

# ECOFEMINIST UNDERCURRENTS IN THE POETRY OF TEMSULA AO

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## ABSTRACT

Northeast, the region being embedded in a geographical land surrounded by superabundant natural beauty, its literature is enriched with multifarious representations pertaining to the diverse socio-cultural background. It is however undeniable that the violence and terror rising out of the insurgency caused by regional militant groups fighting for their own land and identity and the counter-insurgency operations infest upon its people with a deep sense of alienation and denial, partly as a result of the geographical location of the state and negligence from the centre. It is therefore natural that most of the literature from this region carries a deep-rooted concern for the various social issues of these areas. Ecofeminism argues about the traditional androcentric approaches towards the socio-political, ideological and economic issues related to women and environment and the affinity between the two. Temsula Ao's concern for her region and women reflected in her writings, her projection of women as protector of the environment and the human habitation to which she belongs and her portrayal of the symbiotic relationship that women share with Nature highlight eco-feminist under-currents. The paper will aim to explore the presence of eco-consciousness in the select poems of Temsula Ao with particular emphasis on the eco-feminist aspect.

Keywords: Northeast, Eco-consciousness, Ecofeminism, Violence, Women, Environment

## INTRODUCTION

The term "eco-consciousness" even though a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, has long been rooted in Indian literature and particularly in the literature of the Northeast. While glorification of Nature is evident in Indian classical literature, Northeast literature has developed a unique identity pertaining to its association with Nature where Nature alludes to a variety of concepts such as environment, home, spirituality, existence, nest of terror etc. Ecofeminism is a political ideology that seeks to establish a correlation between Nature and gender by exploring the commonalities between gender oppression and environmental degradation mainly caused by the patriarchal ideology that Culture is superior to environment and hence both women and the environment have been subjugated by men. Ecofeminists consider that oppression of women and the environment have occurred simultaneously and women have a responsibility to cease male domination over both.

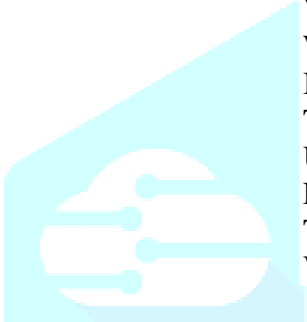
Temsula Ao is one of the major eco-conscious voices from the Northeastern region who has tried to illustrate the cultural richness of this region in her writings. Ao's contribution is not less than that of an environmentalist as she voices not only the cultural transformation but also the environmental degeneration owing to modernization and urbanisation that has been increasingly destroying the harmony of human-nature relationship.

## OBJECTIVES

Temsula Ao while highlighting the problem of insurgency that shattered Nagaland for many decades, expresses her concern for ecology and the safety of her people. This paper attempts to study the following poems of Temsula Ao: 'Lament for an Earth', 'Blessings', 'Earthquake', 'The Garden', 'Bonsai', 'The Bald Giant', 'My Hills', 'A Strange Place' and 'Prayer of a Monolith' from the anthologies *Songs That Tell* (1988), and *Songs That Try To Say* (1992) and highlight the eco-feministic approach and social concerns as reflected in the selected poems.


## DISCUSSION

The poem 'Lament for an Earth' (*Songs that Tell*, 45-47) reveals the miserable condition of our planet as a result of urbanization and industrialization. Ao uses personification and imageries to represent Nature as a living organism. She laments for the earth where once upon a time there was a "verdant", "virgin" and "vibrant" forest which was full of tall trees that provided cool shades to the birds and animals:



Once upon an earth  
There was a forest,  
Verdant, virgin, vibrant  
With tall trees  
In majestic splendour  
Their canopy  
Unpenetrated  
Even by the mighty sun,  
The stillness humming  
With birds' cries. (Lines, 1-10)

The phrase "once upon an earth" (Line, 1) creates a fairy tale like effect to portray the picture of the primitive earth once rich and full of luxury, and the word "virgin" suggests a clear comparison between the forest and a woman. In the next stanza Ao depicts the present forest scenario which has lost "splendour" and become infertile now. Ao presents the devastation of the forest by comparing it to a helpless molested girl:



Alas for the forest  
Which now lies silent  
Stunned and stumped  
With the evidence  
Of her rape. (Lines, 21-25)

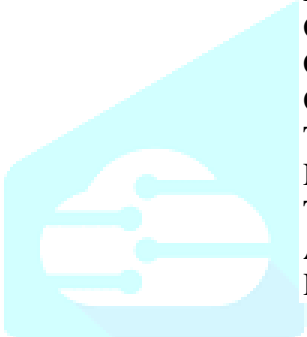
Ao also highlights the irresponsible human activities encouraging deforestation. Men are constantly destroying forests for their own material benefits and the tree trunks are taken with the help of the elephants to the mills which is also a symbol of industrialization:

As on her breasts  
The elephants trample  
The lorries rumble  
Loaded with her treasures  
Bound for the mills  
At the foothills. (Lines, 26-31)

Temsula Ao portrays the forest and the river as sharing the bond of sisterhood. Both the sisters, forest and the river, become the victim of human molestation. Ao reminisces how once upon a time there was a river that was the shelter of varied species of small and big fishes and its honey like water used to quench the thirst of many tired and thirsty deer:

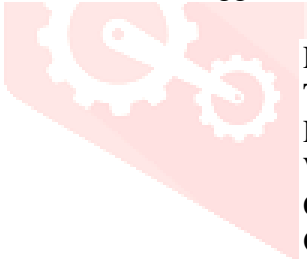
Once upon an earth  
 There was a river  
 Gurgling along  
 With gay abandon  
 Clear and content  
 Resplendent  
 With little fishes  
 Growing big  
 With the seasons  
 The deer at her bank  
 Timid, tired and thirsty  
 Lapping each crystal mouthful  
 As though it was honey. (Lines, 32-44)

But today the crystal-clear water of the river has turned “muddy”. Its natural flow is choked, and it becomes infertile. Nothing is left for tomorrow:



Cry for the river  
 Muddy, mis-shapen  
 Grotesque  
 Chocking with the remains  
 Of her sister  
 The forest.  
 No life stirs in her belly now.  
 The womb  
 And the bleaching powder  
 Have left her with no tomorrow (Lines,53-62)

In ‘Blessings’ (Songs That Tell, 20-21) Ao criticizes the apparent advancement of human civilization abusing the blessings of Nature and its resources. She also criticizes the inequal distribution of natural wealth that results in class struggle and turmoil:



For they shall inherit  
 The crumbs  
 From the rich  
 Who knowing no hunger  
 Cannot savour  
 Of their plenty  
 Though they possess  
 The granaries of the earth. (Lines, 3-10)

The phrase, “The granaries of the earth” (Line, 10) signifies that natural resources are mainly utilized by the rich. Ao considers the blind to be blessed because they are not able to see what the people with eyesight are doing to nature:


Blessed are the blind  
 For they see not  
 What they with sight  
 Have done to the light. (Lines 11-14)

Besides dealing with the theme of violations done to Nature Ao also occasionally shows the retaliating face that Nature shows to human beings. Urbanization, modernization and industrialization in the hill areas create ecological imbalance that directly or indirectly acts as a catalyst for natural calamities like soil-erosion, flood, drought and earthquake. In the poem ‘Earthquake’(Songs That Try to Say, 14-15) Ao warns the society


of the wrath of nature by using the image of a pregnant woman who conceives not to bring new life but rather to destroy by erupting lava from her womb:

When the earth rumbles  
And contorts  
To throw up her secret  
Like a pregnant woman

After conception,  
It is no portent  
Of new life.  
But of death and disaster  
For those who dwell  
Upon her swell.



She gapes open  
To devour  
Toppled towers  
And torn limbs,  
And incites  
Mountains to slide,  
Rivers to rise  
And volcanoes  
To vomit  
Lava and deadly ash.



She heaves and hurtles  
As if to uproot  
The very moorings  
Of life. (Lines, 1-20)

Eco-consciousness not only protests the destruction of nature, but also emphasizes on its preservation with care. This view is projected in her poem 'The Garden' (*Songs that Try to Say*, 16) where she argues that whereas modernisation has dragged away the primitive beauty of her region the green space offered by the garden could be protected. Referring to God, "the GARDENER" Ao suggests that taking care of garden is actually serving the God :

A slice of the earth  
On the ground,  
Or firmed in pots  
Of any imaginable  
Size, shape and colour  
Becomes the respectable  
For new life. (Lines, 1-7)  
[...]  
They grow  
Goaded by hormone,  
Aided by fertilizer  
And tended by your loving care.

The slice of earth  
Thus nurtured  
Brings forth  
Beauties  
In praise

Of the GARDENER  
Of all gardens. (Lines, 14-24)

In the poem 'Bonsai' (*Songs that Try to Say*, 17) also, she criticizes the inhuman attempt to control the healthy natural growth of a plant for the sake of their optic pleasure:

Giant trees  
Stunted by man's ingenuity  
In search of a new beauty. (Lines, 1-3)

With the advancement of civilization man's concept of beauty has also changed. His insatiable hunger for new pleasure and beauty leads him to interfere in the principles of nature. Man's domineering nature is revealed in his futile effort to minimize the vastness of nature:

Earth's vastness  
Diminished and displayed  
In tiny potted space. (Lines, 7-9)

'My Hills' (*Book of Songs*, 157-158) is Ao's contemplation of the peaceful past where she laments at the peacelessness in the North-East region and expresses her longing for the past. She reminisces upon the picture of once paradise like state of the hills:



Once they hummed  
With bird-song  
And happy gurgling brooks  
Like running silver  
With shoals of many fish. (Lines, 4-8)

But simultaneously Ao also presents the transition of the environment of her region that has been gradually losing beauty due to prevailing social unrest:



But to-day  
I no longer know my hills,  
The birdsong is gone,  
Replaced by the staccato  
Of sophisticated weaponry. (Lines, 19-23)

In the poem 'A Strange Place' (*Songs that Tell*, 18-19) Ao considers the world as a strange place where nations have been fighting for the right of the skies. They hardly care for the birds and rather they have been only concentrating on supersonic jets. Instead of birdsong, the sky is now filled with the heavy sounds of weaponry:

This is a place where  
Nations vie  
For mastery of the skies  
Of birds  
Drowned  
In the whirr of jets  
Travelling  
Faster than sound. (Lines, 5-13)

In 'The Bald Giant' (*Book of Songs*, 175-176) the metaphor of a bald giant is used to signify hills. Ao tries to show the worse effects of deforestation that makes the hills withered. Like the metaphorical giant who became bald losing his "green cloak", the hills also losing their past greenery have become bald:

All that is now gone  
 All of him is brown  
 From base to crown  
 And his sides are furrowed  
 Where the logs had rolled  
 Once I thought him friendly  
 But now he looks menacing (Lines, 19-25)

In 'Prayer of a Monolith' (*Book of Songs*, 293-295) the speaker is a monolith, an inanimate object. Ao personifies the dejection of a monolith, a large single upright block of rock. The rock is uprooted from a deep forest and is placed at the village gate by some strangers for the beautification of the entrance thereby leaving it to suffer the agony of separation from its beloved:

I stand at the village gate  
 In mockery of my former state.  
 Once I stood in a deep forest  
 Proud and content  
 My beloved of the laughing dimple  
 Standing by my side. (Lines, 1-6)

The poem ends with the lamentation of the monolith requesting to the "elements" of nature not to tell its beloved the story of its disgrace at the hands of human civilization:

O you elements,  
 When you pass by the forest  
 And my beloved queries,  
 Just tell her  
 I have gone to my glory  
 But please, please, never  
 Tell her the story  
 Of my ignominy. (Lines, 49-56)

By giving life to an inanimate object and telling its miserable story Ao tries to criticize the exploitative tendencies of human beings towards nature and their lack of eco-consciousness and eco-sensitivity.

## CONCLUSION

Temsula Ao's poetry serve as a voice to her community. She seems to write with an innate responsibility to preserve her oral tradition with the task of recreating and reinventing the past. Her poetry reflect a deep concern for the changing social scenario, especially in the face of the change and challenges that appear to threaten the harmony of Nature that is also linked to her tradition. Her poetry is an endeavour to revive a lost identity and while redrafting the violent ridden image of the Northeast she portrays her region for the wealth of natural and cultural history it possesses.

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