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## Echoes of the Earth: Ecological Determinism and Mythic Realism in the Poetry of Temsula Ao

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### Abstract

This article explores the nuanced interplay between ecological determinism and mythic realism in the poetry of Temsula Ao, a pioneering voice from Northeast India whose verses are deeply rooted in the lived realities, oral traditions, and animistic beliefs of her community. It argues that Ao's poetic landscape is not a passive backdrop but a dynamic agent shaping cultural memory, identity, and resistance. Drawing from indigenous cosmology and tribal myths, her poems transform the natural world into an active participant in human fate, echoing both the historical trauma and the enduring resilience of the Naga people. By integrating ecocritical theory, literary naturalism, and indigenous epistemology, this study demonstrates how Ao's work functions as a decolonial archive that challenges dominant narratives which marginalize tribal knowledge and ecological stewardship. Her myth-inflected realism merges folklore with reality to reclaim indigenous histories while confronting the ecological crises and socio-political upheavals of the region. Ultimately, the article contends that Temsula Ao's poetry embodies an eco-mythic poetics of survival, forging a vital connection between land, community, and cultural continuity. In an era of accelerating environmental degradation and cultural homogenization, her verses serve as a timely reminder of the importance of sustaining indigenous wisdom and ecological balance.

**Keywords:** Temsula Ao, ecological determinism, mythic realism, indigenous epistemology, ecocriticism, literary naturalism, oral tradition, Northeast India.

### 1. Introduction

Temsula Ao's poetry stands as a

luminous testament to the profound interdependence of human existence and the

natural world, deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, and ecological fabric of the Naga communities in Northeast India (Ao 2007). Born in Jorhat, Assam, and raised in Nagaland, Ao's early years were shaped by her community's intimate relationship with the forested landscape, seasonal cycles, and an animistic worldview that imbues every element of nature with spirit and agency (Changkija 2021). This unique upbringing is the lifeblood of her poetry, which draws heavily on oral storytelling, tribal myths, and ancestral memory to articulate a vision of life where nature is not a passive backdrop but an active, determining force that governs human fate and preserves cultural continuity (Ngangom 2006).

Within the broader field of Indian English literature, Ao's work occupies a distinctive place. While much of mainstream Indian poetry tends to either romanticize or marginalize the Northeast as remote and 'other,' (Ngangom 2006) Ao's verses dismantle such exoticizing gazes. Instead, she renders her homeland visible as a dynamic site of indigenous knowledge systems, historical trauma, and ecological wisdom (Huggan and Tiffin 2010). Her poetic landscapes—forests, mountains, rivers—are alive with memory and moral agency, bearing witness to the colonial past, political unrest, and the modern ecological crises that threaten both land and identity (Chakrabarty 2009).

This study situates Ao's oeuvre within the intersecting frameworks of ecological determinism and mythic realism. The concept of ecological determinism, often associated with literary naturalism (Pizer 1995; Zola 1893), underscores how nature shapes human behavior and destiny. In Ao's poetry, however, this determinism is not bleak or fatalistic; rather, it is spiritual and restorative, drawing from tribal beliefs that see land and life as interwoven threads in a larger cosmic design (Yimchunger 2022). Mythic realism, on the other hand, allows Ao to blend folklore and reality seamlessly. Her poems resurrect ancestral myths and oral

histories, not as quaint relics, but as vital epistemologies that challenge modernist binaries and resist cultural erasure (Changkija 2021).

By employing insights from ecocriticism (Buell 1995), literary naturalism (Pizer 1995), postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin 2010), and indigenous studies, this paper argues that Ao's poetry functions as a decolonial archive and an act of cultural reclamation. Her verses become a conduit for reasserting indigenous subjectivity and ecological stewardship in the face of external forces that have historically sought to exploit, marginalize, or homogenize the region and its people (Rao 2009). In doing so, she contributes to an emerging body of literature that not only mourns environmental loss but also advocates for a sustainable and respectful relationship with nature.

In an era marked by rapid ecological degradation, climate crisis, and the erosion of indigenous ways of knowing, Temsula Ao's poetry is profoundly relevant. It reminds readers that the health of the land is inseparable from the well-being of its people and that myths and stories carry within them the seeds of resilience and renewal. This study, therefore, seeks to illuminate how Ao's poetic practice exemplifies an eco-mythic poetics of survival, rooted deeply in place, memory, and an unwavering commitment to cultural and ecological balance.

## **2. Literature Review**

The body of critical scholarship on Temsula Ao's poetry has steadily grown over the past two decades, positioning her as a crucial voice in Northeast Indian literature and an influential figure in contemporary postcolonial and ecocritical discourses (Ngangom 2006). Early scholarly readings, such as Robin S. Ngangom's insightful essay (2006), established Ao as a poet deeply committed to preserving tribal identity and oral tradition in a region often misrepresented or ignored in mainstream

Indian literary narratives. Ngangom highlighted how her verses serve as a medium for collective memory, recovering suppressed histories and voicing the silences imposed by colonial and modern state apparatuses.

As critical interest in environmental humanities and ecocriticism gained momentum in South Asian literary studies, scholars began to explore the ecological dimensions of Ao's work. Changkija (2021) (Changkija 2021) argues that Ao's poetic landscapes are not mere backdrops but living entities with agency and ethical presence. Her concept of "eco-mythology" shows how Ao integrates tribal cosmology with ecological consciousness, presenting the natural world as an animate force intertwined with human fate. This aligns with Lawrence Buell's (1995) (Buell 1995) foundational ecocritical assertion that literature can cultivate an "environmental imagination" and become a vehicle for environmental activism and ethical reflection.

In the broader realm of postcolonial ecocriticism, Huggan and Tiffin's (Huggan and Tiffin 2010) influential work *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) provides a vital framework for understanding how formerly colonized landscapes are constructed as both sites of ecological exploitation and grounds for resistance. Ao's poetry resonates strongly with this paradigm. Her depiction of forests, rivers, and mountains serves not only as ecological signifiers but also as historical witnesses to colonial incursions, insurgencies, and continuing marginalization (Huggan and Tiffin 2010). By intertwining environmental and historical consciousness, Ao situates her work within what Huggan and Tiffin describe as a "double critique" – addressing both environmental destruction and the lingering effects of colonial epistemologies.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's (Chakrabarty 2009) provocative essay, "The Climate of History" (2009), further pushes postcolonial scholarship to confront the Anthropocene as an

unavoidable backdrop for historical and literary narratives. In this context, Ao's poetry can be read as an early and intuitive engagement with what Chakrabarty describes as the entanglement of human history with planetary processes. Her verses reflect an acute awareness that cultural survival is inherently linked to ecological stewardship – a theme that connects her work to wider debates on climate justice and indigenous rights.

More recent studies have expanded on these intersections. Yimchunger (2022) (Yimchunger 2022) highlights how Ao's poems function as ecological testimonies, capturing the trauma and resilience embedded in the landscape. By presenting nature as a conscious witness to violence and change, her work subverts anthropocentric notions of agency and foregrounds indigenous epistemologies that recognize the moral life of non-human entities. This stands in contrast to Western literary naturalism (Pizer 1995; Zola 1893), which often portrays determinism as a pessimistic, inescapable fate. Ao reconfigures determinism into a spiritual principle rooted in animism, offering a hopeful vision of continuity and regeneration.

Despite this growing scholarship, a notable gap persists in situating Ao's ecological vision within the literary tradition of naturalism and its determinist underpinnings. While scholars like Pizer (1995) have extensively analyzed naturalism in Western contexts – especially the deterministic philosophies of writers like Émile Zola – few studies have connected this to indigenous frameworks. This article addresses this gap by arguing that Ao appropriates and indigenizes the concept of determinism, transforming it through a mythic lens that aligns with her community's animistic cosmology. Her mythic realism functions not as mere stylistic embellishment but as an epistemological tool that reclaims suppressed tribal knowledge and resists the modern tendency to dismiss folklore as primitive superstition.

Furthermore, ecofeminist thinkers such as Vandana Shiva (Shiva 1989) have long emphasized that indigenous and rural communities possess alternative ecological wisdoms that challenge exploitative development paradigms. Ao's poetic sensibility echoes this standpoint, portraying land not as a commodity but as kin – an ethos that resonates with global calls for environmental justice and sustainability.

In summary, existing literature underscores Ao's significance as an ecologically conscious, myth-infused, and politically engaged poet whose work contributes richly to ecocritical, postcolonial, and indigenous literary studies. By synthesizing insights from multiple disciplines, this review lays the groundwork for a deeper exploration of how Ao's poetry embodies ecological determinism and mythic realism as intertwined strategies for cultural survival and environmental ethics.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that interweaves ecocriticism (Buell 1995; Huggan and Tiffin 2010), literary naturalism (Pizer 1995; Zola 1893), and indigenous epistemology (Shiva 1989) to decode the complex layers in Temsula Ao's poetry.

First, ecocriticism provides a critical lens for interpreting Ao's portrayal of the natural world not as a passive backdrop but as an active, ethical, and sentient force. Drawing on Lawrence Buell's seminal idea of the "environmental imagination" (1995), this perspective emphasizes that literature can foster ecological awareness and act as a cultural agent for environmental responsibility. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) extend this by situating ecocriticism within postcolonial contexts, highlighting how formerly colonized lands are simultaneously

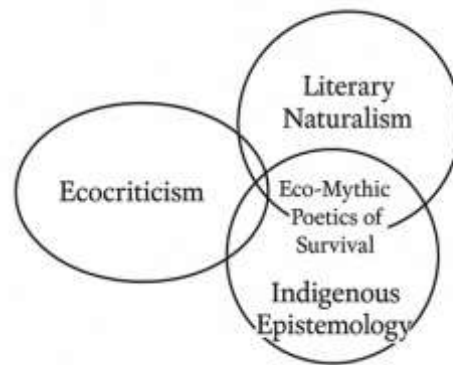
exploited resources and sites of cultural resilience. Ao's work aligns strongly with this view, as her poems infuse the landscape with agency and narrative power, challenging the colonial gaze that treats nature as a commodity.

Second, literary naturalism – informed by the theories of Émile Zola and later articulated by Pizer (1995) – serves to understand Ao's depiction of ecological determinism. Classical naturalism posits that human lives are largely shaped by environment, heredity, and social conditions, often leading to a grim determinism. However, Ao's reworking of this determinism is distinctive: her version is rooted in animistic spirituality and tribal belief systems. Nature in her poetry is both deterministic and regenerative, a moral authority that dictates human fate while also offering the possibility of renewal through respectful coexistence.

Finally, indigenous epistemology frames Ao's use of mythic realism as a valid way of knowing and surviving in a rapidly changing world. For indigenous communities, myth is not mere folklore but an active knowledge system that preserves historical memory and guides ethical relations with the land. This approach rejects the Western dichotomy between myth and reality, validating tribal cosmology as equal to rationalist knowledge structures. By blending myth with realism, Ao's poetry resists epistemic violence and restores indigenous voice in the postcolonial literary space.

Through this tripartite framework, Ao's poetic corpus is read as both a truthful representation of the environmental and historical realities of Northeast India and as an assertion of indigenous worldviews that challenge dominant, often exploitative, narratives about nature and culture.





**Figure 1:** A diagram visually linking Ecocriticism, Literary Naturalism, and Indigenous Epistemology, showing how they intersect in Ao's poetry to shape an "eco-mythic poetics of survival."

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

##### 4.1 Nature as Deterministic and Sacred

One of the most striking features of Ao's poetry is the portrayal of nature as an omnipotent force that shapes individual and communal destinies. Poems like "Stone-People from Lungterok" and "The Old Story Teller" illustrate landscapes imbued with life, memory, and agency (Ao 2007). Forests whisper ancestral secrets; rivers carry both sustenance and stories; mountains stand as eternal witnesses to human folly and resilience.

In her collection *Songs That Tell*, Ao writes:

*"The mountain watches in silence / the futile struggles of men."*

This encapsulates her ecological determinism: human endeavors, however ambitious, are ultimately subject to the moral will of the environment. Yet, unlike the fatalistic naturalism of Zola or Dreiser, Ao's determinism is spiritual and deeply ethical. It demands that humans live in harmony with the rhythms of nature or face the consequences of transgression. This resonates with the animistic belief systems of the Naga people, where every stone, tree, and stream has a spirit and a story (Changkija 2021; Yimchunger 2022).

##### 4.2 Mythic Realism: Reclaiming Indigenous History

Ao's mythic realism is a powerful

narrative strategy that fuses tribal folklore with contemporary socio-political realities, allowing myths to inform present-day identity. In poems like "Laburnum for My Head," the flowering tree becomes more than botanical detail; it symbolizes continuity between generations, rooting the living and the dead in a shared ecological and spiritual cycle.

By embedding myth within realism, Ao refuses the colonial dismissal of tribal cosmology as backward superstition. Instead, her work affirms that myths carry epistemic weight, offering explanations for existence and guidance for ethical living. As Yimchunger (2022) argues, Ao's mythic motifs challenge the rationalist paradigms that underpin modern developmental discourses which often neglect indigenous ecological wisdom.

##### 4.3 Memory, Violence, and Ecological Witness

Ao's landscape is not only alive but also inscribed with the scars of historical and contemporary violence. Northeast India has long been a contested region, marked by colonial annexations, ethnic insurgencies, and militarization. Ao's poetry makes the land a silent yet potent witness to this violence, transforming nature into a repository of collective trauma and resilience (Huggan and Tiffin 2010).

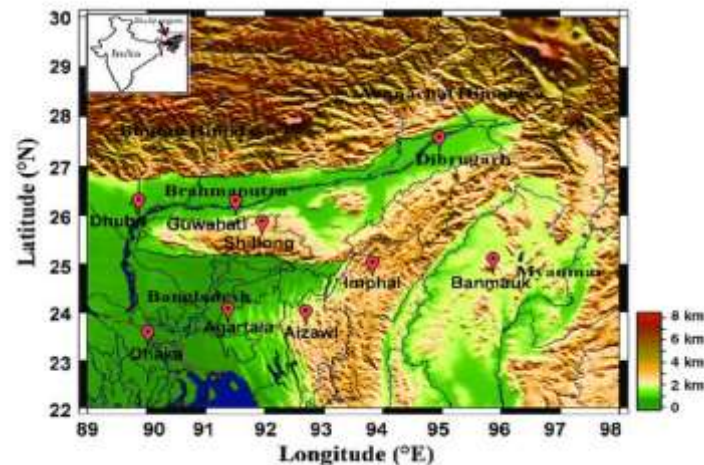
In "Once Upon a Life," Ao writes:

*"The river carried away the secrets, / yet left*

*behind the stains of forgetting."*

This powerful image suggests that while nature may absorb human atrocities, it also retains the imprints of suffering, becoming an ecological witness and archivist of untold

stories. This aligns with Huggan and Tiffin's (2010) insight that postcolonial ecocriticism must reckon with the intertwined histories of environmental degradation and socio-political oppression.



**Figure 2:** A symbolic map of Northeast India highlighting rivers, mountains, and forests that appear in Ao's poems, annotated with select lines showing their role as ecological witnesses.

#### 4.4 Resistance through Eco-Mythic Voice

Perhaps most significantly, Ao's poetry enacts resistance not only through content but also through form and language. By reclaiming oral storytelling traditions and embedding them in English – the language of the former colonizer – she performs what Changkija (2021) (Changkija 2021) aptly calls "**eco-mythic decolonization.**" Her poetic diction is laced with tribal idioms, native plant and animal references, and mythic structures that defy Western narrative norms.

This stylistic strategy resists cultural homogenization and linguistic imperialism. It asserts that indigenous voices can inhabit and transform the dominant language, turning it into a vessel for local epistemologies. In this sense, Ao's eco-mythic voice becomes an act of cultural survival and an assertion of narrative sovereignty (Shiva 1989).

Together, these interconnected analyses demonstrate how Temsula Ao's poetry embodies a unique confluence of ecological awareness, mythic wisdom, and decolonial

politics – positioning her work as an invaluable contribution to contemporary literary and environmental discourse.

#### 5. Conclusion

Temsula Ao's poetry offers a profound and timely articulation of the interconnectedness between human culture, ecological integrity, and mythic consciousness. Through a careful weaving of ecological determinism and mythic realism, Ao reimagines the natural world not merely as passive scenery but as a sentient, moral force that shapes and sustains indigenous identity. Her verses serve as an archive of collective memory, preserving oral traditions, ancestral wisdom, and local cosmology that modernity and colonial histories have long sought to marginalize or erase. In doing so, she reclaims narrative agency for her community, positioning the Naga landscape as both witness and participant in the region's turbulent socio-political past and uncertain ecological future.

The study highlights that Ao's ecological determinism does not replicate the

fatalistic undertones of classical Western naturalism. Instead, rooted in animistic beliefs, her determinism is imbued with a spiritual dimension that emphasizes harmony, respect, and cyclical renewal. Her mythic realism further strengthens this vision by entwining folklore with contemporary realities, creating a poetic language that resists epistemic violence and restores cultural pride. Together, these strategies form what may be called an eco-mythic poetics of survival – a literary mode that is at once decolonial, ecological, and deeply humanistic.

In the age of climate crisis, cultural homogenization, and environmental exploitation, Ao's poetry resonates beyond regional boundaries. It calls for an urgent rethinking of our relationship with the land, urging readers to acknowledge indigenous perspectives that view nature as kin rather than resource. Her work underscores that safeguarding cultural diversity is inseparable from protecting ecological balance.

Future research could build on this study by exploring how Ao's eco-mythic vision could inform contemporary environmental ethics, policy frameworks, and indigenous rights movements, especially in ecologically vulnerable and politically marginalized regions. Ultimately, Tamsula Ao's poetic voice stands as a testament to the resilience of indigenous wisdom – reminding us that in myth, memory, and land lie the seeds of cultural and ecological regeneration.

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