

Eco-feminist reading of Temsula Ao's Poetry

By Dr. Dikshita Bhuyan

Recipient of the *Padmashree* award Temsula Ao, one of the major eco-feminist poets of North-East Indian writing in English hails from Nagaland. She writes about the cultural and physical ecology of Nagaland find in her poems. In her nature centric poems, Ao writes not only about the ecological glory of her land but also depicts human oppression on the ecology which threatens the future of the region.



Temsula Ao

Eco-criticism, a nature centric approach to the literary study deals with illustration of environmental concerns and examination of different perspectives of literature in the treatment of nature with its main aim to protect the earth. Eco-feminism is one of the branches of Eco-critical theory which takes environmentalism and the relationship between women and the earth as its foundation to its analysis and practice. Emerged in 1970s, Eco-feminism regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected with each other. It focuses political, ideological and economical issues related to environment and women. In eco-feminist literature, environmentalism and feminism are interlinked.

The term 'Ecofeminism' was coined by the French writer, Francoise d' Eaubonne in her book, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974). Its scope was further developed by Ynestra King's *The Eco Feminist Imperative* in 1980's. The first eco-feminist conference—"Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980's" was organized at Amherst, Massachusetts, US. Eco-feminist writers argue about the traditional male-centered approaches that involve exploitation and domination and degradation over women which echo in environment.

Women-nature connections are the backbone of eco-feminism. Karen Warren in the book entitled, *Environmental Philosophy: from Animal Rights to Radical Ecology* speaks about different connections between women and nature such as conceptual, empirical, experimental, symbolic, epistemological, political, theoretical etc. that provide competing as well as mutually supportive analysis of the nature of the twin dominations of women and nature.

Eco-feminism has two basic perspectives, namely essentialist eco-feminism and constructionist eco-feminism. Essentialist eco-feminism believes that there is a connection between women and nature due to the similarities of motherly qualities such as kindness, caring, affection, wisdom, sympathy and empathy etc. Women and nature give life, hence both are fertile. On the other hand, according to constructionist eco-feminism, the connection between women and nature is constructed by society especially the patriarchy. Although in ancient period, women and nature are considered as sacred, later on this image is changed and both of them are degenerated and exploited. The social construction gives power to men to dominate women and nature.

Eco-feminism seeks to end oppression on women and nature with its four main precepts. On a very basic level, eco-feminists are unified in the exploration of the commonalities between gender oppression and environmental degradation mainly caused by male dominance. Secondly, men are more related to culture and women are related to environment. Culture has been seen as superior to the 'untamed' environment and hence both women and the environment have been subjugated by men which is seen as dominant over an 'untamed' environment. Women are related to the environment. Thus, women and the environment share a common inferior position. Thirdly, oppression of women and the environment have occurred simultaneously and thus women have a responsibility to cease male domination over both. Fourthly, eco-feminism seeks to combine feminism and ecological thought, as they both work towards egalitarian, non-hierarchical structures. (Agrawal 37)

North-East India presents a paradise of ecology and anthropological museum. Ecologically rich as it is, the literary genres from North Eastern region of India explore the mysterious ecology and expose eco-consciousness of its people and other ethnic realities. However, there is a rapid change in the demography of North-East India due to natural as well as man-made disasters. The growth 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 oppression upon the earth in different ways. They play the roles of eco-poet, eco-feminist in their poetic expressions.

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Temsula Ao's eco-feminist view is seen in her poem "Lament for earth" in which she exposes the exploitation of nature caused by men with its major themes as destruction of nature's treasures, changing of nature's course to modern men's excessive greed and luxury:

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 her treasures
Bound for the mills
At the foothills?

Ao reveals how with the advent of progress and influences of modernization the green forest, once “verdant”, “virgin”, “vibrant with majestic tall trees”, has now become “silent”, “stumped” and “stunned” as her secrets are exploited and violated. Here, the image of the earth is of devastation on a tragic level. The bleak mood of first stanza continues to the last stanza. The earth is seen as ugly and weak appearance as the “evidence of rape” is still fresh in her:

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.

In her another poem, “Cry, for the River” Temsula Ao laments for a dying river. The river was once flowing with “sweet gurgling sound with little fishes/ growing big” on her bosom and sometimes the thirsty deer was taking rest for a while, “lapping each crystal mouthful/ as though it was honey,” and now it has lost its charm and misshapen:

Cry, for the river
Muddy, misshapen
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.

As a chronicler of her time, the poet feels that man’s ties with the nature now are at the point of crisis and expresses her anxiety about such man-made environmental hazards. Her remembrance of the past days when all lived together in harmony speaks about holistic approach towards nature. 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. Although the poet mops at the present corporal change of the beautiful river, in the last line of the stanza the focus is 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 “Bonsai”, Tamsula Ao satirizes the Japanese art of dwarfing trees for a its new look:

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

Ao feels that the skill of preventing the natural growth of trees only for the sake of new beauty lacks the natural warmth and enthusiasm towards nature. This act of growing dwarf trees in container resists trees to supply food, provide shelter and maintain ecological balance in a natural way. In the poem, “Earthquake”, Tamsula 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.
.....
And after her fearsome furore
Is registered
On the Richter scale
She subsides
Like a hysterical female.

The poet's uses similes such as “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. In the poem “My Hills” the poet links her experiences to the environment, weaving her reminiscences with natural beauty of the hills of formative years:

The sound and sights
have altered in my hills
Once they hummed
With bird sing
But today
I no longer know my hills

The bird song is gone
Replaced by the staccato
Of sophisticated weaponry.

Highlighting the problem of insurgency that shattered Nagaland for many decades, Ao feels apprehension for the safety of her people and ecology. As an eco-feminist humanist Ao exposes the degradation of nature and her suffering. 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 peaceful past. In the poem “Prayer of a Monolith”, Temsula Ao describes that nature is undergoing a cataclysmic degradation, an ecological holocaust at the hands of patriarchal societies:

I stand at the village gate
In mockery of my former state
Once I stood in deep forest
Proud and content
My beloved of the laughing dimple
Standing by my side
.....
They dislodged me from my moorings
They tore me from her side
They chipped and chiselled
They gave me an altered dimension.

“They” refers here to those strangers who “came posing and prying and sizing up the stone”. The monolith, in a sense, becomes a waif because it has lost its deep forest on one hand, and the strangers think it as “their new-found trophy” on the other hand. The helpless monolith “protested” and “pleaded” against the inhuman activity, but the strangers went about their ways. This destructiveness is rooted in anthropocentrism, an arrogant view of the male-dominators that they are separate from and superior to nature which exists only to serve their needs. The monolith, like a desperate person, now stands at a village gate or somewhere else and claims of its dissatisfaction, frustration and outcast state of life. It prays the other elements of nature not to unfold its dejected state before its beloved. Thus the stone bewails the oppression exercised upon it by the so-called mighty strangers.

O you element
When you pass by the forest
And my beloved queries
Just tell her
I have gone to my glory
But please, please, never
Tell her the story
Of my ignominy

The ‘quest for roots’, a trend of post-colonial literature has uniquely been reflected in North-east poetry with a reflection of eco-feminism in a major quantum. Ecological degradation has been a common phenomenon all over India since long. But if we look at the main stream Indian poets writing in English, poets like K.N. Daruwalla or A.K. Ramanujan can be traced who have momentary poetic impressions exposing the ecological concerns. Although the North-eastern

region of India has faced the ecological imbalance at a rapid pace, it still retains the unique status of the biodiversity hotspot. The ecological concern and its eco-feminist motivation of the North-eastern poets are unique. In the poems discussed above, Temsula Ao gives her eco-feminist viewpoint while talking about the close relationship between the domination of nature and woman. Glorification of nature on one hand and protest against the exploitation of the earth on the other, in varying forms and degrees, sometimes separate, sometimes appearing together are innate parts of her eco-feminist outlook. 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, it can be said that ecological consciousness of her land makes Temsula Ao an eco-feminist poet and that she finds her poems a suitable medium to create awareness against the dangers of environmental degradation. Ao focuses on the importance of saving trees, because it is sacred, because it is necessary for the survival of people especially for the future generations. She makes an awareness that without environment human beings cannot exist, that due to 'superior power' and capitalist mindset, men have exerting tremendous pressure on the environment. As an eco-feminist poet, Temsula Ao asserts that mother earth can satisfy our needs, but cannot satisfy the thirst of patriarchal society and her reactions in these poems have paved the way for the redressal of the loss caused to the environment and also for the realization of the greatness of envioning relatedness of everything to everything.

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