



Foreshadowing Naturalism: An Exploration of Realism and Naturalism in The Poetry of Tamsula Ao

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ABSTRACT

The literature of India's Northeast occupies a distinctive position within Indian writing in English because it emerges from indigenous cultural traditions while also engaging deeply with the broader genre of nature writing. Though the critical terms "realism" and "naturalism" are often associated with twentieth-century literary movements, their essential concerns faithful representation of life, close attention to environment, and the shaping influence of nature on human existence have long been integral to Indian literature. Nowhere is this more evident than in the literature of the Northeast, where oral traditions, folklore, and lived experiences of close interaction with nature have shaped literary expression for centuries.

Within this context, Tamsula Ao stands out as one of the most significant nature-conscious voices from the Northeast. As a prominent writer from Nagaland, she occupies an important place in modern Indian literature. A retired professor of English from North-Eastern Hill University, Ao is a poet, short story writer, and ethnographer whose creative and scholarly works seek to bring the cultural wealth of the Northeast into national literary discourse. Her writing reflects a deep engagement with the land, history, and traditions of the Ao Naga community, while also addressing universal human concerns.

This research paper seeks to explore Tamsula Ao's poetry as a powerful embodiment of realism and naturalism. In her poems, nature is not merely a scenic backdrop but a living presence that shapes human identity, memory, and moral consciousness. Ao presents the natural richness of the Northeastern landscape its hills, forests, rivers, and rhythms of life with vivid realism, drawing on the sensory and emotional depth of lived experience. At the same time, her work exposes the darker realities brought about by modernization, such as environmental destruction, cultural erosion, and the breakdown of the harmonious relationship between human beings and nature.

Keywords: *Realism And Naturalism, Environmental Consciousness, Cultural Wealth, Tamsula Ao.*

1. Introduction

Temsula Ao (1945–2022) created a groundbreaking poetry voice that eschewed literary aesthetics in favor of reality and naturalism as manifestations of cultural and ecological responsibility. Her unique role as a visionary poet and Ao Naga ethnographer allowed her to blend lyrical expression with anthropological accuracy, turning her poetry into living archives of indigenous environmental knowledge. Throughout the course of three decades and six poetry books, Ao chronicled Northeast India's biodiversity while critically analyzing the forces that endanger its survival, such as extractive capitalism and military. As sustainable solutions for the Anthropocene, Naga cosmological frameworks are highlighted in her poetic work.

The study also looks at how Ao's ethnographic discipline, which has its roots in indigenous traditions, influenced a literary practice that serves as cultural memory, ethno biological discourse, and environmental resistance all at once. Ao's dual status as a scholar and cultural insider gives rise to her realism and naturalism. The *Lijaba* cosmogony, which attributes Nagaland's untamed terrain to the creator deity's deliberate design, is one of the oral traditions of the Ao Naga that she actively worked to preserve while serving as the director of the North East Zone Cultural Centre. This cosmology views the natural landscape as sacred and intentional rather than accidental, a view that profoundly influences Ao's creative imagination.

Temsula Ao's poetry accomplishes two goals: In the context of current environmental discourse, it both revitalizes and preserves traditional ecological knowledge. She urges readers to rethink nature as an active moral and cultural force rather than as a static entity. Ao's lyrical ethnobiology provides an essential counter-narrative in an era of ecological crisis, one in which plants are essential to a moral ecology, land is sacred, and all share resources.

2. Contextual of the Study

In the poetry of Northeast Indian poets, especially those from tribal tribes, nature is not a passive background but a living, breathing entity that is personified, worshipped, and grieved when it is damaged. Both naturalism and realism are literary philosophies that stress the environment as an active character in stories and draw attention to the moral, cultural, and political ramifications of human interaction with the natural world.

In Northeast India, where indigenous populations have long coexisted harmoniously with nature, ecological concerns are addressed via lived experiences rather than theoretical abstractions. Indigenous cosmologies, where rivers, hills, forests, animals, and plants have spiritual meaning and are fundamental components of cultural identity, are reflected in poetic depictions.

Poet and folklorist Temsula Ao from Nagaland presents an engaging ecocritical viewpoint in her poetry. Her poetry regularly discusses environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and deforestation, presenting these issues as instances of gendered violence and cultural erasure. As an ethnographer, Ao consciously draws upon the oral traditions, myths, and collective memories of her Ao Naga community. This grounding in indigenous knowledge systems lends authenticity and depth to her poetry, allowing her to record a way of life that is increasingly under threat. Through this blending of realism, naturalism, and oral tradition, Ao captures the tension between tradition and change, continuity and loss.

Temsula Ao can thus be regarded as an environmentalist writer in a literary sense. Her poems give voice to the cultural transformation and environmental degradation taking place in the Northeast, urging readers to recognize the cost of unthinking modernization. By foregrounding the interconnectedness of humans and nature, her work fosters ecological awareness and sensitivity. Ultimately, Ao's poetry not only preserves the cultural and environmental heritage of the Northeast but also challenges readers to reflect on their responsibility toward nature and indigenous cultures in a rapidly changing world.

3. Rational of the Study

Temsula Ao's poetry frequently gives voice to the non-human, highlighting indigenous customs that preserve biodiversity via cultural discipline and fusing ethical agency with vegetative silence. The notion of reciprocity, which has its roots in Naga customs, emphasizes the fair division of resources and labor, driven by societal harmony and mutual duty. As a result, her poetry serves as both a record of sustainable living and evidence of the ecological knowledge inherent in traditional lifestyles.

Temsula Ao's dual role as a scholar and cultural insider gives rise to her environmental vision. The Lijaba cosmogony, which explains how Nagaland's untamed landscape was formed, is one of the oral traditions that Ao Naga actively sought to preserve while serving as the director of the North East Zone Cultural Center. The idea that the land is sacred and purposeful rather than accidental is established by this belief, which holds that the creator deity Lijaba purposefully shaped the hills and forests. The basis of Ao's poetic imagination is this perception of the landscape as purposeful and spiritually charged.

Temsula Ao creates a poetic tapestry of indigenous cosmology, ecological wisdom, and cultural memory. Her poems show a deep connection to the land and its spiritual, communal, and vegetal value; they are frequently organized around ethnobotanical knowledge that is essential to Naga culture. The poems collectively create a cohesive ethno biological framework where ecological sustainability is a lived practice influenced by myth, ritual, and collective values rather than an abstract idea.

In addition to preserving traditional ecological knowledge, Ao's poetry reintroduces it into current environmental discourse. Her writings inspire readers to view nature as a moral, cultural, and living presence rather than as inert matter. An essential alternative viewpoint in an era of environmental crisis is provided by Ao's poetic ethnobiology, which regards the land as sacred, cherishes shared resources, and views plants as essential to a moral ecological order. Thus, her poetry serves as a record of sustainable behaviors as well as an example of the ecological wisdom of native lifestyles.

4. Review of Related Literature

Joshi, Vibha. (2021) postulated that the poetry of Ao is a rich tapestry of indigenous cosmology, ecological consciousness, and cultural memory. Her work, which frequently draws from ethnobotanical knowledge ingrained in Naga culture, demonstrates a profound engagement with the land and its vegetal, spiritual, and communal significance. Through the poems in *Book of Songs* (2013), Ao offers an ethno biological perspective that combines poetic expression with ecological sustainability, providing insight into the Naga people's relationship with nature. This worldview places a strong emphasis on *Lijaba*, the Earth-Maker, whose legendary presence sanctifies the land.



Kharmawphlang, D. (2022) hypothesized that in "*My Hills*," Ao emphasizes the spiritual geography of the Naga landscape by depicting the hills and forests as sacred entities. Since nature is seen as a living and spiritual force, this sacredness is more than just symbolic; it is a reflection of a strong ecological ethic. Instead of being viewed as passive resources, plants, trees, and landforms are seen as active members of a common ecological system. By using *Lijaba*, Ao conveys awe for the land and emphasizes the importance of caution, deference, and care in how people engage with it. Similar to this, Ao portrays oath stones culturally significant markers as silent witnesses to moral obligation and group commitments in "*Prayer of a Monolith*". These stones stand for customs pertaining to hunting and forest use, such as the preservation of specific species and reverence for forest spirits. These customs guarantee the sustainable use of natural resources by reflecting ethno biological knowledge. Ao combines moral authority with silence by giving voice to the monolith, demonstrating how cultural discipline contributes to biodiversity preservation.

Sentiyula, A. and Bendangsenla. (2024) proposed that the Naga tradition is the foundation of the reciprocity principle, which emphasizes social harmony, equitable labor distribution, and shared responsibility. In "*A Village Morning*", Ao vividly illustrates this concept by describing daily life in a rural village. She emphasizes the crucial role women play in handling household chores, providing care for families, and navigating community life through a number of intricate scenes. The poem opens with a cock crowing, indicating the beginning of the woman's day and the certainty of her obligations. She plays a vital role in maintaining family and community life through her morning routine, which includes stirring embers, cooking rice, tending to livestock, and taking care of children.

5. Confab

Temsula Ao's poetry can be interpreted using the interrelated theoretical frameworks of ethno poetics, ecofeminism, and indigenous ecocriticism. Northeast Indian poetry holds a unique place in Indian literature because it provides a deep ecological awareness based on oral histories, indigenous customs, and very personal connections to the land, plants, and animals. As critical philosophies that focus on the interaction between literature and the natural world, realism and naturalism offer a helpful framework for analyzing this regional corpus of work.

Nature appears as both a witness and a victim of colonization, whether the government, the market, or patriarchal systems, in poems like "*The Bald Giant*" and "*The Old Story-Teller*", carry it out. Ao portrays ecological loss as an existential crisis and questions the dichotomy between culture and nature through indigenous imagery and oral cadences. Other poets from the area, Adi tribal mythology, in which rivers are sentient beings and mountains are sacred entities, is heavily referenced in the poetry, place similar emphasis on the environment as an extension of individual and collective identity. Nature serves as a storehouse of memory, emotion, and ancestors' knowledge in poems, in addition to being a physical landscape. Similarly, involvement with Khasi oral traditions maintains an ecological awareness that opposes both the capitalist exploitation of natural resources and contemporary alienation.

The poetry of Temsula Ao is a prime example of this intersection of ecofeminism. She portrays the female body as a site of both vulnerability and resistance in poems like “*Mothers–II*” often equating the suffering of women with that of wounded landscapes. The experiences of female protagonists, which are reflected in deforested areas, drying rivers, and the decline of indigenous values, involve domestic abuse, social exclusion, and spiritual alienation. The landscape is an extension of the feminine self—violated, silenced, yet resilient rather than just a background.

It highlights how poetic expression is shaped by cultural, ritualistic, linguistic, and spiritual contexts. Ethno poetics values rhythm, repetition, silence, and breath as structural components and acknowledges poetry that is spoken, sung, chanted, or performed rather than just written forms. This method is especially important for reading poetry from Northeast India, where artistic expression is strongly influenced by ties to the natural world, ancestors, and the universe.

The decolonization of literary studies is aided by ethno poetics, which emphasizes underrepresented poetic forms. It broadens the definition of poetry to encompass folktales, chants, riddles, and spiritual invocations while also validating a variety of epistemologies. Ao focuses on Naga epistemologies that place people as participants in ecological networks rather than as dominant forces in order to challenge Western conservation paradigms. Ao continuously highlights how women and nature are oppressed in tandem throughout her body of work.

*"Alas for the forest
Which now lies silent
Stunned and stumped
With the evidence
Of her rape"*

(Ao, Lament for an Earth 2013, P- 42)

Patriarchal violence simultaneously targets women and the natural world is reinforced when the violated forest is used as a metaphor for the violated bodies of tribal women during times of conflict.

Meticulously probing six poetry collections by Temsula Ao, her work is revealed as a type of ethno biological record using the framework of textual archaeology. Ao records indigenous flora and fauna including bamboo, jacaranda, frogs, bats, snakes, and fireflies, highlighting biodiversity as a crucial component of cultural heritage. Overshadowing ecological metaphors, she compares cultural memory to organisms that endure in harsh environments in *Songs along the Way Home*:

*"Like the stubborn lichen
Clinging to a craggy rock-face"*

(Ao, Songs along the Way Home, P-1)

Reading Ao's poems in conjunction with Northeast India's environmental history reveals the profound socio-ecological damage caused by colonial exploitation. The poem "*The Bald Giant*," for instance, alludes to the British timber industry of the nineteenth century, which decimated substantial



tracts of old-growth forest. Furthermore; Ao transforms conventional belief systems through comparative mythology. Idealized representations of divine harmony are challenged in the poem “*Appeasement*” when the Ao Naga creator deity is recast as an enraged force that “*must be appeased with human blood*”. Parallel to this, Ao describes an instance in “*The Spear*” in which a hunter unintentionally kills a doe. The poem examines moral obligations to animals and the environment. The hunter is forced to face the repercussions of his actions and pursue reconciliation with the natural world after the doe's death, which represents a break in the harmony between humans and nature.

Ao's first three poetry collections. These pieces use strong imagery, animistic personification, and cultural specificity to capture the disintegration of human-nature relationships. Beyond protest, Ao's poetry becomes a living archive of *Naga ecological knowledge* that upholds customs and cautions against environmental degradation. Ao reveals ecological violence by focusing on three main themes: *the loss of sacred ecological values, unequal access to natural resources, and deforestation as gendered violence*.

Irony is used by Ao to analyze capitalist exploitation in “*Blessings*.” Even though the rich own “*the granaries of the earth*,” they are unable to fully appreciate plenty, while the impoverished make do with scraps. This unequal resource distribution is associated with ecological blindness. In “*Prayer of a Monolith*,” ancient standing stones, which represent ancestral laws that governed sustainable, living, like hunting limits and agricultural cycles are given voice, reviving animistic traditions.

Songs That Try to Say (1992) is where Ao sharpens her cautions. The earth is portrayed in “*Earthquake*” as an angry mother who no longer gives birth but instead unleashes devastation. Bestowing to Ao, this graphic imagery depicts nature's retaliation against unbridled exploitation. The poem “*A Strange Place*” criticizes modernization by illustrating how technological aspirations stifle the natural world, as birds are muffled by military and airplane noise.

Ao laments the loss of ecological relationships in *Songs of Many Moods* (1995) by using poems that center on specific species. The single tree by a highway in “*An Old Tree*” is gradually deteriorating due to environmental changes. The poem depicts both cultural displacement and ecological loss as development pushes the natural world aside.

Using forests, rivers, and the earth itself as female figures violated by patriarchal and militarized systems, Ao frequently connects ecological degradation to the exploitation of women throughout her body of work. This ecofeminist viewpoint emphasizes how women and land are viewed as easily conquered resources.

Songs from Here and There (2003) and *Songs from the Other Life* (2007), two of Ao's subsequent collections, move from recording loss to envisioning sustainable futures. Based on Naga cosmology, indigenous knowledge, and ecological ethics, she suggests alternative lifestyles that prioritize coexistence over dominance. Ao's poetry in this stage serves as both a chronicle of suffering and a manual for resiliency, demonstrating how indigenous worldviews can counteract and rectify extractive modernity.

That future, as Ao envisions it, is predicated on listening to the wails of the ghosts of trees, heeding the wisdom embedded in ancestral stories and names, and recognizing, as she herself implored, that accepting difference can “mean transcending the ‘local’ to discover the universal. In an era marked

by cascading ecological crises, Tamsula Ao's voice from Northeast India emerges as a profound and urgent call to rebuild humanity's relationship with the earth one grounded in care, respect, and enduring reciprocity. These principles are encoded in the language and stories of her people. Her work thus stands as a vital bridge between Indigenous ecological knowledge and the global imperative for sustainability, demanding recognition not merely as regional literature but as essential planetary wisdom.

Ao's poetry, deeply rooted in the ecological and cultural landscapes of Northeast India, frequently engages environmental degradation as a distinctly gendered experience. Her poems do not simply mourn the loss of forests; they frame deforestation as a form of gendered violence, where the destruction of land parallels the violation of the female body. This convergence reflects an Indigenous ecofeminist worldview in which the earth is understood as feminine, generative, and nurturing and its violation signifies both ecological and patriarchal aggression.

This metaphorical association between land and womanhood is powerfully articulated through Ao's poetic embodiment of hills, forests, and rivers as maternal figures. In poems such as "*My Hills*" and "*Stone-People from Lungterok*," the land is personified as a nurturing presence a source of sustenance, wisdom, and spiritual grounding. The loss of forest cover, therefore, is not merely an environmental concern but a rupture within the cultural and gendered lifeworlds of Indigenous communities. Trees are not inert resources; they are maternal protectors, keepers of memory, and carriers of tradition.

Deforestation in Ao's poetry often coincides with narratives of displacement, poverty, and women's suffering, suggesting that ecological violence disproportionately affects female bodies and roles. In agrarian and tribal societies, women are primary gatherers of forest produce firewood, medicinal herbs, and food resources that are both economic necessities and symbolic extensions of their nurturing and reproductive identities. The destruction of forests thus results in the erosion of women's autonomy, safety, and cultural authority. Ao renders this loss subtly through poetic silences and absences, where once-lush landscapes give way to emptiness, despair, and dislocation.

Moreover, deforestation in her work frequently allegorizes colonial and patriarchal conquest. The imposition of commercial forestry, capitalist land-use practices, and extractive economies is portrayed as a violent intrusion, echoing the historical colonization of Indigenous lands and women's bodies. The feminized forest—fertile and life-giving—is subjected to domination and control. This analogy draws upon a long-standing ecofeminist tradition that recognizes the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women as structurally interconnected under patriarchy and capitalism.

In poems such as "*The Old Story-Teller*," Ao foregrounds a generational rupture: elders mourn the fading forests and the disappearance of the stories bound to them, while younger women appear increasingly alienated from both the land and their inherited knowledge systems. Here, the erasure of forests becomes an erasure of feminine epistemologies, disrupting the intergenerational transmission of ecological knowledge, rituals, and folk practices.

By embedding gendered meaning within environmental destruction, Ao challenges readers to reconsider deforestation not simply as an ecological crisis but as a cultural and gendered trauma. Her poetic voice bears witness to both the wounded earth and the silenced women who suffer alongside it. Through her symbolic fusion of woman and land, Tamsula Ao's ecopoetics offers a powerful



critique of environmental and gender injustice. Her work calls for a reimagining of ecological resistance one that acknowledges the intertwined fates of forests and women, of landscape and body, of memory and survival.

6. Conclusion

Temsula Ao's poetry transcends mere lamentation by activating oral tradition as a living strategy of ecological conservation. Her work functions as an *archival ecology*, reviving mythic sanctions that enforce environmental ethics and practicing taxonomic resistance through the preservation of ethno biological vocabularies. This deliberate linguistic and narrative intervention counters epistemicide and ensures that Indigenous ecological knowledge remains vibrant and relevant. Nagaland was for Ao "*the 'orange tree' that remained with her*" wherever she went a symbol of rootedness, specific identity, and generative potential. Her poetry becomes the fruit of that tree, offering not only the taste of a particular land and culture but also the seeds of a more sustainable and just future.

Eco poetry is ingrained with indigenous worldview, which refuses to divorce ecological rhythms from human life, is what sets it apart from Northeast India. These poets deal with landscapes under siege forests cleared for development, rivers contaminated, mountains mined in contrast to some strands of Western ecocriticism that envision nature as a place of refuge or purity. Their poems articulate both political resistance and environmental grief, functioning as both protest and elegy at the same time. An effective lens for analyzing literary voices from this area is Ecofeminism, which connects the exploitation of nature with the subjugation of women. Numerous female poets from Northeast India depict patriarchal violence and environmental degradation as linked manifestations of systemic dominance.

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