

# ETHNO-CULTURAL IDENTITY OF NORTHEAST INDIA WITH REFERENCE TO TEMSULA AO'S SELECT POEMS

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**Abstract:** Northeast part of India is known for its ethnogenic significance which has many roots of civilization, and it is distinct from the other part of the country. Therefore, the culture of Northeast India faces tremendous challenges due to its vast ethnographic diversity. Temsula Ao, is one of the most widely read and studied women writers of North-East India. She has been the recipient of many awards including the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi award in 2013. She is also a pioneer writer from Nagaland. The main aim of this study is to explore ethno-cultural aesthetics of the Northeast Indian region which exists in Temsula Ao's poetry. For that purpose, fifteen of her poems are selected from her anthology titled *Books of Songs*. The select poems were analysed qualitatively. This descriptive qualitative research methodology deals how Ao-Naga regional people know about human values, beliefs, behaviour, and social conditions within their own environmental contexts. The major finding of this paper is in what way Temsula Ao revitalizes Ao-Naga culture and tradition by picturing her region, history and condition of women relating them with nature through her poems. Implications were identified for the people of diverse cultural backgrounds. And, it is concluded that the beauty of a region is retained by the people who have a staunch belief in their traditional cultural values and ethics.

**Keywords:** *Ethnicity; cultural aesthetics; revitalizing – history; folklore; belief; women and nature*

## INTRODUCTION

In India, writers have produced abundant literary output in order to establish their own cultural identity, historical elements, traditional values and the problems of society. Indian region is the one which consists of various cultures, religion, tradition and customs that are invariably portrayed in literature. The hitherto least studied writes of Northeast Indian states (i.e. Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh) highlight their traditions and customs with their originality and nativity unchanged. Northeast India is known for its ethnogenic significance which has many roots of civilization. The culture of Northeast India faces tremendous challenges due to its vast ethnographic diversity. The present study

explores the ethno-cultural identity of one of the Northeast Indian region (Ao-Naga) which remains a largely unexplored area for academic research.

The purpose of this paper is to showcase the richness of Ao -Naga history, culture, tradition, custom and environmental surroundings to the people belonging to different cultural backgrounds.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The major themes, exclusively in North East Indian poetry, are natural elements, myths, traditions and customs, folklore, political dilemmas and violence. In an article, "Re-Defining the Self: A Perspective on Writings from North-East India" the writer writes about northeast region and its poetry: "The North-east region of India is known for

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its rich biodiversity and beautiful topography. The unique ecology of the region with its mountains, valleys, rivers form an important part of the narrative of the literature of this region. Poetry from North-east is often deeply rooted in the land, in the people's culture and in their past" (Lalengkimi 2017)

According to N. Chandra and Nigamananda Das (2007), Northeast region has abundance of glories that are connected with natural elements. Northeast poets strongly react for the destruction of Mother Nature through their poetry. Nature is the soul of life. In "Ecology, Myth and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India" they describe:

Indian English poetry from Northeastern part of India is rich in enshrining various aspects of 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. The ruthless act of deforestation and oppression upon the Mother Nature in various ways by destroying the serenity of the nature, obliterating the natural environment, killing rare birds and animals and distorting the landscape and biodiversity, have been sharply reacted upon by these poets. (Chandra and Das 35)

During the time of Independence, North-East region is being represented for violence, terrorism and insurgence. The people of Northeast region are wider in population which leads to emergence of diverse political, social and cultural issues. Thus, Subir Bhaumik (2009), BBC's former bureau chief of East and Northeast India, says: "The North East has been seen as the problem child since the very inception of the Indian Republic. It has also been South Asia's most enduring theatre of separatist guerrilla war, a region where armed action has usually been the first, rather than the

last, option of political protest" (Bhaumik 4-24).

Narayan Ch. Gahatraj (2014) says the importance of Oral Tradition in his article, "Cultural Memory and Remembrance: Exploring Orality and Identity in Northeast Poetry" as follows:

Oral tradition is a complex phenomenon which configures its own ways and means of expression and transmission. It expresses self-identity and uploads social organizations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of the mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of contemporary social order. It also articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concern over reform and redress. (Gahatraj 419)

Ganganand Singh (2022) writes that despite the distinctiveness that marks the poetry of each of the poets of North East India, certain unifying traits are found in the poetry of the region. In Ao Naga Oral tradition, the quest of identity and selfhood, the hybridization of indigenous culture is presented as an outcome of modernity and Christianity. Satapathy, D.A., Bhattacharya, P. (2021) states that North East India has often sought its validation from within its ethnic and cultural identities and has been cogently and succinctly depicted by the writers hailing from the region, who are connected by a shared cultural consciousness, and also by a socio-ethnological ethos that is articulated in the form of their oral and written literatures.

The article, "Literature as Social Agenda: The Poetry of Temsula Ao" states that the endangering of the traditional/indigenous culture in the face of invasion of an alien culture marked by modernity and globalization coupled with the gross misrepresentation of the

heterogeneous character of the region under the erroneous homogeneous ‘Northeast’ label further adds to the woes of this region. It is only natural hence that most of the literature emanating from this region carries a deep-rooted concern for the social issues. (Neeraj Sankhyan and Suman Sigroha, 2016).

### **Temsula Ao – An Ethnographic Writer of Northeast India**

Temsula Ao is an Indian poet, short story writer and an ethnographer who is known for her Sahitya Akademi Award winning short story collection “Laburnum for my Head”. Temsula Ao’s writing present images and themes of Naga’s folk culture. As a representative of her people, she infuses in her poetry the voices and concerns for her people and her land. Similarly, Rajashree Bargohain & Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (2020) mentions in their article, “Poetry, identity and the geography of culture: representations of landscape in poetry in English from Northeast India” as:

Group identities among indigenous populations become intrinsically connected to a particular landscape, attached as they are to the cultural, social, spiritual and political significance of the land. It is a result of these deep ties that their relationship to a particular territory or land area becomes a major marker of their identity and distinctiveness. (Rajashree B & Rohini M, 2020)

Referring to the poet in the introduction to the *Books of Songs*, Prasad remarks that she searches for the past that has disappeared into the mist of the time, for it is in the very unreliability of that history that her people’s troubled present arises.

In Ao-Naga oral tradition poems are called songs. It is a part of folklore. Thus, GJV Prasad, in his Introduction to *Book of Songs: Collected Poems (1988-2007)* writes: “As one can see from the title of her very first collection of poems, *Songs That Tell*,

Temsula Ao has seen herself as a lyricist, of her poetry as in the tradition of songs” (xvii). He further says about the reason behind the term ‘songs’ which Ao has given in all her titles of poetry collection:

All her collections of poems have the word “Songs” in their title, as does this volume of her Collected Poems. This could also be because there is no word other word for poetry in most North Eastern languages, because poems are songs in oral cultures, and Temsula Ao sees herself as Naga woman poet in search of tradition (Introduction, xvii).

Ao imprints her voice of identity in her article, “Identity and Globalization: A Naga Perspective” as:

The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in which, Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity makers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity (“Identity” 7).

### **METHOD**

This study used a qualitative method, particularly the descriptive qualitative method, and it was appropriate to interpret and analyze source text and secondary sources. In addition, data were collected as many as possible in the form of phrases and sentences both from the primary text and the secondary sources.

People may typically think of memory as the recollection of the past. Memory enables people to learn from past experiences and apply that knowledge in

present circumstances. It is a critical part of our identity. Cultural memory is a form of collective memory shared by a specific group of people that represent their way of life.

The theory of Cultural Memory is the constructed understanding of the past that is passed from one generation to the next through text, oral traditions, monuments, rites, and other symbols. To understand culture, humans access a vast array of cultural symbols. Here Tamsula Ao uses stone, mountain, and trees as cultural symbols to retrieve her own cultural identity through her poetry.

Conclusions of this study are drawn about the appropriate role which interventions designed to enhance ethnic identity may reasonably be expected to fulfill in the struggle to improve the effects of ethnic identity.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study is to analyze exactly how Tamsula Ao revitalizes ethno-cultural identity of Ao-Naga regional people by portraying their tradition, region, history and condition of women relating them with nature through her poems.

The following fifteen poems are taken for study from Tamsula Ao's collected poems, *Book of Songs* (2013): "The Old Story-Teller", "Distance", "Lesson of the Mountain", "An Old Tree", "A Bald Giant", "Stone-People from Lungterok", "My Hills", "History", "A Tiger-Woman's Prayer", "When a Stone Wept", "Soul-Bird", "Requiem", "Man to Woman", "Woman to Man" and "Blood of Other Days".

### IMPLICATIONS

People of diverged ethnic inclusiveness may understand....

- The cultural background of Ao-Naga regional people of Northeast India
- Ao-Naga's history and the way they lead their life in the past

Ao – Naga's worship of nature and natural elements etc.

### DISCUSSION

In the following section, the life of indigenous people belongs to Northeast India especially Ao-Naga region people is discussed. In this discussion, the researchers interpret Tamsula Ao's select poems in the aspects of Ao-Naga regional people's oral tradition, historical past, beliefs and rituals, mythological elements, destruction of nature, association of women, custom and traditions with their natural surroundings.

#### Oral Tradition

Oral tradition is a part of folklore which plays a significant role for the identity of a particular people. Folklore reconstructs the history which has been neglected and forgotten by the people. Ao says that every aspect of their life, social, political, historical and religious has been retained in the memory of the people through their Oral Tradition. Thus, she writes her own Ao-Naga Oral Tradition in the poem, "The Old Story-Teller". The poem begins as:

I have lived my life believing  
Story-telling was my proud legacy.  
(1-2)

Thus, Calinescu, A. (2021) states that despite the fallible nature of recollection, human beings return to their past in order to give a healthy meaning to their present.

In the poem "Soul-Bird" the grandmother tells their cultural belief to her granddaughter which is whispered:

She draws me closer  
Whispering in my ear,  
"She that keening bird in the sky?  
That's your mother's soul  
Saying her final good-bye  
It is over  
Come, let us go home now". (35-41)

These cultural belief passes through younger generations by their oral traditions. Thus, Narayan Ch. Gahatraj (2014) talks of the importance of oral tradition in his article, "Cultural Memory and Remembrance:

Exploring Orality and Identity in Northeast Poetry” as follows:

Oral tradition is a complex phenomenon which configures its own ways and means of expression and transmission. It expresses self-identity and uploads social organizations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of the mythical, legendary and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of contemporary social order. It also articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concern over reform and redress. (419)

Here, the poet represents her staunch belief in her ancestry and is proud of her own Ao-Naga community. She further says that stories are inherited in her blood and revitalized and reinforced through her memory as:

When my time came I told stories  
As though they ran in my blood  
Because each telling revitalized  
My life-force  
And each story reinforced  
My racial reminiscence. (Ao 9-14)

Their stories are about their ancestral past, their worship of nature and about their valiant warriors. At the end of the poem, the poet laments for the displacement of ancient traditions and history due to the arrival of a new era. The poet remembers the warning of her grandfather through these lines:

Grandfather constantly warned  
That forgetting the stories  
Would be catastrophic  
We could lose our history,  
Territory, and most certainly  
Our intrinsic identity. (Ao 27-32)

Ao, in fact tries to revitalize her tradition of story-telling through this poem.

Further, Temsula Ao tries to emphasize the destruction of the past in her poems, “Distance” and “History”. She says that how religious practices and traditions of Ao-Naga community are ruined by people who forget and neglect their past. The following lines from the poem “Distance” shows the gap between the people and their past:

An earth  
Stretching out  
To a sky  
No longer abode of the celestials.  
A sky  
Looking down  
On an earth  
No longer housing mortals.  
That is distance. (Ao 14-22)

She also expresses that people changes according to the new generations which tend to forget their past that exists in the poem, “History”:

They now resonate  
In words of new  
Discernment  
To argument the lore  
Of our essential core. (Ao 9-13)

Ao, in fact tries to revitalize her tradition of story-telling through this poem. Rani Banerjee (2015) in her article, “Influence of Oral Traditions in some of the poems of Temsula Ao” comments: “Since time immemorial story telling has served as an important way of preserving the cultural heritage of any community. Story tellers by retelling stories and tales transmit the culture from one generation to the other and thus pave way for the preservation of the rich heritage” (45).

### **Cultural Memory**

The most powerful forms of cultural memory may involve recollections of past trauma experienced by groups of victims. The poet represents her staunch belief in her ancestry and is proud of her own Ao-Naga community in her writings.

She further says in her poem Stone People from Lungterok that stories are inherited in her blood and revitalized and reinforced through her memory as:

When my time came I told stories  
As though they ran in my blood  
Because each telling revitalized  
My life-force  
And each story reinforced  
My racial reminiscence. (9-14)

Their stories are about their ancestors who have emerged from stones. Their stories are about their ancestral past; their worship of nature is about their valiant warriors. At the end of the poem, “The Bald Giant the poet laments for the displacement of ancient traditions and history due to the arrival of a new era. The poet remembers the warning of her grandfather through these lines:

Grandfather constantly warned  
That forgetting the stories  
Would be catastrophic  
We could lose our history,  
Territory, and most certainly  
Our intrinsic identity. (27-32)

Temsula Ao writes about the history of Ao-Naga community people in the poem, “Blood of Other Days”. People invoke and worship the spirit of nature. The following lines glorify the historical Ao heroes:

Tribal heroes, earning the merit  
To wear special cloths 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. (Ao 6-12)

The arrival of Christianity imposed religious faiths leading to great confusion. People’s belief, customs and traditional past are stripped by “a tribe of strangers” (13).

### **Beliefs and Rituals**

In Nagaland, people worship natural elements like sun, moon, stars, river, trees and mountains. They cherish the beauty of nature though later the same nature has been ruined in the poems, “Lesson of the Mountain” and “My Hills”. Here, Temsula Ao describes the majesty of mountain and its secrets in the poem, “Lesson of the Mountain” as:

The mountain stands,  
Impassive, challenging,  
Imposing, dominating,  
Reposing, secretive  
And smugly benign. (Ao 8-12)

Mountain is a symbol of strength, security and determination of every nation. Ao registers the same without fail. Further, she endures the inner passion urges to challenge for finding the secrets and the majesty of the mountain. The due course of mountaineering gives an experience of pain and peril. The top of the mountain reveals that the earth possesses its beauty and also it does not have any secret at all.

The poem, “My Hills” visualizes the beauty of hills as:

Once they hummed  
With bird-song  
And happy gurgling brooks  
Like running silver  
With shoals of many fish. (Ao 4-12)

In this poem she wonders how the beauty of nature flourishes everywhere in the past and also mourns for nature’s ruined condition in the present. Here, she records the rhythm of hills in its bird song and the presence of brooks in its gurgling. She also visualizes the sight of hills in all the seasons which are playing magic in its brightness. She beautifully depicts the seasons as:

The trees were many  
Happy, verdant, green  
The seasons playing magic  
On their many-splendoured sheen.

When summer went,  
The hills echoed  
With the wistful whispers  
Of autumnal leaves  
Fluttering to their fall  
In the winter-smelling breeze.  
(Ao 9-18)

While recording the music and rhythm of hills Ao feels sad about the present ruined condition too in the same poem. Thus, the end of the poem goes:

The rivers are running red,  
The hillsides are bare  
And the seasons  
Have lost their magic,  
Because  
The very essence  
Of my hills  
Are lost  
Forever. (Ao 24-32)

The contrast between the past and the present is struck by the silver and red colours respectively. She completely mourns for the pathetic condition of nature in this poem. The contrast between past and present is struck by silver and red colours of river respectively. The very title of the poem, "My Hills" denotes the belongingness of the poet to her region and nature.

The poem "Soul-Bird" indicates the ancient Ao-Naga belief that the dead person's soul takes in the form of a bird, a hawk, an insect or a caterpillar. Moreover, the transformation of a hawk is considered as a good omen that can be seen as a last appearance by only their loved one on the earth. Thus, Temsula Ao writes as a daughter's voice of her dead mother:

They are chanting prayers,  
But I watch a lonely hawk  
Soaring  
Amidst the swirling  
Blue of the vast sky. (1-5)

### Mythology

According to Ao-Naga mythology, Ao

people emerged from stones and the stories around the myth are represented through the poems, "Stone People from Lungterok" and "When a Stone Wept". The word "Lungterok" literally means six stones. Six stones are considered as a symbolic representation of three men and three women. The versatility of Ao-Naga people is discussed by the poet. The poet says that the stone people are "The poetic and politic/Barbaric and balladic/ Finders of water / And fighters of fire" (10-14).

The poet further describes that the stone people are polyglots and they have knowledge of birds and animal discourse. They carve the head of their enemies as trophies of war that shows their bravery. They have done all kinds of work and they believe in supernatural power. They worship nature:

#### STONE- PEOPLE

The worshippers,  
Of unknown, unseen Spirits,  
Of trees and forests,  
Of stones and rivers,  
Believers of soul,  
And its varied forms,  
its sojourns here  
And passage across the water  
Into the hereafter. (Ao 41-50)

This poem brings out the close association of Naga people with nature. In this poem, Temsula Ao conveys the idea that though people have uncivilized qualities, they have faith in God, practises religious doctrines and worships nature. And, people have strong endurance like stones. They identify their root of community through natural elements.

Thus, Saranya (2017) writes in an article, "Ecocritical Perspectives on Temsula Ao's Selected Poems" as:

Stone-People worships the soul of spirits which exists in nature and they also worship trees, forests, stones, rivers and all other natural elements. The root of a tribal

community is identified through natural elements in this poem. Stone is a symbolic representation of people in Ao-Naga community. Like, stones people belong to this region have strong endurance and they have involved in all kinds of profession in order to make themselves stronger economically. Further, stone symbolizes stone-age civilization which exists in Nagaland. The poet refers Stone-People as: “savage and sage”. Though people have uncivilized rude qualities, they have faith in God, practices dogma and doctrines of their religion and follows the principles of their community. Through these qualities they will reach the position of sage. Thus, the poet wants to imprint her ethnic identity in this poem. (Saranya and Sheela 2017)

According to Ao-Naga myth certain individuals, men or women possess companion spirits in the form of tiger. That is explicitly mentioned by Temsula Ao in her poem, “A Tiger- Women’s Prayer”. In this poem, a woman who has a power prays to God for identifying her strange feeling that she gets often. She does not know whether she gets the power of spirit, human or tiger. Even she dislikes those powers which bring her away from her womanhood. She wants to be a normal woman. Thus, she says:

And entangled my woman-self  
In an un-seemly mesh  
Of spirit, human and beast.  
So I implore  
Grant me this last prayer  
So that when I cross over  
To the region  
Beyond the sun  
Like all others of my kind.  
(Ao 37-45)

Thus, the poem “When A Stone Wept”

picturizes the lifelessness, emptiness and barrenness of the place through the mythological reference of stones. The poem ends like:

Where no element can ever encroach  
To rejuvenate life nor re-furbish  
This barren patch of usurped land  
Where a stone-mother and her  
children  
*Have absolute dominion.*  
(Ao 123-127)

When Nature, the God of Gods, is replaced by new God it is not a welcome change but it is an inevitable coming. Temsula Ao clearly states that how people adapt the alien principles unknowingly in the following lines:

We borrowed their minds,  
Aped their manners,  
Adopted their gods  
And became perfect mimics.  
(Ao 45-48)

Though people reject their own history, tradition and cultural past they realize their condition and restore their identity. Thus, Nature shrieks of unfamiliar death “in the agony of re-birth” (Ao 69).

### **Destruction of Nature**

Temsula Ao’s “An Old Tree” portrays the devastation of nature. The title, ‘An old Tree’ itself explains its ruined condition in this poem. The old tree says that the earth is sustaining because of the tree which has given a way to summer rain and winter frost. She writes in an old tree’s voice:

The protective earth  
Sustaining me  
Has given way  
To summer’s rain  
And winter’s frost. (5- 9)

This indicates climatic changes which occur due to nature. In this poem, the poet personifies an old tree as a human being.



Roots, trunk and branches of the tree are compared with human organs like veins, hair, etc. Human body becomes fragile in due course of time. Similarly, the tree also becomes old in due course of time:

My roots are exposed  
Like varicose veins on aged calves  
And dead branches on my trunk  
On a balding head. (10- 14)

Further, the tree mourns for Birds and Squirrels those which do not pay a visit to it. This makes the old tree think that it has lost its fruitfulness. Death is an inevitable experience in life, not only for human beings, but also for nature. Thus, the poet concludes this poem in the words of an old tree:

I am an old tree  
Waiting  
For what happens  
To all old trees. (25- 28)  
In the poem, “The Bald Giant”,

Temsula Ao remembers the beauty of mountain which has been transformed bald recently. She describes nature which is glorified in the form of the mountain in all seasons that twisted at present:

His green cloak of summer  
Shimmered in the sun,  
And when autumn came  
Golden patches dotted  
The fading green velvet.  
Winter brought a different glory  
Shrouding him in a mystery  
As he seemed to retreat  
Behind the swirling mist.  
All that is now gone. (10-19)

Nature, which is the soul of human civilization, is destructed by the strangers. This reads as follows:

Declaring that our Trees and  
Mountains  
Rocks and Rivers were no Gods

And that our songs and stories  
Nothing but tedious primitive  
nonsense. (Ao 17-20)

Temsula Ao beautifully depicts the condition of mountains which creates a staunch gloomy atmosphere and pathetic state of it:

All of him is brown  
From base to crown (20-21).

She further says that mountains turn very weak due to the negligence of people. And, its surface looks like wrinkled face and the logs are rolled off without the support of unstrengthened base:

And his sides are furrowed  
Where the logs had rolled. (22-23)

The poet feels that the mountain is menacing her at present; however, the same mountain was her friend in the past. She gets afraid that it leads her to resent the mountain. Temsula Ao indirectly says that the mountain has lost its glory and strength which might break up into pieces and put her down when shakes:

And I resent his presence  
In my horizon  
Because I dread  
That when the earth shakes  
He will surely disintegrate  
And carry me to our common doom.  
(26-31)

Sayantana Chakraborty (2017) writes his view on “The Bald Giant”:

The poem ends with a catastrophic realization that since regeneration and renewal in external nature is impossible, the future of the community bodes ill, with unpredictable uncertainties. The existence of the hill means the existence of the hill-dwellers, and as a corollary the extinction of the hill means the extinction of the hill-

dwellers. Traditionally, the hill is a fixed site, a symbol of stable relationship and identity. (367)

Similarly, Anupama (2014) says that, "Nature is not just a source of sustenance for most of the NE states but more of an extension of identity and roots. Thus, harm to nature immediately affects the question of identity. Nature becomes a space where an individual identifies himself. Through the spirits of trees and rivers and mountains, one can find the ancestral roots" (61) and this is what is emphasized in "Stone- people from Lungterok", where TemsulaAo depicts her ethnic identity of Ao Naga community which is constructed by nature. Their worship of elements of nature is depicted as:

The stories told of the moment  
When we broke into being  
From the six stones and  
How the first fathers founded  
Our ancient villages and  
Worshipped the forces of nature.  
(15- 20)

Northeast people have worshipped nature which is the embodiment of their culture.

### **Association of Women with Nature**

In the poem, "requiem", Temsula Ao associates women with nature. Requiem is a musical work based on a mass for the soul of the dead. The poet begins the poem: "who will mourn?" (1). She repeats this same question throughout the poem at frequent intervals. An accident is to occur when the kitchen stove bursts out. Newly wedded bride has turned into ashes in the fire. It is believed that the accident has taken place due to the greed of gluttony of the mother-in-law-for money and property. The bridegroom restarts his work again though he has lost his women. The poet mourns for deceased brides and is worried, "Who will mourn? /Mothers and fathers/Millstoned with daughters/or daughters who are simply born?" (36-39).

In an eco-feminist point of view, the bride is a metaphor for the nature of northeast India that is destroyed by the greedy people, who are referred to as a mother- in-law in the poem, in the progressive world:

Who will mourn this black end  
mass?  
This charred carcass  
Of a recent blushing bride  
Roasted on the pyre  
Of avarice  
Lit by the gluttony  
Of the scavengers  
And abetted  
By the kitchen stove. (2-10)

Temsula Ao mourns nature which is destroyed by people of the modern world. Temsula Ao's "Lament for an Earth" projects the condition of forest in the earth and the condition of women in the society. The title of the poem, "Lament for an Earth" signifies the lamentation of an earth for its ruined condition. Temsula Ao emphasizes the condition of an earth in the present which leads to the destruction of human civilization. Here in this poem, earth is associated with women for its delicate and feminine characters. Temsula Ao describes the beauty of forest which consists of tall trees, hummingbirds and little creatures. The forest sustains in the fury of storms and shook of rains. She compares the forest and women based on their feminine qualities:

Once upon an earth  
There was a forest,  
Verdant, Virgin, Vibrant. (1-3)

These feminine characteristics are gone from the forest at present and that pathos is shown by the very first line of the poem. Both, nature and women are molested; it indicates the polluted state and possession of abundant of treasures. Later, they are silenced by society's domination. Thus, Temsula Ao imprints the present pathetic condition of nature and women as:

Alas for the forest

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

The poet describes the river, which once upon a time flows clear and contented making gurgling. In the river bank, deers drink water and fulfill their thirst. Little fishes are growing big in the river. On the contrary, at present the river has turned into mud and deers and fishes cannot survive. Here, TemsulaAo expresses that the forest has cried for the poor condition of river because both are bonded with sisterhood:

Cry for the river  
Muddy, mis-shapen  
Grotesque  
Choking with the remains  
Of her sister  
The forest... (53-58)

Women and Nature are the source for extension of roots and identity. Thus, human civilization of the future has to be determined by women and nature. If neglected to protect these two, there is no future for all. TemsulaAo conveys her idea:

No life stirs in her belly now.  
The bomb  
And the bleaching powder  
Have left her with no tomorrow.  
(59-62)

Man fails to protect nature and women. Nature and women need to be safeguarded for the survival of all the creatures on the earth. Man's negligence leads to lose their beauty before the arrival of their old age. Hence, the earth takes revenge on men:

Alas for this earth  
Thus ravaged  
Stripped of her lushness  
And her sap  
Her countenance  
Furrowed and damaged  
Touched by age  
Her substance

Exposed and crumbling  
To the first touch  
Of the rain and wind  
And flaking away  
To silt into the ocean  
And sand into the desert,  
Leaving her old and decrepit  
Before her time. (63-80)

Temsula Ao laments for both nature and women who have lost their purity. Thus, she concludes:

Grieve for the rape of an earth  
That was once verdant, vibrant  
Virgin. (81-83)

Stones are the symbolic representation of Ao-Naga's ancestral past. According to Ao-Naga myth, the first Ao people, three men and three women emerged from six stones, at the place called Lungterok. Women stones give life to small stones. So, the woman stone is called "Mother- Stone". The longings of a mother stone for her child stones exist in the poem, "When A Stone Wept". Stone- mother is abandoned by her he-stone and her little ones. The stone-mother seeks the help of wind and rain in order to find her little ones though she could not. She believes that the sun will help her to find them. She approaches the sun. The sun said:

'I can tell you where they are  
But you must be prepared  
To pay the price I stipulate.' (Ao 71-73)

For that stone -mother replies:

'Yes, grandfather, yes,' said the stone-mother  
'Take me to them and  
I will give you anything you ask  
Help me find my little children'.  
(Ao 74-77)

The sun asked:

'Your pain is my payment  
It will lead you to your children'. (Ao 84-85)

This symbolizes the pain of relationship. Stone-mother bears her pain and finally gets back her little ones. Then, Stone-Mother curses nature which gives intolerable pain to her. Henceforth, in nature wherever stones are found there will not be any plant or tree making the place a vast empty land.

### Customs and Tradition

In her twin poems, “Man to Woman” and “Woman to Man”, Temsula Ao brings out the custom practised by Ao-Naga community. According to their customs, Ao man must build a new house before he marries a woman. Similarly, in the poem “Man to Woman”, a man promises to his lady love that he will build a new house after Moatsu day. Moatsu day is a Spring festival of the Ao people celebrated after sowing, to invoke God’s blessings for a plentiful harvest. The following lines imply the same:

After the harvest is over  
I shall build a new house  
It will only be of thatch and bamboo  
But built with love for you  
(Ao 29-32)

In the next poem, “Woman to Man”, the woman replies her man that how she neglects the offer from her maternal uncle’s house and how she struggles to convince her mother. She chooses him, even though he is slow in speech and his face is like a craggy mountain. She loves him due to his bravery and steadfast energy which indicates that beauty lies in hardwork and also speaks of the strength of Ao men:

And when the men play tug-of-water  
I always see you at the anchor  
With steady pace other men walk to  
fields  
But with you I see only running feet  
(Ao 40-43)

Temsula Ao feels that through poetry

the agriculture civilization Ao community can be reiterated and immortalized. Further, Ao wants to recall the relationship between the past myth and the present life.

### CONCLUSION

North-East writers have focused nature, myth and violence in their writings. They showcase the natural beauty, tribal culture and insurgency of the northeast region. They also try to establish their identity of their region which they believe would preserve their natural circumstances, culture and traditions. They also focus on violence, bloodshed, conflict and unrest of their region which shows their concerns towards their region. Along with that they write about nature and culture which are deeply rooted in their past.

Temsula Ao’s role in Northeast India is inevitable. Her voice revitalizes her own Ao-Naga community in the form of her writings like short stories, novel and poems. She holds on her own identity, ethnicity, territory and history and unveils through her writings.

The cultural identity of the Ao-Naga region is appropriately picturised in these select poems of Temsula Ao. Further, the richness of the region is witnessed by the people who have a staunch belief in their traditional cultural values and ethics.

Temsula Ao’s works can be further analyzed in various aspects such as Ao-Naga tribal studies, Ao-Naga Oral Tradition and Mythological references, postcolonial perspectives and power politics, Naga Insurgency, Industrialisation in Nagaland and so on.

As a savior of ethnic identity, Temsula Ao fear about new generation people who are the cause of loss of cultural identity of Ao-Naga region. So, Temsula Ao traces the Ao-Naga identity through her writings especially in her poetry.

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