenous societies. Eco-feminist readings might interpret the story as reinforcing the idea that care for nature parallels care for culture and community. Ao herself, as a woman writer from the Northeast, occupies a position that allows her to articulate ecological concerns alongside marginalized voices. This intersectionality strengthens the eco-critical dimension of her work by highlighting how environmental and cultural survival are interconnected.

The contemporary relevance of "Stone People from Lungterok" cannot be overstated. In an era marked by climate change, deforestation, and displacement of Indigenous communities, Ao's narrative offers an alternative ecological imagination. Eco-criticism encourages readers to see literature as a space for environmental advocacy. Ao's story does not propose technological solutions; instead, it urges a return to ethical relationships with nature grounded in respect, memory, and restraint. By revisiting origin myths, Ao suggests that ecological restoration may require cultural restoration as well.

Furthermore, the story challenges dominant literary aesthetics that privilege realism over myth. Eco-criticism recognizes myth as a powerful mode of ecological expression, capable of conveying complex relationships between humans and nature. Ao's integration of myth into contemporary prose demonstrates that ecological truths need not be confined to scientific discourse. Instead, they can be communicated through symbolic and narrative forms that resonate emotionally and spiritually. This expands the scope of eco-critical literature and validates Indigenous storytelling as a legitimate and vital ecological discourse.

III. Conclusion

Temsula Ao's poetry serves as a decolonial ecopoetics. She challenges the "extractive logic" of the modern state by re-centering Naga epistemologies where humans are participants in an ecological network. Her work is a call to "return to the roots"—not as a nostalgic retreat, but as a survival strategy in an era of climate crisis. By voicing the "unheard interests" of the land, Ao transforms poetry into an act of environmental activism, reminding us that when the earth is "ravaged," the human soul is inevitably "uprooted." "Stone People from Lungterok" by Temsula Ao is a rich eco-critical text that articulates an Indigenous environmental philosophy rooted in myth, memory, and sacred geography. Through the symbolic motif of stone people and the sacred landscape of Lungterok, Ao presents nature as ancestral, sentient, and ethically significant. The story resists anthropocentric and exploitative worldviews, critiques colonial and modern erasures of Indigenous ecological knowledge, and advocates for a sustainable, respectful relationship with the natural world. By foregrounding oral tradition and ecological memory, Ao underscores the importance of cultural narratives in fostering environmental consciousness. From an eco-critical perspective, the story is not merely a retelling of an origin myth but a profound meditation on belonging, responsibility, and survival in an ecologically fragile world. Temsula Ao's narrative thus contributes significantly to eco-critical discourse, offering a voice from Northeast India that enriches global conversations on ecology, culture, and sustainability.

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