

INTERRELATION OF ENVIRONMENT AND WOMEN IN THE SELECT LITERARY WORKS OF TEMSULA AO AND MAMANG DAI

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Abstract

This paper intends to explore the interrelationship of women and the environment in the select literary works of Temsula Ao (1945-2022) and Mamang Dai (1957-) within the broader context of ecofeminism. Hailing from two diverse lands – Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh – they are categorized as authors from the Northeast region of the Indian subcontinent and therefore representing a realm that is often bracketed as marginal territory. This paper will argue that these authors have reacted to this delimitation strategy of the so-called mainstream uniquely and preserved the rich cultural and physical diversity of their lands by weaving a tapestry of variegated pictures of their region in their literary works. Critiquing the political, ecological, and social situations of their contemporary period, these writers also depict how people are intrinsically connected to their land which defines their identity. As the paper particularly attempts to analyse their works from an ecofeminist theoretical framework, it aims to situate Ao and Dai as authors whose literary works are charged with multiple significations; the exploration of women and nature is one such facet that posits their works relevant to the theoretical discourses in the contemporary period.

Key Words: Northeast, Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Nature, Women

'The Northeast, geographically and in all other ways, is so unique that it is only those who appreciate this uniqueness and respect it for what it is that can understand the manifestations of our being, our existence, in the literary and cultural domains'- Monalisa Chankija (135)

This observation by Monalisa Chankija, a renowned poet and journalist from Nagaland, posits two most pertinent features about the Northeast region of the Indian subcontinent: its uniqueness and how that is to be appreciated to gauge its literary and cultural representations. This also brings to the forefront several problematic issues. Literature from this region is often categorised as representations from the periphery, therefore it has to negotiate with the so-called mainstream/marginal dichotomy. Second is its medium of representation- we have English renderings of an oral tradition that does not have any written language. The third is, that the heterogeneous voices

of this region are often represented as homogeneous entities and therefore categorised within a bracket term - Northeast. Thus while one is writing or reading about literature from the Northeast, one needs to be keenly aware of its multiple layers of signification.

The paper chooses to study select literary works of two renowned authors from the two diverse lands of the Northeast- Temsula Ao, Nagaland and Mamang Dai, Arunachal Pradesh – from the perspective of ecofeminism which interlinks ecology and feminism. Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for my Head: Stories* and Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* will be referred to and as a point of reference some poems will be studied from Ao's *Songs that Tell, Songs that Try to Say* and Mamang Dai's *River Poems* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. Ecofeminism shifts from the anthropocentric approach of ecocriticism to a critique of androcentrism focusing on women's political, social, cultural/symbolic participation or representation in association with the environment. As women writers both Ao and Dai have represented their land from myriad perspectives. This paper will attempt to study how and to what extent their literary works evoke ecofeminist resonances that can be pertinent to literary discourses of the contemporary period.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism as a theory is gradually gaining ground after being relegated to the background since its emergence during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. Carolyn Merchant has observed that 'Women have had no voice, but ecofeminism is a radical new language. Women must provide the moral energy and determination for both the First and Third Worlds. They are the future and hope in the struggle over life'(Merchant 23). The term, 'ecofeminism' was coined by a French radical feminist, Françoise de'Eaubonne(1920-2005) in her book *Feminism or Death (Le Feminisme ou la mort,1974)* to synthesize two struggles- feminism and ecological movements. She argues that men with an infinite capacity to procreate have not only reduced women as childbearing agents but also have caused the destruction of the earth. According to her rationale, the earth can be saved only when feminism emerges to put an end to the monopoly of male or the domination of patriarchal structure in the society (de'Eaubonne, 178). Having thus created a theoretical basis to address the oppression of earth and women, de'Eaubonne created a platform that gradually became an umbrella term to combine both ecological and feminist movements as ecofeminist discourses. The theory gradually incited wide critical debate and intersected with myriad disciplines. In her essay, 'Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women' Rosemary Radford Ruether explains: '(This) socio-economic form of ecofeminist analysis then sees the cultural symbolic patterns by which both women and nature are inferiorized and identified with each other as an ideological superstructure by which the system of economic and legal domination of women, land, animals is justified and made to appear “natural” and inevitable within a total patriarchal cosmovision' (Ruether 35). Ecofeminists suggest that the twin dominations of nature and women are, in fact, an outcome of a social structure that sanctions the superiority of reason, culture, and men over emotions, nature, and women. Ynestra King, Val Plumwood, and Carolyn Merchant have further explored this discourse from various perspectives. Carolyn Merchant in her book *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* posits that there are different types of ecofeminisms- cultural ecofeminism, liberal ecofeminism, and socialist ecofeminism. While liberal ecofeminism focuses on the implementation of laws, cultural ecofeminism studies the symbolic representation of nature (Merchant 8). Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Claudia Von Werlhof, and Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen focused on the third world perspective of the interrelation between women and nature. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying*

Alive - Women, Ecology, and Survival in India describes Prakriti 'as an embodiment and manifestation of the feminine principle which nurtures creativity, and ensures inter-relationship of all beings'. This concept radically differs, she argues, from the Cartesian concept of Nature as a resource. Shiva coins the term 'maldevelopment' which excludes the feminine, the conservation, and the ecological principle (Shiva 4). The unique feature of the ecofeminist discourse is that it is also a form of activism and a theory. Women all over the world have voiced their concern about preserving, conserving and sustaining nature.

Temsula Ao as an ecofeminist

Temsula Ao's literary works are imbued with the essence of the land she hails from. She was a renowned poet, writer and held the esteemed position of Professor within the Department of English at North Eastern Hill University, Shilong. She also served as Director of the North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur (1992-97). As a writer and a poet, her literary works weave a mosaic of images drawn from Naga myths, folklore, rituals, and her knowledge of world literature. She has been aware of the political turmoil of her place, the spirit of its ethnicity, the mark of marginality, and all of this form the very bedrock of her literary oeuvre. As a prolific writer, she has authored many short stories, poems, and essays to her credit and is widely acknowledged for her scholarly contributions to academic discourses. Ao has published several poetical collections- *Songs that Tell*, *Songs that Try to Say*, *Songs from Here and There*, *Songs of Many Moods*, and *Songs from the Other Life*. Her publications include *Laburnum for My Head*, a short story collection, *Henry James and the Quest for an Ideal Heroine*, *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition* and *These Hills Called Home*.

Ao's poetical collection *Songs That Tell* (1988) is a symphony of her variegated moods which she has woven together. In the poem, 'Songs Dedicatory'(9) she has collected her 'stray thoughts' which she has composed as a 'bouquet'. Despite being personal these are pregnant with varied issues- myths, legends, global, local, and political issues- thoughts that were- to use her own words- 'inchoate and inarticulate'(10). Nagaland – the place she hails from –has witnessed insurgencies and political upheaval. The serene nature with its overwhelming beauty has fostered its people whose lives were often caught in this political imbroglio. Thus a dichotomy between serenity and solicitude remains one of the predominating moods of these lyrics. If the dreams in the morning still sparkle 'Like the dewdrops / On leaves in the sun' with the advent of the day they also fade ('In the Morning' 11). Amongst its varied moods, one can notice how Ao has voiced the marginalization of women in society.

Ao is deeply concerned with the ecological crisis as well as the representation of women in her works. As an ecofeminist writer Ao is keenly aware of how nature is devastated due to human intervention. This violation is often symbolised as the devastation caused to a woman's body. *Songs that Tell* also records a poem called 'Lament for Earth' (45) in which Ao imagines Earth as a woman whose honour has been violated. Earth is imagined in two states- one in her pristine maidenhood adorned with a 'verdant, virgin, vibrant' forest and another when she is devastated due to human intervention. She was a virgin whose canopy had not even been 'penetrated by the mighty sun'. But now she 'lies silent/ Stunned and stumped / with the evidence of her rape'(45). Ecofeminist theory upholds that the violation of women is often symbolically linked with that of the earth. Ao's symbolic representation of the violation of the earth's body by the process of development strengthens this impression. River, the forest's sister, has also been violated – her motion is choked.

No life stirs within her belly now.
The bomb
And the bleaching powder
have left her with no tomorrow. (46)

The deterioration and the exploitation of the earth are equated with the rape of a woman- she has been 'ravaged', 'stripped', and 'damaged'. Ao ends the poem with an appeal to mourn for this earth.

Earthquake is a remarkable poem in her poetic collection, *Songs that Try to Say* (1992). In this poem, Ao describes the effect and cause of tremor that affects lives. Again she imagines, during an earthquake, the earth, like a pregnant woman in her labour pain throws up what is inside her. But it is not the picture of a benevolent mother that is forever nourishing living beings. It is the picture of a hysterical female that can destroy everything.

She subsides
Like a hysterical female
After her fury is spent. (14)

As some of her poems depict the symbolic interconnection of women and her land, Ao's short story 'Laburnum for My Head' offers an interesting study from the ecofeminist point of view. That nature has the enormous capacity to assert itself is strengthened in the sentence ' But nature has a way of upstaging even the hardest rock and granite edifices fabricated by man'(pg 1). The central character here is Latina who instead of a tombstone chooses a laburnum bush to be planted on her grave. The magnificent colour of the flower has fascinated her and she has this only wish to her husband and children who , in their turn, only belittle her describing this wish as an 'unhealthy fetish for laburnum'(3), After her husband's death she visits the graveyard to choose her own place of burial. But her position, as the driver Mapu reminds her, is marked to be behind her husband's. Latina defies this norm and chooses a place where the laburnum bush can grow to adorn her grave. Throughout her life, she strives to get this wish fulfilled and in the end, wins her battle against all patriarchal norms. When she dies the laburnum blooms 'flourishing in an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality'(20). This assertion of nature is Latina's defiance too against all norms which compels a woman to fit into a specific role.

Ao's literary works are so varied that it would be an injustice to view that from a single perspective. Nonetheless, she can be defined as an ecofeminist who as a woman writer shows concern for nature and how women are both symbolically and physically linked to it.

Mamang Dai and Ecofeminist Resonances

Mamang Dai was born on February 23, 1957, at Pasighat to an Adi community, in East Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. She worked as an accredited journalist and held the prestigious position of Programme Officer with World Wide for Nature (WWF), Itanagar Office and worked in the Biodiversity Hotspots Conservation Programme in the field of Research, survey, and

protection of the Flora and Fauna of the eastern Himalayas. Dai was a recipient of the prestigious Padmasree Award for her contributions to the field of education and literature. Her literary works include *The Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill*, *River Poems*, *Midsummer Survival Poems*, and a bilingual work *The Balm of Time*. As one of the leading voices of her land Dai has preserved the intangible heritage of her land in her writings. Prof Nigamananda Das has observed that in Dai's poetry, 'life in Arunachal Pradesh, people's faiths and her own, agriculture, mountains, streams, rivers and stones, myths, and nature's magic, reveal the myriad world of Arunachal's ecology and mysterious and glorious heritage (Das 64-65). Mapping Dai's poems, therefore, from the ecofeminist approaches will limit her views to a narrow gaze. However, this study will show that Dai's work is interspersed with ecofeminist resonances explicitly and implicitly. Ecofeminism posits that the image of earth as a mother who sustains children that is people of her land attains a relevant point in a cultural discourse. One of the tenets of ecofeminism is this symbolic association with the earth as mother, as a sustaining deity. The metaphors of earth-mother and river-woman are the predominant images that recur in Dai's poetry. One of the tenets of ecofeminism is this symbolic association with the earth as a mother and as a sustaining entity. In Dai's poetry, the clan is sustained by mother nature. The image is so poignant in the cultural contours of the land that it recurs in different tropes such as folklore, myths, and religious beliefs of the community. Dai, in her poetical as well as other literary works, has recorded this image of earth mother as a sustaining deity who along with her male counterpart has created this clan and sustained them.

The Missing Link is a poem in *River Poems* that refers to the cloud woman 'always calling from the sanctuary of the gorge' (12). The opening poem is extremely vocal about the impact of the river on the people of the land- 'The river was the green and white vein of our lives linking new terrain'(11). The poem 'Images'(31) recalls the myth where Dai has written about the unity of the earth woman and the sky man. The poem once more depicts the image of the 'earth woman rising to meet her sky lover '(31). The myth of earth woman and sky lover is a theme that pervades the myths of her land. Elwin has pointed out that it is a common belief that the sky and earth were originally joined together. Vedic mythology, Aitareya Brahmana, for example, also mentions the sky and the earth being joined together (Elwin 23). Throughout tribal India, there are stories describing the union and separation of heaven and earth and their subsequent reunion in marriage. To the Adi earth and sky are wife and husband. The Minyongs has described how at first Sedi, the earth, and Melo, the sky , lay close together in the marriage bond. The conceptualization of Earth as a woman is quite common in Adi tribes. Written in a lyrical language that is at the same time melancholic, Dai's verse sways between mythology, ecology, and a yearning for the days that are no more. The poetic self often unifies with nature in an unmistakable sense. The poem 'A Stone Breaks the Sleeping Water' (21)for example, records

Now, when it rains

I equate the white magnolia with perfect joy:

Spring clouds, stroke of sunlight,

The brush strokes of my transformed heart.

This oneness with nature evokes, more than the celebration of nature, a sense of unity that the poet cherishes and desires to be permanent.

The next poem is Tapu (42) which was originally a dance performed by the men during the time of community feasting. Gradually it came to be viewed as a war dance performed to exorcise malevolent spirit. The dance recalls a belief that women who had borne no sons could put on male attire and participate in the dances in the hope of conceiving a son.

Across the barren earth
 The fence stretches the boundaries
 Of the natural world.
 Children are for the blessed
 Only in dreams we hear
 The sights of the unborn. (43)

The phrase 'the barren earth' is charged with layers of meanings- on one hand, it recalls the ecofeminist assertion of imposing woman–earth association, on the other hand, barrenness as something negative quality is to be overcome by invoking the earth mother once more. Tapu dances which changed from women's fertility dances to the celebration of heroism are celebrated in the lap of nature which is so intrinsically connected with the community life. The next poem from this collection is 'Birthplace' (79) which proclaims the birth of the people of the land recalling the theme of viewing nature in the image of a woman – 'We are the children of the rain/of the cloud woman'.

Dai's poetical collection *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* portrays beauties of the land – Dai here writes about the beauty that 'we destroyed / in our hunt for life' ('This Summer' 3). In the poem 'The Sorrow of Women' Dai speaks for women whose life seems to be insignificant compared to other things such as war. Another poem is 'The River' (16) in which Dai writes

I saw a woman floating in a lily pond,
 in a mountain of mist, wrapped in a cloud
 streaming with tendrils and pollen dust.

The poem records the recurring image of associating a woman with the river.

Legends of Pensam, Dai's novel , not only introduces us to lives of Adis but also to the inanimate world where nature is present as a living entity. Dai also offers glimpses on how women of the land had to toil hard in order to survive. The book shows how women participate in sustaining the life of the community. There is a reference to the village of the widows . After the death of Kalen , it is the duty of Omum to carry on the life . 'She fetched the water, lit the evening fire, fed the pigs and chickens and carried on with her life without stopping to pine or utter recriminations'(15). Thus she is like the land, resilient and unperturbed. In another context Dai focuses on the daughters of the village and shows how women's daily lives are interlinked with nature. In the forest they cut wood, crack dry bamboo and pile stray branches seasoned by sun and rain into stacks to be carried back to the village (73). As a contrast to the domesticated space which confines women, Dai records how women have to work amidst nature in order to

provide sustenance for their families. It is interesting to note that Dai has titled a chapter in the text as 'River Woman'. In the depiction of the character Nenem, Dai interconnects the idea of associating river with her. To Hoxo, 'she was like the river, constant, nurturing, self-possessed. Like the river, she was the soul of our land'(121). Thus one can trace cultural ecofeminism which interlinks symbolic representation of woman -nature interconnection interspersing Dai's literary works.

A Comparative analysis

In the works of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, the intangible heritage of their rich cultural tradition finds unique literary expressions. Both of them needed to address the oral tradition of their land which had to be communicated in a written form. Sarma has observed, 'It is interesting to note that amongst the different ethnic communities of the region, the written is an extension and continuation from the oral tradition, and in the works of authors like Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, the oral and the written often straddle the same narrative space'(Sarma, 36). It is also interesting to find that both of them are very much awake and aware of the changing contours of their lands caused by political upheaval or ecological deterioration. In their works, one can trace a passionate yearning to cling to the past and preserve the rich heritage of their land which forms the identity of its people. Yet there are differences in the way both of them have represented and reacted to the changing contours of their land. Analysing their works from the ecofeminist theoretical framework two perspectives become quite obvious- while Ao depicts the violation of Mother Earth in terms of physical assault on a woman's body, Dai evokes the cultural ecofeminist argument of associating Mother Earth/river woman who is both a mythical agent and geographical entity. It may be mentioned in this context that the interrelation between women and the environment can also be traced in the poems of several other writers of the Northeast. Feminist writings of Esther Syiem, Indari Syiem Warjri from Meghalaya, Easterine Iralu from Nagaland, Mona Zote, and Monalisa Chankija have articulated in their works how women are intrinsically connected to their land.

Conclusion

Voices from the Northeast often have to overcome many issues to be registered in the pan-Indian literature. Though bracketed as literature from the margin, these writers celebrate their land, people, and tradition in myriad ways which form unique patches in the tapestry of diversity of India. Both Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai have recorded how women and land are intrinsically connected and portrayed in their literary works, how the land is viewed as a sustaining deity that needs to be protected from violation. They have depicted how women play significant roles in society, their sorrows, lament, and struggle to sustain the traditions of the land. Ecofeminism that asserts the interrelation of ecology and women are thus intrinsically portrayed in their works.

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