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TEMSULA AO'S POETRY: AGGRANDIZING ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

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Abstract: The literature of the Northeast belongs to the genre of indigenous literature on the one hand, and the broader eco-criticism genre, on the other. Although the term "eco-consciousness" is a 20th-century phenomenon, it has long been rooted in Indian literature, particularly in the literature of the Northeast. Temsula Ao, being one of the major eco-conscious voices from the Northeast in general, is an important part of modern Indian literature, as a literary voice of Nagaland in particular. This retired English professor from Northeast Hill University is a poet, short story writer, and ethnographer who tried to provide the cultural richness of this region a national level recognition.

This research paper aims to explore the poems of Temsula Ao which are fully embedded with the presence of eco-consciousness. In these poems, Ao not only highlights the ecological richness of their region but also reveals the ugliness of modernization that is increasingly destroying human-nature harmonious inter-relation. She pursued the oral tradition of her own Ao Naga community as an ethnographer. She can be hailed as an environmentalist because her literary works give a voice to the cultural transformation and the environmental degeneration in the Northeast and try to generate eco-consciousness and eco-sensibility among her readers.

Keywords: Eco-consciousness, Eco-criticism, Temsula Ao, Northeast literature

INTRODUCTION

They did not tell us
What it would be like
Without trees.

Nobody imagined
That the whispering of leaves
Would grow silent
Or the vibrant jade of spring
Pale to grey death.

And now we pile
Rubbish on rubbish
In the dusty landscape
Struggling to create
A tree.

These lines from the poem *Tree* by Tina Morris, the twentieth-century British poet makes the present generation realize what the world would be without trees. The poet holds a mirror before the reader's imaginative eye. This consciousness of the writers has brought the two disciplines of ecology and literary criticism together. The purpose is to restore the Earth's health, which was lost owing to man's wrongdoing. The term "eco-criticism" was invented in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism*, which means an interdisciplinary study of literature and environmental consciousness.

Lawrence Buell defines "eco-criticism" as 'the environment-oriented study of literature and (less often) arts, more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice'. He identifies The two phases/waves of eco-criticism identified: The first "eco-criticism" and the second wave "revisionist eco-criticism" (Buell 138). The poems of Tamsila Ao are marked by the presence of nature in all these given aspects, either providing the backdrop, or giving historical significance to nature like in the poem —Stone-People from Lungterok, or playing an active role as seen in the short story —Laburnam for my Head. Her people are depicted as having a close relationship with their immediate ecological surroundings and nature which is an integral part of their life. She makes excellent use of nature as a metaphor. This aspect is prominent in the poetry emanating from the region as noted by Chandra in his book *Ecology, Myth, and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India*:

“Indian English poetry from the Northeastern part of India is rich in enshrining various aspects of the ecology of the region. It has been a fashion with the poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness (36).”

The poems of Temsula Ao are filled with elements of nature, faith, love, life, death, loneliness, desires, and confessions from interesting perspectives writing from interesting perspectives such as that of a self-made woman and a tribal. Her first book is a collection of poems published in 1988 titled *Songs That Tell*. *Songs that Tell* (1988) was followed by four other books of poems, namely, *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). In 2013, all five of her poetry books were compiled and published as *Books of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007*. In studying the poems of Temsula Ao, the study of this research paper will refer to the complied collection of books of poems i.e. *Books of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007* (2013), and not the separate collection of poems mentioned above.

We often say that literature is the mirror of society. Literature often reflects the culture of its region, its norms, mores, and values, the process of change and its impact on the people, and certain types of other social facts. The works of Temsula Ao provide a wide range of the history of the Ao-Nagas from the oral tradition till the present. Her poems and short stories show how the political underground upheavals since the 1950s, the traumatic circumstances, self-isolation, and misery created deep-rooted mental unrest among the Ao-Nagas as well as the Naga people in general. The core belief of the origin of Ao-Naga in Ao folklore maintains the belief that the ancestors of the Aos emerged out of the earth at Lungterok', which means six stones. Temsula Ao writes in her poem, —Stone-People from Lungterok from her collection of poems *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007* (2013), Lungterok:

The six Stones

Where the progenitors

And forebears

Of the stone-people

Were Born

Out of the womb

Of the earth.

...

STONE-PEOPLE

Savage and sage

Who sprang out of LUNGTEROK

Was the birth adult when the stone broke?

Or are the STONE-PEOPLE yet to come of age? (109)

According to tradition, three males and three females burst out of these six stones which were believed to be the starting of the civilization of the Ao-Nagas. This has been considered the origin of the Aos by the majority of the tribe including writers like Temsula Ao and L. Sosang Jamir. The three male stones were Longpok, Tongpok, and Longjakrep, and the three female stones were Longkakupokla, Yongmenala, and Elongsu who married the three males and settled in the first Ao settlement in Chungliyimti. B.B. Gosh the author of *Nagaland District Gazetteers: Mokokchung District* (1979) writes, “It was here that the Aos attained a remarkable achievement as an organized society, a tribe with proper village government, distribution of powers, a set of customary law to abide by, and consciousness of moral and ethical aspects of mankind”(32). It is impossible to trace down exactly when the Ao-Nagas first settled in Chungliyimti because there was no written record of any sort of time or date. Their history can only be traced to the origin myth of Lungterok. However, the myth of the Lungterok serves as the ultimate ethos of the Ao-Nagas, and the beginning of their Ao tradition. Temsula Ao called this strain of tradition the Primary Tradition.

Temsula Ao also writes about the turmoil and the terror-stricken lives of the Naga people: Nagaland’s story of the struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got rewritten into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome (Ao, *These Hills* x). All were affected by the violation of human rights which was a common occurrence. Temsula Ao writes, —For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life – their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul (Ao, *Once Upon* 180).

Kishor Kumar comments, “Major strength of her poetry lies in two features: its rootedness and its political consciousness. Nagaland in her poetry is not just a setting; it is the soul of her poems” (13). What Kumar comments on Temsula Ao may be evident as we read the following lines from her poem —*My Hills Today*:

I no longer know my hills,
The birdsong is gone,
Replaced by staccato
Of sophisticated weaponry

Because
 The very essence
 Of my hills
 Are lost
 Forever ---

(Ao, *Book of Songs* 158)

While presenting a graphic picture of the Naga society, the writings of Temsula Ao also dwell on the strength and weaknesses of the characters in her stories and the status of Naga women, her struggle with tradition and modernity, caught between the rural and the urban, thus reflective of social behaviour patterns. In her poem *Woman*, Temsula Ao writes:

But woman,
 Thus fashioned
 Thus oppressed
 Beguiled and betrayed,
 Sometimes rebelled
 To break the mould
 And shake off the hold
 That nature devised
 And man improvised.

(Ao, *Books of Songs* 17)

Though political conflicts affect *society* as a whole, women are the ones who bear the brunt of terror and domination, the terror of insurgency, and living in a patriarchal society. Jo Freeman writes in *The Politics of Women's Liberation*:

“What was thought to be a personal problem has a social cause and political situation. . . Women learn to see how social structures and attitudes have moulded them from birth and limited their opportunities”. (Qt. in Hooks 48-49)

Despite the various limitations and constraints from society and patriarchy, Temsula Ao always seems to have that boldness to express herself as a woman:

I am a woman
 And woman creates
 Therefore
 I shall create
 The real me
 And a brave new world

(Ao, *Books of Songs* 129)

All of Temsula Ao's collection of poems has the word "Songs" in their book titles. Temsula Ao sees herself as a lyricist; this is because poems are songs in the oral tradition. As such, her "songs" sing of her life, her people, and her landscape. While Temsula Ao uses prose for more direct comments on the impact of political violence, she turns to poetry to recover and connect with the old traditions or to establish continuities with the past. Through her poems, Temsula Ao sings of her different emotions and moods, filled with elements of her personal life, love, loneliness, angst, loss, desires, confessions, faith, aging, and death. Her poems, especially her early collections of poetry exhibit the technique of humour and a sense of irony. The sense of loss and loneliness in writing from interesting perspectives such as that of a self-made woman and a tribal is also undeniable. Temsula Ao uses her poetry to bridge the growing distance between human beings and nature, between her people and the past, and between the people and their connection with the land.

One consistent factor in the narrative style of Temsula Ao is its location i.e. Nagaland. Her writings are marked by the presence of nature either providing the backdrop or being of historical significance. She uses land/nature as a metaphor for her people, the exploitation by various factors to portray their deteriorating identity. She utilizes different forms of nature such as forests, trees, rivers, mountains, hills, and animals as a symbol to depict the identity of the people and also womanhood. In this, we may observe how Temsula Ao uses an eco-feminist approach to connecting women with nature which is prominently visible in works such as *Lament for Earth*. The use of pathetic fallacy – a literary term for the attribution of human emotion and conduct to things found in nature that are not human - is also employed in her narrative, for instance in the poem *An Old Tree*, wherein the tree identifies itself with an aging human being. Another trait of Temsula Ao's narrative strategy lies in her boldness and originality. Kishor Kumar comments that the strength of her writings lies in "its rootedness and its political consciousness. Nagaland in her poetry is not just a setting; it is the soul of her poems (13)".

Temsula Ao deals with recurring themes such as lamentation for the loss of their indigenous culture, traditions, beliefs, and history, those relating to women's identity in the context of patriarchy, and the theme of violence and power struggles. The appeal for identity and cultural recognition also marks a recurrent theme in her works. In this light, Temsula Ao may also be seen as a facilitator of the new generation in helping to re-imagine and realize the value of their rich oral tradition through her works. Presenting her readers with the spirit of nationalism and identity also marks one of the prominent narrative strategies which she incorporates into her writings. Temsula Ao writes that "Identities are made, un-made and re-made". (Ao, *On Being* 10)

The Ao-Naga tribe has come a long way from their world of oral traditions to the modern world. Their identity is reflected through their customs, beliefs, skills, language, rituals, architecture, music, dance, and handicrafts which have been handed down through generations in the form of oral tradition and material culture. One may question what exactly is the Ao-Naga identity and why is there a need re-imagine it. On identity, Temsula Ao writes, "For a Naga, identity is a many-layered concept" (Ao, *Identity* 6). This is because the Naga identity is based on so many factors, with each tribe having its distinct customs, language, and dress.

The new literate tradition set aside the old oral tradition preceding it. The natives, under the influence of the missionaries with their new belief system and formal education, started to replace their old traditions with new ones. In the process, vital aspects of their tribal ancestry were lost. This transition from the old to the new has been expressed elaborately by Temsula Ao in her poem —*Blood of Other Days* from *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988- 2007* (2013) capturing significant details about the transition that the Naga society has gone through. The poem provides a chronicle of the process of transition that took place in Naga history which holds significant groundings to the study of this thesis. Most of the part of this full-length poem is quoted below:

In the by-gone days of the other life
Before the advent of the WORD
Spilling the blood of foes
Was the honour-code
Head-takers became acclaimed
Tribal heroes, earning the merit
To wear special clothes and ornaments
And live in grand houses.
We believed that our gods lived
In the various forms of nature
Whom we worshipped
With unquestioning faith.
Then came a tribe of strangers
Into our primordial territories
Armed with only a Book and
Promises of a land called Heaven.
Declaring that our Trees and Mountains
Rocks and Rivers were no Gods
And that our songs and stories
Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense. (Ao, *Books of Songs* 297).

The above poem is a detailed chronicle of the transition that the Nagas have undergone since the advent of Christianity, education, and a new system of legal administration. In the above poem, Temsula Ao also points out how their connection with nature and their worship of god was considered “primitive nonsense” and that much of their old songs, stories, and “rituals were trivialized into taboo”. She also echoes on how “the spilling of blood of foes was the honor code” and “Head-takers became acclaimed tribal heroes”. Although Temsula Ao laments on the loss of various practices, one would agree that the abolition of the practice of headhunting could offer relief in today’s context. The British administrators came in with their laws and what has once been

considered trophies of victory became evidence of murder and therefore punishable. In today's world, headhunting would be against all odds when it comes to global humanity, and thus in some ways, with time, many traditional practices do die a natural death as they gradually lose their relevance and value. For instance, in the Indian context, the abolition of Sati is better and more humane for society as a whole. However, for a culture already rich with tradition, forcing a foreign belief system only result in cultural disintegration because as Temsula Ao puts it, they are only aping their manners and becoming perfect mimics:

We borrowed their minds,
Aped their manners,
Adopted their gods
And became perfect mimics (Ao, *Book of Songs* 297).

The above lines echo Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology*: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (64). It is evident that he who dominates material production controls mental production too, so here too it can be seen how the British colonizers hold the dominant political power over the Ao-Nagas thereby controlling their mental constructions. However, Terry Eagleton argues in his book *Ideology: An Introduction* (2007) that: “the other side of the story, however, is equally important. For if such dominion fails to yield its victim's sufficient gratification over an extended period, then it is certain that they will finally revolt against it” (xxiii). Mere mimicking of the ruling class resulted in an ambiguous mixture of misery; often at times, these miseries outweigh the gratifications. In such cases, the victims are more likely to revolt especially “when there is more to be gained than to be lost by such action” (xxiii). Hence, since the dominant colonial power succeeded by the Indian political power among the Nagas fails to yield “sufficient gratification” as pointed out by Terry Eagleton, what ensued was the political rise of the Naga nationalist movement.

On further probing into the Ao-Naga tradition, there is always a unique presence of nature in the form of simple backdrop scenery, or spirit and souls, which all play a vital role in their tradition. The role that nature plays for the Ao-Nagas, more so for the people of the Northeast, is noteworthy. Nature is intrinsically woven into their identities. As such, the writings of Temsula Ao also reflect nature as she writes about her tradition. In the field of literature, the relation to nature is termed eco-criticism. Eco-criticism studies the relationship between literature and the environment (Nayar 242). Temsula Ao often asserts the identity of her people through the metaphors of trees, mountains, and animals. The symbol of the mountain recurs in her poems and becomes an allegorical rendering of the glory of Ao-Nagas.

And if you fail
To find the secret
And the majestic thought
At the top of the mountain
You have climbed it in vain (Ao, *Book of Songs* 68).

For the Ao-Naga, nature is not just a source of sustenance but more of an extension of identity and roots. So, any harm to nature directly affects the question of their identity. When the Christian missionaries debunked their beliefs of worshipping the various forms of nature and that their songs and stories were “nothing but tedious primitive nonsense” (Ao, *Book of Songs* 296), ultimately it questions their identities because, for them, the spirits of the trees, rivers, and mountains held a deep connection with their ancestral roots. “In a land swept clean of ancient gods” (Ao, *Book of Songs* 297), their ancestral belief became questionable and led to distortion of identity. Adding to that, the Ao-Nagas not only refrained from worshipping nature, but nature itself was depleting as a result of the changing human activity. Disturbing the balance of nature or harming the hills ultimately becomes a threat to their identities. In the poem *Lament for Earth*, Temsula Ao laments on the once unpenetrated forest and river which abound in rich flora and fauna. But now the forest “lies silent” and the river has become muddy “choking with the remains of her sister the forest”. Temsula Ao’s poem *Lament for an Earth* reveals her lamentation over the miserable condition of our planet as a result of urbanization, modernization and industrialization. She represents nature as a living organism through the rhetorical aid of personification and feminine terms. She laments for the earth which was a “verdant”, “virgin” and “vibrant” forest once upon a time and was full of tall trees providing 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. (Ao, *Book of Songs* 44)

In the next stanza, Ao depicts the present condition of the forest which was once rich and full of luxury. Losing “splendour” it has 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. (Ao, *Book of Songs* 45)

The above lament is also found in her poem, *My Hills* where she notes the changes that occur in the hills that she calls her own.

The sound and sights

Have altered

In my hills

...

I no longer know my hills,

The birdsong is gone,

Replaced by the staccato

Of sophisticated weaponry (Ao, *Book of Songs* 157).

As seen in above, the transition from the old ways to the new is very much reflected in the poems of Temsula Ao. One may note that the gradual change from the old tradition often parallels the change in nature as well. In addition to the growing Naga population, change in the natural environment is also caused by the political upheaval that was brewing in the land since the 1950s. Therefore, to conclude, Temsula Ao, not only highlights the ecological richness of the Northeast region in her poems but also reveals the ugliness of modernization which is continuously destroying the age-old harmony between humans and nature. That’s how she tries to generate eco-consciousness and eco-sensibility among her readers. Her efforts of generating eco-consciousness among the readers are truly a ray of hope for the eco-sensitive community which always emphasizes the preservation of nature with care.

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