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## **Assessing Many Layers of Interconnection: An Ecofeminist Reading of Nature and Women in Temsula Ao's Poetry**

### **Abstract**

Ecofeminism, as an academic discipline, results from the intersection of myriad forms of feminist and environmental studies. It claims that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are inherently bound up with the notions and workings of class, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism which result from the patriarchal order of society. In Indian English Literature, plenty of evidences of the simultaneous subjugation of women and the oppression of nature can be found. This paper seeks to analyse the poems of Temsula Ao from an ecofeminist perspective. Temsula Ao, a formidable poetic voice from the North- East India , expresses her concern over the gradual degradation of the natural surroundings of the North- East India and the cultural transformation taking place in the region. The longstanding insurgency, which has posed a serious threat at the counterbalance of the region, remains one of the most important issues undertaken by the writers emerging from the North- East India. Temsula Ao, whose poems attest to the authenticity of the experience of local inhabitants under the threats of violence due to the longstanding insurgency, unearths both the devastation of the natural world and the subjugation of the women due to the impact of insurgency.

**Keywords: ecofeminism, North- East India, insurgency, violence, nature, culture, women**

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the intersection of myriad forms of feminist and environmental activities. The term 'ecofeminism' was first coined by the French radical feminist Françoise d' Eaubonne in 1974 to synthesize apparently two separate movements: ecology and feminism. It claims that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are inherently bound up with the notions and workings of class, race,

colonialism and neo-colonialism which result from the patriarchal order of society. Ecofeminism tends to challenge structures of patriarchy rather than individuals. It seeks to study how the workings of western patriarchy have resulted in the twin subjugation of women and nature. It confronts systems of patriarchy and studies and analyses the different elements that perpetuate and legitimise the oppression of women, nature, animals, people of different race, colour who are labelled as 'other' in the discourse of a society which is controlled by the patriarchal hegemony of power. Karen J. Warren in her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy* says:

According to Ecofeminists, trees, water, food production, animals, toxins, and more generally, naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nonhuman nature) are feminist issues, because understanding them helps one understand the interconnections among the dominations of women and other subordinated groups of humans ("other human Others"), on the one hand, and the domination of nonhuman nature, on the other hand. (1-2)

Ecofeminism advocates the active agency of women's movement against all forms of oppression including the environmental degradation. Their basic claim is that if the present order of society, which is based on the subjugation of woman, is not changed, all forms of oppression will continue to be practised. So, to end all forms of oppression, the oppression of women must be stopped first. Ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether in her book *New Woman, New Earth* says:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this society. (204)

Though all ecofeminists agree that there are important connections between the unjustified domination of women and nature, the different strands of ecofeminism seem to differ with each other in regard to their opinion about the nature of such connection. Thus, the umbrella term 'ecofeminism' connotes a plurality of positions, some of which are mutually compatible and some of which are not. Karen J. Warren in her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy* deduces ten such type of connections between women- other human Others- and nature - historical, conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic and literary, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political and ethical.

Though ecofeminism as an academic discipline started in the West, a look at some of the postcolonial countries such as Africa or South Asia, particularly India, reveals that these nations have had a history of environmental activism and movements even before ecofeminism emerged as an academic discipline in the Western world. The Chipko ('chipko' in Hindi means 'to embrace' or hug) movement in India saved 12,000 square kilometres of sensitive land. The 'Chipko' movement – a women initiated ecological movement is both about trees and women. Even before the 'Chipko' movement, India had witnessed the struggles of women to save nature. In more recent times, other Indian women who have led

environmental causes and movements are Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, C.K. Janu and Mamang Dai.

Although ecofeminists believe that women in general share a special bond with nature because of their special connection with it, the relation between women and nature varies to some extent from one region to another. For the Third World women, Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* says:

Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically , but also through their social roles in providing sustenance. All ecological societies of forest-dwellers and peasants , whose life is organised on the principle of sustainability and the reproduction of life in all its richness. (41)

What Shiva said about the Third World women in general could specifically be said about the women of the North-East India as they have a day to day interaction with nature and environment and their livelihood is directly linked with it. In the poems of the women poets of the North-East India this inseparable connection of women with nature is evident.

Indian writing in English from the North-East region of India, which has a distinct trend, a set of distinct concepts and techniques, is over five decades old. The seven provinces, (excluding Sikkim) popularly known as ‘seven sisters’, have their own literary tradition, distinct from one another, hence falsifying any approach of homogeneity. But a slanting glance at the literary history of North- East India in general reveals that the literatures of most of the provinces of North- East were basically oral literature for many years until the Roman script was adopted as the script for the Tribal Literatures. Notably, the writing in English which developed during the colonial period in other provinces of India could not develop in the North- East. The first Indian writing in English from this region to introduce the cultural and ethno-ecological riches of the North- Eastern provinces to the outside world is Hem Barua’s *The Red River and the Blue Hill* (1954). So, the writers to produce literature in English began to write only after the 1950s and the tempo of writing in English has gathered momentum after the 1990s. Significantly, most of the writings after the 1950s express the concern of the common populace of the region over the longstanding insurgency in the region, which is one of the most haunting agents of unrest and threats of corporeal violence that looms large over the general course of daily life. Established writers like Bhupati Das, Temsula Ao, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Lakshahira Das, Dayananda Pathak, Mamang Dai, R. K. Madhubir, Mitra Phukan, Easterine Iralu, Homen Borgohain, Nirupama borgohain, Dhruva Hazarika, Siddhartha Deb, Arup Kumar Dutta, Sanjoy Hazarika, Umakanta Sarma, Esther Syiem, Indira Goswami, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Ratan Thiyam, Arun Sarma, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, Nilakshi Borgohain, A. J. Sebastian, Rajendra Bhandari and Bhaskar Roy Barman have made valuable contribution to the literary output of the region.

Temsula Ao, a formidable poetic voice from the North- East India , expresses her concern over the gradual degradation of the natural surroundings of the North- East India and the

cultural transformation taking place in the region. The longstanding insurgency, which has posed a serious threat at the counterbalance of the region, remains one of the most important issues undertaken by the writers emerging from the North- East India. Ao, whose poems attest to the authenticity of the experience of the local inhabitants under the threats of violence due to the longstanding insurgency, unearths both the devastation of the natural world and the subjugation of the women in the patriarchal society. The poems of Ao echo the feminine sensibility over the conflict-torn region of North-East India and expose the threat upheld by the violence of insurgency at the ecological sustainability of the region. The attempt to understand the predicament of women caught in the turmoil of insurgency in the North-East region alongside the devastation of the natural world would require a sensitive approach and a deliberately careful study of the complex and subtle nuances of their troubled identity and existence which is almost always hushed by explicit gory details of the insurgency. The North-East Indian society is not really known to be stained with the evil practise of the devaluation of women and of favouring men only. Unlike most of the other regions of the country, most parts of the North- East India doesn't have a tradition of an inherently patriarchal society, where women are ranked as second class citizens, or to put it even more properly, the norms of patriarchy in the North- East Indian regions were not based upon a demoralization of the female or the feminine values as it is practised in most other places of the country. It has been mostly in the past few decades, owing allegiance to the armed conflicts, that women have been subjected to sheer violence perpetrated by both the armed rebels fighting against the Indian state as well as by the state's armed machinery. Instances of rape, physical violence, mutilation of the bodies have become known phenomena now as a result of the lasciviousness and brutality of the insurgent groups.

The insurgency which has literally tore apart the peaceful cocoon of the serene environment of the North- East Indian regions also demands an insider's view to understand its roots. The existence of multi-ethnic tribes with their heritage of folk-tales and oral wisdom, have always had a sense of alienation from the mainland of India, which resulted in their vociferous claim to have a different legislation of their own. This claim led to an internal turmoil within the states of North- East India and the lack of sufficient analysis and communication between the region and Centre led it to take the form of active armed conflict and violent insurgency that remains unsolved since 1950s. At the same time, the seven states of North- East India, comprising of various indigenous tribes with their own multi- ethnic values, lacking in any sense of homogeneity, also witnessed continuous factional disputes resulting from internal conflict among the states and tribes which worsened the situation. The insurgency, which has posed a serious threat at the ecological stability of North-East India, remains the same force which has been responsible for the defilement of women in the society on a larger scale. Temsula Ao , the winner of Sahitya Akademi Award, takes us to the secluded sphere of North-East Indian womens' unique sensibility to nature. Her poetical works attest to the deplorable condition the women and the crumbling of the ecological balance of North- East India due to the lasciviousness of the male hegemony of power. In her writings, the rich natural world becomes an external corollary to the internal sensibilities of women. Her poems attest to the close affinity between women and nature, a kind of relation that defines the women of this region and one which is almost always advocated by the

theorists of ecofeminism. Simultaneously, it foregrounds the twin exploitation of nature and women due to the workings of the insurgent groups.

Temsula Ao, whose poems attest to the authenticity of the experience of local inhabitants under the threats of violence due to the longstanding insurgency, unearths both the devastation of the natural world and the subjugation of the women. Ao in her poems repeatedly uses the words and images of rape and virginity to draw an analogy between the condition of women and nature. This usage conforms to the accepted cultural norms of the anthropocentric society through which nature is always defined in feminine terms. By drawing this analogy between the condition of women and nature, she poses a scathing criticism of the defilement of both women and nature. Such images of rape and virginity refer to the claims of cultural and spiritual ecofeminism. Although some ecofeminists consider the hegemonic association of women with nature as a source of oppression and devaluation of women's unique womanly qualities, the other groups of ecofeminists regard this imposed connection between women and nature as a ground of empowerment for women. Women, as some ecofeminists believe, have a distinguished relationship with nature because of some of their identical qualities which, to some extent at least, endow them with a powerful agency. Ao, a sensitive ecologist that she is, uses these claims of essential ecofeminism to draw an analogy between women and nature, where the pitiful condition of one becomes the reflection of the degrading status of the other in the patriarchal society.

“Lament for an Earth” is a poem where Ao literally voices forth her lament over the loss of a rich natural world due to the causes of war and modernization.

Once upon an earth  
 There was a forest  
 Verdant, virgin, vibrant  
 With tall trees  
 In majestic splendour (1-5)

Ao expresses her anguish over the destruction of the natural world as a result of the workings of the mechanisms of modernization and insurgency. The forest, once rich in its ‘splendour’, has now turned into a barren place. She continues to lament:

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

The bombing, an offspring of the Nagaland insurgency has absolutely ravaged the place and wrecked its serenity. The debris of mankind has now choked the flow of the river. The forest and the river, that once used to sustain life, now hold the remnants of destruction. They seem to share a bond of sisterhood and are both left barren and ravaged. Interestingly, Ao refers to both the natural periphery in feminine terms, and the destruction and ravaging of the earth, the river and the forest is repeatedly being analogised with the ravaging of a helpless girl. Her lamentation thus continues in her poem:

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

The poem, going beyond the boundaries of the regions of North- East India , echoes the universal concern of ecologists all over South Asia and the world over the rapid acceleration of the destruction of forest and ecological wealth. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* talks about the rampant destruction of forests and pollution of water, and soil:

In 1950, just over 100 million hectares of forests had been cleared—by 1975, this figure had more than doubled. During 1950-1975, at least 120 million hectares of tropical forests were destroyed in South and Southeast Asia alone; by the end of the century, another 270 million hectares could be eliminated. (Intro xii-xiii)

In the poem “Requiem”, Ao refers to the remnants of the lifeless body of a woman who had been tortured brutally by her husband. Ao’s reference to the remains of “a recent blushing bride” (4) as a lump of “blackened mass” and “charred carcass” has strong ecofeminist and speciesist overtones . It also alludes to the dichotomy between the sphere of the mind and body which creates the hierarchy of power in a society, aligning the men to the domain of the mind and, thus stressing their superiority over women, who are aligned with the domain of the body and thus, regarded as inferior to men. Historically, women have been defined by their ‘biological potentiality’ and their child bearing capacity has worked against them by confining them to the sum of their child-bearing parts. The female body, as a site of oppression, has always been the means by which patriarchy exerts control over women. In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* , Katie Conboy writes : “Just

as man's civilizing impetus transgress wildlife, land and vegetation into territories to tame and control, so too does it render woman a form of nature to apprehend , dominate and defeat." (50)

What makes Ao's poem more striking is the burned flesh of the bride which is also compared to the images of meat which can be cooked and consumed, once again, served to satiate the hunger of the male. This image of the woman as that of an edible and consumable commodity and the man as the hunter is further appropriated by Ao in the next few lines ,

Who will mourn?

Certainly not he

The recent widower

The hunter, the trapper

Who uses vermilion

As the bait. (22-27)

This image of the woman as a helpless prey and the man as the hunter with the vermilion as the bait is very significant and has strong ecofeminist and specieist overtones. The hegemonic prevalence of male superiority in the androcentric society justifies this hierarchical relationship between man with women and the non-human world, both of which are rendered as the 'other', dominated and exploited by men for their own betterment. Ecofeminism seeks to dismantle the base of this unequal relation between man and the 'other' and advocates the establishment of a society based on equality between people of different race, class, gender and the non-human world.

"Blessings" is another poem by Ao where she criticizes the notions of progress and development which is based on the unjustified utilisation of natural wealth. She thinks the poor are blessed:

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. (3-10)

These lines significantly refer to the monopolization of wealth to a reserved section of the society which creates the hierarchical division between the rich and poor, a diminishing of which remains an important goal of the ecofeminists. “The granaries of the earth” (10) refers to the natural wealth which is mostly consumed and utilised by the richer section of the society.

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

The above lines are a strong reminder of the torture on nature. In the poem she refers to all the marginal people who are barred from an entry to the “Kingdom that never was” (37) and claims that this false kingdom of civilization is based on lies, biased notions of humanity and civilization- a celebration of the marginal people for whom ecofeminism always raises its voice.

Almost the same note of criticism rings in “To The Children of the World”, where Ao regrets the lack of an answer to the future generation about the devastation of the world in which they are born. This poem rings of her maternal concerns for the future of Nagaland. Being the giver of life and the nurturer of it, women are supposed to bequeath a world full of new promises and happiness to the new generations, but unfortunately, the calamitous deterioration of the serenity of life of the region handicaps a woman from doing so. So, this poem rings of Ao’s disappointment over the previous generations for failing to maintain the essence of serenity and peace that life used to exhibit, and the impact of civilization, constant strife, militancy that have made life rather unbearable in the serene mountains of North-East:

Just one advice-  
 Never ask  
 Why you were born  
 Some of you were born  
 To inherit  
 The plunder of the ages (3-8)

“A Strange Place”, another poem by Ao, becomes a strong criticism of the national policies and men’s ceaseless competing after power at the cost of the destruction of the ecological balance of different bioregions of different places. A poignant criticism of the national policies can easily be discerned in the following lines:

This is a place where  
 Nations vie

For mastery of the skies  
 Unheeding to the cries  
 Of birds  
 Drowned  
 In the whirr of jets  
 Travelling  
 Faster than sound (5-13)

The lines show a strong contrast between the serenity that the North- East region engulfs and the working of the man-made mechanisms of power that drowns the serenity of the natural surrounding under its loud bang. The same poem also criticises the divide between the rich and poor , co-existing, yet:

Each insulated  
 Against the other  
 By self – imposed exile  
 The one from choice  
 The other by force  
 Of sheer existence. (35-40)

This sensitivity over the division of power between the poor and the rich by “A berlin wall” (29) echoes the universal sensibility of the dalits and marginalised who are segregated and denied an access to the reserved section of the society, which again, conforms to the divisions among people in society based on shades of colour, race, gender and economical wealth (against which ecofeminism always raises its voice). So, like a true ecofeminist, Temsula Ao’s poems echo the plight of the destitute, the marginal, the women and most importantly, raises voice for the balance of the ecology of the North-East India , which is at stake at the wake of civilization and the practise of militarization for a long time.

In “Woman”, Temsula Ao once again strikes the same dualities that is claimed to be created by Nature. The quality of nurturance and the activities related to the body of a woman, i.e. childbirth , childbearing keep her closer to nature, or at least this is the claim of the patriarchal society. They are meant:

To bear the burden  
 To hold the seed  
 And feed

Every other need

But hers. (2-6)

What makes Ao's poem interesting is her claim that "Time perpetuated her assignment / And custom prevailed (7-8).

While the "convenient mould" of mother and lover helps men to appropriate their claims over her, it also makes her the perfect 'other' under the mould, which denies any identity of her own. The relation between nature and woman is rather adverse in the poem- within the constraints of cultural construct, the qualities of care and nurturing make the woman fall prey to that culture. So, in the context of the poem, Nature becomes the bidding force for women, the gifts of Nature makes her vulnerable to the cultural constructs, which is created and perpetuated by men. The relation between Nature and woman in the poem is rather problematic, where the woman serves as nurturer, to "hold the seed" (3) – which connects her to the life-giving quality of nature, but this quality "That Nature devised" (28) was improvised by men to define her according to the code of the male-centred society, to appropriate her to the needs of the society, which is basically based on the sole purpose of the fulfilment of the desires of the men only.

Another intriguing imagery is the reference to the "beast of burden" (20) - an analogy between the woman and the beast, who, in this male-oriented discourse of the society, somewhere shares the same essence of being passively used and exploited at the hands of the men

The poem "My Last Song" speaks of the sensibility of a woman brought up in close proximity with nature. All the images of nature, all the beautiful elements of life have special appeal to her. The rich sensibilities echo the beautiful ecological surrounding of her region too:

If a rainbow

Goes unseen

If a raindrop

Falls unfelt

By me,

And if

The colours on flower

And the twitter in feathers

Do not touch me,

I will have sung

### My last song. (12-22)

The poem unfolds the sensibility of Ao as a woman over the rich natural surrounding which defines her identity. Each and every single element of nature in this world become a part of her psyche and a faint suggestion of her alienation from these natural elements seem to suggest the end of her 'songs' too.

"Bonsai" is another poem which shows the controlling power of man to diminish and control nature to produce artificial beauty only. "Giant trees" (1) are being "stunted by man's ingenuity/ In search of new beauty" (2-3). The modernization and globalisation has changed man's concept of beauty and has led him to change the natural course of the trees and stunt its growth and bring out an artificial effect. It shows man's effort to dominate nature and commercialize it. The "tiny potted space" (9) symbolically refers to the confinement of modern existence, cut off from the vastness of natural life and thus exhibiting a total lack of true connection with the natural world.

The collection of poems *Songs That Tell* and *Songs That Try to Say* becomes a saga of a woman poet's anguish over the gradual degradation of the rich natural world due to the slow encroachment of modernity and insurgency in the North-East regions of India. It shows Ao's concern over the defilement of nature and at the same time demonstrates the connection between women and nature. The overtones of ecofeminism are heard in most of the poems of the collection. The poems also cater to the study of the indigenous culture and traditions which is almost always ignored in the discussions about the details of violence and insurgency by the mainstream Indian fraternity.

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