

# Ecofeminist Reading of TamsulaAo's Poetry

## Abstract

Ecofeminism as a theory has a common principle of female interaction with the environment as it connects the domination and exploitation of woman with the nature with the objective of establishing a non-hierarchical social structure. Nature occupies the central focus of analysis in ecofeminism which is a revolt against human domination over environment. This paper aims to study some select poems of Tamsula Ao, a major first generation Indian women poet writing in English from Nagaland in the light of ecofeminism.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Woman, Devastation, Inter-Connected.

## Introduction

A rich archive of some rare species of flora and fauna, the Northeast India comprising eight states presents a paradise of ecology and anthropological museum. Ecologically rich as it is, the literary genres from the north eastern region of India explore the flora and fauna and the mysterious ecology and expose eco-consciousness of its people and other ethnic realities. But regrettably, there is a drastic change in the demographic picture of entire North-east India as the region has been facing a rapid environmental disaster due to deforestation, excessive mining, exploration of oil or surveys of minerals, expanding human habitation, growth and expansion of urban areas at the advent of urbanization and globalization. Such rise of ecological hazards and disasters has panicked the ecologists and a band of ecology conscious poets have come up voicing their protest against the ruthless act of deforestation, oppression upon the Mother earth in very many ways. The poets for their deliberate interest in the preservation of ecology play the roles of eco-poets, eco-critics and eco-feminists. The ruthless act of deforestation and oppression of the Mother earth in very many ways have been reacted sharply upon by the poets. Among such ecologically conscious writers, Tamsula Ao occupies a prominent place as a major eco-feminist poet in the newly emerging English literature from the north east India. The aim of this paper is to discuss some select poems of Tamsula Ao from the eco-feminist standpoint. The aim is to see how the poet presents her landscape, how she relates women with the environment or ecology; is there any domination or subjugation in that interaction?

Ecofeminism is an important concept in contemporary literary criticism that speaks about female interaction with the environment. Despite various diversities amidst the ecofeminists, the common principles that unite them are the beliefs that there are important connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature, and understanding of which is crucial to feminism, environmentalism and environmental philosophy. Bina Agarwal(1997) succinctly describes four precepts in ecofeminism- firstly, ecofeminists are united in the exploration of the commonalities between gender oppression and environmental degradation caused by male dominance, secondly, men are more related to culture and that women are related to nature and that culture has been seen superior to the 'untamed' environment and so both women and nature have been subjugated by men, thirdly, oppression of women and oppression of nature have occur simultaneously and hence women have a responsibility to cease male domination over both and lastly, ecofeminism seeks to combine feminism and ecological thought as they both work towards egalitarian, non-hierarchical structures.

Women-nature connections are the backbone of ecofeminism. According to Ariel Salleh, "ecofeminism is a recent development in feminist thought which argues that the current global crisis is a predictable outcome of patriarchal culture".(Salleh 1988,130)Karen Warren speaks of different kinds of connections that ecofeminists have identified such as historical,



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conceptual, empirical, symbolic, political, theoretical, ethical etc, which are instrumental to identify the range and variety of ecofeminist positions on women-nature connections.(Warren ,1993)

The term ecofeminism was coined in France in 1974 by Francois d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. However the term did not appear in America until 1980, with Ynestra King's *The Eco-feminist imperative* (Sturgeon, 1997).The concept was however, appearing throughout the 1970's with writers like Rosemary Redford Ruether's *New Women, New Earth-Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature-the Roaring Inside her*(1978) and Carolyn Merchant's *The earth of Nature-Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1979).Though these writers were not directly associated with the term ecofeminism, yet, their adaptation of feminism was mainly rooted in the green movement of the 1970s. Karen Warren , a major exemplar of ecofeminist theory argues that the ecofeminist critique of patriarchy is grounded on the ecological principles-"everything is interconnected with everything else all parts of the ecosystem have equal value."(Warren 1993, 254)

Ecofeminism primarily focuses on the importance of living in harmony with nature. Instead of exploiting the ecosystem of the earth for our needs, we need to change our lives to live with the system. There is an implicit belief that in past days, people lived in harmony with nature. but as time passes by, the distance between mankind and nature increases at the cost of lop sided development. The exploitation continues into the present time with the mechanistic world view. According to Catherine Keller there is total lack of a holistic approach as she says, " the earth is being wasted-devastated, with a violence echoed by the crude contemporary idiom of 'waste of sucker'; it's being used up, it's profound resources squandered, and its lush abundance consumed, its complex surface worn out."(Keller, 1990, 249)

From the 1980's onwards, there has been rapid development in literary output in English language from the region, drawing the attention of national and international publishers as well as readers. The North-eastern region of India is unique in its culture and tradition, inhibited by people of variegated folklores, myths and customs and possesses rich literary traditions. The region has its dark side too. The people of this land are witnessing social alienation, identity crisis, conflicts arising from various issues related to their homelands. Thus Indian literature emerging from the North-eastern region is marked by its political nature and regional sensibility. Amidst such socio-political situation, one of the striking features of the contemporary Indian English poetry from the North-eastern region is the emergence of ecofeminist writings.

Recipient of Padmashree award in 2007 for her contribution to literature and education, Temsula Ao is a poet, short story writer and folklorist of Nagaland. Ao has carved a niche among the contemporary poets of north-east India writing in English for her collection of poetry *Songs That*

*Tell*(1988), *Songs That Try to Tell*(1992), *Songs of Many Moods*(1995) and *Songs from here and there* (2003) which established her as a major voice in Indian English literature from North east India. The selected poems for the present study are mainly related to ecology, environment, profound serenity in nature, rich biodiversity and ecological erosion because it is through these poems, the poet has been celebrating the ecological glory of her land with a keen ecological concerns and awareness indicating human oppression on the ecology that threatens the future of the beautiful region. The cultural and physical ecology of Nagaland finds expression in her poems. Ao has etched her bio-regional narratives voicing her ecofeminist humanism.

Ao has traced the conceptual connections of ecofeminism in her poem "Distance" which locates the conceptual basis of the twin dominations of women and nature in value dualisms. The poem pictures the parallel distance that prevails between men and women which cannot be equal at any point:

Distance is what can't not meet.  
Fathers and sons  
Antagonists and intolerant  
Struggling for supremacy over an earth  
Both want to straddle.

("Distance", STT,17)

These lines accounts how in patriarchal conceptual framework 'antagonist' and 'intolerant' fathers and sons who comprise male domain, are aspiring to conquer and establish their supremacy over the earth. The poet asserts that relationship between male and female is same as the relationship between the earth and the sky. These lines speak ecofeminist point of view that explains and justifies relationship of domination and subordination.

The injustice meted out to women since time immemorial by various agencies has sharply been reacted upon by Temsula Ao. The conditions imposed upon her by nature, time, man and religion have been referred in the poem "Woman" which echoes her ecofeminist standpoint:

Nature fashioned her thus

.....

Timeless dominion. (STT,22)

Ao portrays insignificance and self-effacement to illustrate the submissive nature of woman. In the male-dominated society, the charm of a woman lies in her inability or unwillingness to protest and vociferously demand her rights. In the first stanza of the poem, though a protest is not made in so many ways, the tone suggests that the insignificant position is not the happiest for woman. As a woman writer, her opinions about life grow out of an observation of that area of experience which is most accessible to her. Woman's service to those she loves is unrestrained, given without hope of any reward. She is able to offer herself most selflessly, because she has trained herself to have no expectations. A sense of great suffering, borne without compliant and without hope of succor is found in this stanza. The woman performs what is considered her duty until her last breath. She is always the background, never considered worthy of notice or concern even though

she is born "to bear the burden, to hold the seed and feed every other needs but hers." There is a sentiment of regret at the fact that man establishes "a timeless dominion" over woman. Thus the poet seems to protest the unfairness of society's expectation which only looks at the woman in the role which, through compulsion and habit, she performs best.

Temsula Ao protests strongly against the destruction of nature and erosion of nature's riches in every respect. Destructions of nature's treasures, changing of nature's course to modern men's excessive greed and luxury are some of the important themes in the poem "Lament for the Earth." The north east India is a store house of natural beauty, rich natural resources and biodiversity. Nagaland, being its part is rich in evergreen nature. The flora and fauna of her homeland always beckons Ao and she feels pain at heart when she witnesses the ruthless act of deforestation. Ao expresses her grief:

Alas for the forest  
Which now lies silent  
Stunned and stumped  
With the evidence  
Of her rape.  
As on her breasts  
The elephants trample  
The lorries rumble  
Loaded with treasures  
Bound for the mills  
At the foothills.

("Lament for the Earth", STT, 45)

Ao reveals how with the advent of progress and influences of modernization, holistic approaches changed. The poet shows how the green forest, once "verdant, 'virgin', 'vibrant with majestic tall trees', has now almost been denuded. Sweet chirping of birds is heard no more. Ao protests against such ruthless destructive mood of man and also the extraction of nature's resources from the bosom of the earth in the name of industrialization. After the trampling of the elephant and the rumbling of the lorries on her breasts, the earth lies 'silent', 'stumped', and 'stunned'. The secrets of the earth are exploited and violated. This stanza links violence towards women with violence towards the nature. There is an implicit sense that men are gradually separated themselves from nature and have contrived to widen the gap through further development. So men folk never hesitate to load their lorries "with her treasure/bound for the mills." Men have thus devalued nature and the natural treasures. The dominant patriarchal view holds that women, too, are created for the consumption of men. A remark of Plant makes the point more clear:

We have painfully seen that it is the same attitude that allows violence towards us that also justifies the rape of the earth. Literally, the image are the same. We also know that we just are capable, generally speaking, of enacting the same kind of behaviors. (Plant: 1990, 159)

The image of earth, in the poem, is of devastation on a tragic level. A mood, similar to the first stanza also prevails in the last stanza. The earth is seen in an ugly and weak appearance unable to bear the severe pain as in her the "evidence of rape" is still apparent:

Alas for this earth  
Thus ravaged  
Stripped of her lushness  
And her sap  
Her countenance  
Furrowed and damaged  
Like a fading beauty  
Touched by age  
.....  
Leaving her  
Old and decrepit  
Before her time. (Ibidem)

The lushness, sap and beauty of the earth have been wasted. Thus all pervading perversion and disappointment find expression in each line of the poem. Ao takes an ecofeminist stand point to describe the rape of virgin earth and for her, there is no other way than to lament the miserable fate of the earth.

A lover of ecology, Ao is a river poet. She describes a odd looking river which has lost its natural beauty:

Cry, for the river  
Muddy, misshapen  
Grotesque  
Choking with the remains  
Of her sister  
The forest.  
No life in her belly now  
The bomb  
And the bleaching powder  
Have left her with no tomorrow.

("River", STT, 46)

Such a pathetic scene depicting the environmental degradation, the poet tries to make the reader conscious about man's hostile and careless approach towards nature. The river once was following with "sweet gurgling sound with little fishes/growing big" (Ibidem) on her bosom. Sometimes the deer while tired and thirsty was taking rest for a while, "lapping each crystal mouthful/as though it was honey" (Ibidem). That was time when all lived together in harmony and happy mood. But waters of the river no longer splash. The poet feels that man's ties with the nature now are at the point of crisis. As a chronicler of her time, Ao also expresses her anxiety over the terror-stricken atmosphere in her land. The exploitations, the bombs, huge quantities of poisonous industrial and municipal wastes as a result of urbanization and increase of disproportionate population and chemical pesticides like bleaching powder- all are manifestation of what amounts to human self worship. The poet mops at the present corporal change of the beautiful river. The last line of the stanza focuses on future. Once the water of the river is poisoned, its natural beauty is destroyed and the treasure of the river is all used up thoughtlessly, there will remain nothing of her for future generations.

In the poem, "Earthquake", Tamsila Ao discovers an affinity between earthquake and pregnant woman:

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.

.....  
And after her fearsome furore  
Is registered  
On the Richter scale  
She subsides  
Like a hysterical female.

("Earthquake", STOS, 14)

The poet presents man-nature relationship between man and woman as the earth is presented here as a frenzied woman. The fury of the earth can damage and cause hazards to the environment as she "heaves and hurtles/as if to uproot the very moorings of life". (Ibidem) The poet's uses of language in the poem deserves attention. She uses similes, "Like a pregnant woman", "she subside like a hysterical female" to present the earth's feminine look. The poet visualizes that the earth with her shocking contrasts of anger and restlessness, otherwise calm and composed, leaves "mortal man"-her lover in a awkward situation. Although in the last four lines, domination of the earth has not firmly crystallized, yet the total effect being that of a perception of the suffering and inferiorisation of both woman and the earth is found in the whole poem.

The poet satirizes the Japanese art of dwarfing trees in "Bonsai":

Giant trees  
Stunned by men's ingenuity  
in search of new beauty  
Orchards  
Reduced to produce  
Only atrophies of fruits  
Earth's vastness  
Diminished and displayed  
In tiny potted space.

("Bonsai", SSTOS, 17)

Preventing the natural growth of trees only for the sake of new beauty is one of the favorite pastimes of modern people specially the city dwellers. The poet mocks at this hobby and at the same time denies appreciating this kind of skill that does not reflect the warmth and enthusiasm towards nature. In this unsavory act, the trees are misshapen and bestowed with an altered look. They are no more the trees that supply food, provide shelter and maintain ecological balance as they influence the wind, temperature, humidity, soil and water. Instead they yield atrophied fruits as a result of their low productive capacity. Her criticism of the selfishness of man is bitter when she ridicules man's adherence to the moods and fashions of the modern artificial world as it

"diminishes the vastness of the earth/displayed in tiny potted space". (Ibidem) She pleads for freedom of the "giant trees" to grow naturally which have been suppressed by man's unintelligible cleverness and impulses.

In the poem "My Hills" the poet reminisces her surrounding hills as the transition of environmental condition over the years has made Ao quite unhappy. She has been nostalgic of the early days of her life when she was overjoyed with the natural environment. In the poem "My Hills" the poet reminisces her surrounding hills:

The sound and sights  
Have altered in my hillss  
Once they hummed  
With bird song  
And happy gurgling brooks  
Like running silver  
With shoals of many fish  
The trees were many  
Happy, verdant, green  
The seasons playing magic  
On their many splendoured sheen. ("My Hills," SOMM, 48)

The above first two lines remind the poet of the changing, unfamiliar atmosphere of her hills. The Naga people regard hills and mountains as their ancestors. In a retrospective mood, then, she describes the old glory of the hills. She wishes to live her whole life in such pleasant atmosphere in nature, but the realization that this kind of carefree life amidst "happy, gurgling brooks", "shools of many fish", "happy, verdant, green lives" will not continue forever, makes her heartbroken. In a dejected mood she complains:

But today  
I no longer know my hills  
The bird song is gone  
Replaced by the staccato  
Of sophisticated weaponry. (Ibidem)

Here the poet highlights the sensitive problem of Nagaland.. The north eastern region of India has been one of the most continuously militarized regions of India since Independence. Sustained violence and conflict have become a part of Naga society. In situation of armed conflict or what has been called low intensity war-fare, it is the vulnerability of the women that is multiplied hundred folds. Each day becomes a struggle for survival against tremendous odds. The loss that women face in times of conflict is not just emotional or physical in terms of losing a loved one, but also transfers into the economic and social spheres. The poet, as a woman, feels apprehension for the safety of herself and her hills, as the sweet birds songs are "replaced by staccato of sophisticated weaponry." Ao focuses her vision on the uncertain future which might not be safe and favourable for her. The common problem of economic underdevelopment, exploitation of natural resources and changing demographic profiles in her homeland have provided fertile ground for the growth of local militaries. Instead of ignoring such ground realities, Ao presents herself as an ecologically conscious poet who exposes the degradation of

nature and her sufferings. The poem accentuates the predicament of the poet grappling with some of the psychological, social, and environmental difficulties of present day life opposed to a glorious past.

### Conclusion

The quest for roots, a trend of post colonial literature has uniquely reflected in Northeast Indian English poetry with a reflection of ecological consciousness in a major quantum. In the present study of select poems of Temsula Ao, its significance has been highly realized. Ecological degradation has been a common phenomenon all over India since long. But if we look at the main stream Indian poets, only poets like K.N. Daruwalla, A. K. Ramanujan etc. can be traced who have some momentary poetic impressions exposing the ecological concerns. Though North east India has a unique status of biodiversity hotspot, the region has faced the ecological imbalance at a rapid pace. The ecological concern of the poets of the region is thus unique. This canonical approach is really a praiseworthy venture and it contributes to a great extent, to the contemporary praxis of theory and its reflection in the post colonial writing. Temsula Ao is talking about the close relationship between the domination of nature and herself, a woman through her poems. Glorification of nature on one hand and protest against the exploitation of the earth on the other hand, in varying forms and degrees, sometimes separate, sometimes appearing together are innate part of her ecologically conscious and ecofeminist outlook which is evident in her poems. Ao's achievement as a major Indian eco feminist poet from the northeast region begins to take shape from her concerns in her choice of a subject. For her subjects, she chooses the experiences of women and degraded environment in every sphere. Contending with certain old beliefs, Ao depicts the position of women in some selected poems that reveals the twin domination of nature and women. Seeing herself as a woman, writing about women's experience of nature from a perspective of womanhood and the experiences of devaluation and exploitation of both women and nature, this study concludes that ecological concerns surface prominently in her writings and that she finds her poems a suitable medium to create awareness against the dangers of environmental degradation. Through her poems, Ao focuses on the importance of saving trees, not only for its sacredness but also as it is necessary for the survival of people especially for the future generations. Hence, as an ecofeminist poet, Temsula Ao makes awareness that the earth must be valued because people are dependent upon the earth for life.

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