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The Ethnobiologist's Verse: Temsula Ao's Poetic Synthesis of Ao Naga Ecology and Cultural Preservation

Pankaj Gogoi[1*],Dr. Prabuddha Ghosh[2], Prasant Mali[3]
[1]Assistant professor, Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University
[2]Assistant professor, Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University
[3]Assistant professor, Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University

Abstract
*Temsula Ao (1945–2022), the seminal Naga poet-ethnographer, cultivated a six-decade poetic corpus that transcends aesthetic expression to become a biocultural manifesto for indigenous sustainability. Through ecocritical analysis of her complete poetic oeuvre–*Songs That Tell *(1988),* Songs That Try to Say *(1992),* Songs of Many Moods *(1995),* Songs from Here and There *(2003),* Songs from the Other Life *(2007), and* Songs along the Way Home *(2017)–this research establishes Ao as a pioneering voice in decolonial ecopoetics. Her work documents the violent disintegration of human-nature reciprocity under extractive capitalism while preserving ancestral ecological knowledge as regenerative pathways. Her poetry demonstrates that cultural continuity is the bedrock of ecological resilience, positioning poetry as a vessel for biocultural preservation. Methodologically, this study employs frames of interdisciplinary ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and ethnopoetics to explore how Ao's poetry becomes both elegy for ecological loss and blueprint for regenerative futures.*

INTRODUCTION: The Poet as Ethnobiologist and the Naga Cosmos

Temsula Ao (1945-2022) forged a revolutionary poetic idiom that transcended literary aesthetics to become an act of ecological and cultural stewardship. Her unique position as both an Ao Naga ethnographer and visionary poet enabled a synthesis of scientific precision and lyrical power, transforming her verse into living archives of indigenous environmental knowledge. Through six poetry collections spanning three decades, Ao documented Northeast India's biodiversity while interrogating the forces threatening its survival—from militarization to extractive capitalism. Her work constitutes a decolonial ecopoetics that centers Naga cosmological frameworks as sustainable paradigms for the Anthropocene. This paper also examines how Ao's ethnographic rigor, grounded in traditions like the *Lijaba* creation narrative shaped a poetic practice that functions simultaneously as ethnobiological discourse, cultural *memoria*, and ecological resistance.

Ao's environmental vision emerged from her dual identity as scholar and cultural insider. As Director of North East Zone Cultural Centre, Ao worked toward preservation of Ao Naga oral traditions including the *Lijaba* cosmogony, according to which the creator deity designed Nagaland's rugged terrain. This cosmology perceives landscapes as intentional creations rather than accidental formations, establishing a framework of sacred geography that permeates Ao's poetry. Temsula Ao's poetic oeuvre is a resonant tapestry of cultural memory, ecological wisdom, and indigenous cosmology. Her works articulate an ardent engagement with the land and its vegetal, spiritual, and communal significance, often structured around ethnobotanical knowledge embedded in the Naga way of life. In the poems from her *Book of Songs* (2013), Ao foregrounds an ethnobiological framework that intertwines ecological sustainability with poetic expression, offering insights into the Naga people's relationship with nature.

One of the foundational elements in this ethnobiological worldview is the figure of *Lijaba*, the Earth-Maker, whose mythic presence sanctifies the land. In the poem "My Hills", Ao invokes the spiritual geography of the Naga landscape, transforming hills and forests into sacred entities (Ao, 2013, p. 157). This sacred geography is not merely symbolic; it reflects a deep-seated ecological ethic in which the environment is seen as a living, spiritual force. Plants, trees, and topography are not passive resources but active participants in a shared ecological order. By poeticizing *Lijaba*'s connection to the land, Ao articulates a form of environmental reverence that situates the earth as a sacred being deserving of care and restraint. In "Prayer of a Monolith", the oath stones—culturally significant stone markers—are depicted as silent witnesses to communal vows and moral obligations (Ao, 2013, p. 293). These stones symbolize ritual restraint in hunting, a principle that includes the protection of certain species and reverence for forest-dwelling spirits. The ecological wisdom embedded in this practice is inherently ethnobiological, as it informs how and when flora and fauna may be used without endangering their survival. Ao's poem gives voice to the monolith, blending vegetal stillness with moral agency, and foregrounding a tradition that ensures biodiversity through cultural discipline. Rooted in Naga tradition, the idea of reciprocity

promotes equitable distribution of work and resources based on mutual obligation and social harmony. Ao's poem "A Village Morning" is a vivid portrayal of the daily life in a rural village (Ao, 2013, p. 181). Through a series of vignettes, Ao captures the essence of morning activities, emphasizing the woman's role as the central figure managing domestic chores, familial duties, and community interactions. The poem is set in a traditional rural village, where life revolves around agriculture, domestic chores, and communal responsibilities. Ao paints a detailed picture of the woman's morning routine, beginning with the disruptive sound of the cock crowing. This initial image sets the tone for the poem, highlighting the inevitability of the day's tasks and the woman's reluctance to leave her slumber. The woman's day starts early, dictated by the needs of her family and the community. She engages in a series of tasks—from stirring embers and cooking rice to attending to her children and livestock—that underline her pivotal role in sustaining daily life.

Together, these poems form a coherent ethnobiological framework where ecological sustainability is not an abstract ideal but a lived reality, encoded in myth, ritual, and communal practice. Ao's poetry thus performs a dual function: it preserves traditional ecological knowledge and reanimates it within contemporary environmental discourse. Her work invites readers to rethink the biological world not as inert matter but as an active, moral, and cultural force. In an era of environmental degradation, Ao's poetic ethnobiology offers a vital counter-narrative—one in which the land is sacred, resources are shared, and plants are part of a moral ecology. Her poetry becomes an archive of sustainable practices and a testament to the ecological intelligence of indigenous way of life.

Theoretical Grounding and Research Methodologies

Ao's work demands analysis through interconnected theoretical lenses of indigenous ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and ethnopoetics. Poetry from Northeast India occupies a unique place in Indian literature, offering a tapestry of ecological consciousness deeply embedded in indigenous traditions, oral narratives, and intimate relationships with land, flora, and fauna. Ecocriticism, a theoretical framework that studies the interrelationship between literature and the physical environment, provides a compelling lens through which to examine this regional corpus. In the poetry of Northeast Indian writers, especially those from tribal communities, the natural world is not a backdrop but a living, breathing presence—often personified, revered, and mourned when violated. Ecocriticism as a literary approach emphasizes the environment as an active agent in narrative, foregrounding the ethical, cultural, and political implications of human-nature interaction. In the context of Northeast India, where the communities have historically lived in symbiotic relation with nature, poets articulate ecological themes not as abstract concerns but as lived realities. Their works reflect an indigenous cosmology where rivers, hills, trees, and animals are imbued with spiritual significance and cultural identity. Temsula Ao, a poet and folklorist from Nagaland, offers a sincere ecocritical vision in her poetry. Ao's verses often speak of deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and environmental degradation as forms of cultural erasure and gendered violence. In poems like "The Bald Giant" and "The Old Story-Teller", nature is both witness and victim of colonization—whether by the state, market forces, or patriarchal norms (Ao, 2013, p. 178, p. 240). Through her use of native imagery and oral cadence, Ao resists the binaries of culture or nature and presents ecological loss as an existential crisis. Other poets from the region, such as Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh and Desmond Kharmawphlang from Meghalaya, also foreground the environment as an extension of identity. Dai's poetry draws from Adi tribal myths where rivers are sentient and mountains sacred. Her work *The River Poems* portrays nature not just as a physical entity but as a repository of memory, emotion, and ancestral wisdom (Dai, 2013). Similarly, Kharmawphlang's poetic attention to Khasi oral traditions preserves an ecological consciousness that counters modern alienation and capitalist exploitation of natural resources (Kharmawphlang, 2009). What distinguishes Northeast Indian ecopoetry is its rootedness in indigeneity—a worldview that refuses to separate human life from ecological rhythms. Unlike strands of Western ecocriticism that focus on nature as a site of retreat or purity, these poets deal with landscapes under siege: forests cleared for development, rivers polluted, and mountains mined. Their poems function as both elegy and protest, articulating environmental grief and political resistance simultaneously. Ecofeminism, a theoretical framework that connects the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women, provides a powerful lens to examine the literary voices emerging from this region. Many women poets from Northeast India articulate environmental degradation and patriarchal violence as interconnected forms of systemic domination. Temsula Ao's poetry exemplifies this ecofeminist nexus. In poems such as "Mothers-II" and "Old" she foregrounds the female body as both a site of resistance and vulnerability, often paralleling it with wounded landscapes (Ao, 2017, p. 73).

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The female protagonists in her poems endure domestic violence, social marginalization, and spiritual alienation—experiences that are mirrored in the destruction of forests, the drying up of rivers, and the erosion of traditional values. The landscape is not merely a setting but an extension of the feminine self—wounded, desecrated, and yet resilient. Similarly, Mamang Dai's *The River Poems* depict nature as a maternal force intimately tied to the cycles of life and death (Dai, 2013). Her poetic voice often laments the severance of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands, equating ecological loss with the disintegration of identity and womanhood. Through the ecofeminist lens, these poets critique the dual hierarchies of patriarchy and anthropocentrism. Their works advocate for a return to indigenous values that honour both the earth and the feminine principle, resisting extractive logics that view both as passive and exploitable. Ethnopoetics is a theoretical and critical approach that explores poetry—especially indigenous, oral, and non-Western traditions—by paying attention to its cultural, linguistic, performative, and spiritual contexts. It emerged in the 1960s and 1970s through the work of scholars and poets like Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, who aimed to challenge Eurocentric literary standards by valuing the aesthetic and structural elements of oral and tribal traditions. Ethnopoetics emphasizes the importance of tradition, ritual, and environment in shaping poetic expression. When applied to poetry—particularly from indigenous or marginalized communities—it focuses on how poems are embedded in community memory, myth, and spirituality, rather than just literary forms. Unlike conventional literary criticism, ethnopoetics recognizes that much poetry—especially from tribal and indigenous cultures—is not written but spoken, sung, chanted, or performed. It values repetition, rhythm, silence, and breath as integral parts of poetic structure, not merely as rhetorical effects. Ethnopoetics treats indigenous and local languages, symbols, and metaphors on their own terms, without forcing them into Western aesthetic molds. It pays close attention to how people express relationships with nature, ancestors, deities, and the cosmos, which is vital in understanding poetry from places like Northeast India. By bringing marginalized poetic forms to the forefront, ethnopoetics helps decolonize literary study. It legitimizes diverse ways of knowing and expands the definition of what poetry can be, valuing local forms such as folktales, chants, riddles, and spiritual invocations.

Challenging Western conservation models, Ao centers Naga epistemologies where humans participate in ecological networks rather than dominate them. Kyle Whyte's indigenous climate studies illuminate how poems like "Jacaranda Longings" reframe biodiversity loss as cultural amnesia: "I've done with my blooming / I now have only jacaranda longings" (Ao, 2013, p. 188). Her documentation of "the man-made lake" exemplifies the significance of community-led sustainability. Ao consistently exposes the parallel oppressions of women and nature. The poem "Lament for an Earth" depicts deforestation through visceral rape imagery: "Alas for the forest / Which now lies silent / Stunned and stumped / With the evidence / Of her rape" (Ao, 2013, p. 42). The violated forest mirrors tribal women's bodies during conflict, embodying Vandana Shiva's argument that patriarchal violence targets both (Shiva, 2010). Jerome Rothenberg's "total translation" explains Ao's formal innovations of oral aesthetics and mythic resonance (Rothenberg, 2004). Poems like "Blood of Other Days" use incremental repetition mimicking Ao Naga storytelling: "Head-takers became acclaimed / Tribal heroes, earning the merit / To wear special cloths and ornaments / And live in grand houses" (Ao, 2013, p. 296).The poem "Earthquake" reworks Lijaba narratives, portraying geological fury as divine retribution: "She heaves and hurtles / As if to uproot / The very moorings / Of life" (Ao, 2013, p. 69). Sukracharjya Rabha's ecological performance theory(Collins and Nisbet, 2012, p.102) illuminates Ao's kinetic imagery. Rabha's emphasis on "nature-human symbiosis" resonates with Ao's plant metaphor in "The Garden": "A slice of the earth / On the ground, / Or farmed in pots / Of any imaginable / Size, shape and colour / Becomes the receptacle / For new life." (Ao, 2013, p. 71)—a horticultural ideal mirroring Rabha's minimalist staging rejecting 'exaggerated and excessive modes'.

Three methodological approaches decode Ao's ethnobiological poetics, viz. textual archaeology, ecocritical historicism, and comparative mythology. In the framework of textual archaeology, close reading across six collections of Ao's poetry reveals systemic ethnobiological documentation. The *Book of Songs* (2013) catalogues native flora (e.g., bamboo, jacaranda) and fauna (e.g., frog, bat, snake, firefly), positioning biodiversity as cultural heritage. In *Songs along the Way Home* (2017) Ao employs mycorrhizal metaphors for cultural memory: "Like the stubborn lichen / clinging to a craggy rock-face" (Ao, 2013, p. 1). Correlating Ao's poems with Northeast India's environmental history exposes socio-ecological traumas of colonial extraction. For instance, "The Bald Giant" references 19th-century British timber exploitation that devastated old-growth forests (Ao, 2013, p. 175). Under the purview of comparative mythology, tracing *Lijaba* motifs in the poems uncovers Ao's cosmological subversion. Traditional tales depict *Lijaba*, the Ao Naga deity believed to be the creator of mankind, reimagined in her poem "Appeasement" as one who is "angry, and must be appeased with human blood" (Ao, 2013, p. 267). Further, in another poem entitled "The Spear", depicts an event – a hunter accidentally killing a doe with his spear (Ao,

2013, p. 277). At its core, the poem examines the intricate relationship between humans and animals, emphasizing themes of respect, responsibility, and the consequences of human actions on the natural world. The accidental killing of the doe symbolizes the disruption of harmony between humans and nature, prompting the hunter to confront the ethical implications of his actions and seek reconciliation with the natural order.

Ecological Witness and Indigenous Resistance in Temsula Ao's Early Poetry (1988–1995)

Temsula Ao's first three poetry collections—*Songs That Tell* (1988), *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), and *Songs of Many Moods* (1995)—form a trilogy of ecological witness that documents the violent unraveling of human-nature relationship. Through visceral corporeal imagery and animistic personification and precision, Ao crafts an unparalleled poetic chronicle of environmental catastrophe, biocultural erosion, and indigenous resistance. Her work transcends mere protest to become a sacred archive of Naga ecological knowledge, positioning poetry as both lamentation and lifeline for sustainable futures. In her debut collection *Songs That Tell* (1988), Ao weaponizes lyricism to expose ecological violence through three interconnected visions, viz. deforestation as gendered violence, inequitable resource distribution, and sacred ecology. In "Lament for an Earth", Ao pioneers an ecofeminist poetics where industrial logging becomes anatomical rape. The poem's opening stanzas juxtapose a lost Edenic forest–"Verdant, virgin, vibrant / With tall trees / In majestic splendor"—against its violated present: "Alas for the forest / Which now lies silent / Stunned and stumped / With the evidence / Of her rape" (Ao, 2013, p. 42). Machinery transforms into predatory entities: "elephants" of greed "trample""her breasts" while lorries "rumble / Loaded with her treasures / Bound for the mills" (Ao, 2013, p. 42). This corporeal cartography extends to rivers, imagined as the forest's sister, now "muddy, mis-shapen / Grotesque / Choking with the remains" of clear waters where deer once drank "crystal mouthful / As though it was honey" (Ao, 2013, p. 43). Ao's imagery parallels Sukracharya Rabha's critique of 'modern technological strangleholds' severing humanity's vital affinity with nature (Collins and Nisbet, 2012, p. 145)."Blessings" employs sacramental irony to critique capitalist extraction. The poem's beatitude-inspired structure ("Blessed are the poor…") exposes how the rich "possess / The granaries of the earth" *yet* "knowing no hunger / Cannot savour / Of their plenty," while the poor inherit only "crumbs / From the table of excess" (Ao, 2013, p. 15). Ao links this caloric injusticeto ecological blindness: "Blessed are the blind / For they see not / What they with sight / Have done to the light" (Ao, 2013, p. 16). The "granaries of the earth" symbolize nature's plunder for elite benefit, contrasting with Naga grain-sharing feasts that enforced distributive ethics."Prayer of a Monolith" resurrects animistic traditions through lithic sentience. Standing stones (Oath Stones) embody ancestral covenants: "We stand guard / Between earth and sky / Holding stories / Of restraint" (Ao, 2013, p. 294). These monoliths materialize spiritual governance—hunting taboos prohibiting overkill, fallow cycles ensuring soil regeneration—positioned as antidotes to industrial rapacity. Ao's personification transforms stone into ecological witness: "Our shadows grow long / With the weight of broken promises" (Ao, 2013, p. 294).In the 1992 poetry collection entitled *Songs That Try to Say* Ao depicts nature's retribution by intensifying her ecological warnings through geological personification and cultural elegy. In the poem "Earthquake" reimagines terra firma as an enraged maternal body. Rejecting tropes of nature as life-giver, Ao depicts earth "contort[ing] / To throw up her secret / Not life / But death and disaster" (Ao, 2013, p. 69). The poem's seismic violence–"She gapes open / To devour / Toppled towers / And torn limbs"—culminates in apocalyptic rebellion: "She heaves and hurtles / As if to uproot / The very moorings / Of life" (Ao, 2013, p. 70). This tectonic fury mirrors Rabha's 'interrogation of technological strangleholds', framing earthquakes as ecological retribution for extractivism (Collins and Nisbet, 2012, p.142).The poem "A Strange Place" depicts epistemic uprooting by linking modernisation to cultural amnesia. Ao critiques the global political landscape, depicting nations vying "For mastery of the skies" (Ao, 2013, p. 13) while disregarding the plight of birds drowned out by the noise of jets. This juxtaposition underscores the prioritization of technological advancement and military dominance over environmental and humanitarian concerns. Ao's third poetry collection, *Songs of Many Moods* (1995) documents vanishing ecological synchronicities through species-specific elegies, in which biodiversity becomes a cultural archive. Ao's poem "An Old Tree" portrays the plight of an aging tree through vivid imagery and introspective reflection. The poem evokes a sense of empathy towards the tree's gradual decline and existential uncertainty. It opens with a straightforward declaration: "I stand by the highway / An old tree" (Ao, 2013, p. 145). This establishes the tree as the central subject and sets the tone of contemplation and resignation. The speaker reflects on the tree's relationship with its environment and its gradual decline. The earth, once protective and sustaining, has given way to the harsh elements — the highway, the summer's rain and winter's frost. This environmental struggle mirrors the challenges faced by the tree in maintaining its resilience and survival.

Interconnecting Threads: Ao's Ecological Poetics and Sustainable Alternatives

Ao consistently maps ecological violence onto female bodies—forests as raped virgins, earth as vengeful mothers, rivers as abused sisters. This ecofeminist lexicon is identified as the deplorable condition and victimization of mother nature by patriarchal society. Her imagery reveals how land and women become dual territories of conquest under militarized extractivism.The trajectory of Temsula Ao's poetic evolution culminates in a sincere exploration of sustainable alternatives during her middle period (2003-2007), where she transitions from documenting ecological trauma to articulating regenerative paradigms. In *Songs from Here and There* (2003) and *Songs from the Other Life* (2007), Ao synthesizes her ethnographic precision, ecofeminist consciousness, and Naga cosmological frameworks to envision models of biocultural resilience that counter the destructive forces of modernity. This phase represents not merely protest but a pattern of coexistence, positioning indigenous knowledge as vital counter-narratives to extractive modernity (Shiva, 20130, p. 22).

In the volume entitled *Songs from Here and There* (2003), Ao constructs a dialectical geography that juxtaposes Naga landscapes against urban environments, revealing the ecological costs of displacement while affirming place-based sustainability. The poem "The Bald Giant" is a poignant exploration of the transformation of nature over time, the impact of human intervention, and the existential fears associated with mortality and decay. The central theme of the poem revolves around the transformation of a once majestic tree, symbolically referred to as the "bald giant" (Ao, 2013, p. 175). The tree undergoes a stark transformation from its former beauty—adorned with a "green cloak of summer" and "golden patches" in autumn—to its current state of barrenness and decay. This transformation highlights the inevitable passage of time and the effects of human activities such as logging. In "Jacaranda Longings", Ao skillfully contrasts the natural beauty of the jacaranda trees with man-made structures such as the grotto and the cathedral. The jacarandas near these architectural landmarks compete for attention, symbolizing the enduring allure of nature amidst human constructs. The tree by the lake, described as shining "Like a string of amethyst / Round a princess' neck" (Ao, 2013, p. 189), evokes a sense of natural splendor and preciousness that transcends the artificiality of its surroundings. This contrast highlights Ao's exploration of how nature persists and asserts its presence even in urban environments. In another poem "Icarus", the 'text' transitions from Icarus's mythological flight to the modern era, where human ingenuity has led to technological marvels such as airplanes. Ao contrasts Icarus's personal tragedy with humanity's collective achievements in aviation, suggesting a continuum of ambition and innovation throughout history. Ao raises ethical questions about the uses and consequences of technological advancements. The evolution of flight—from a symbol of human aspiration to a tool of warfare—highlights the dual nature of innovation, capable of both progress and destruction.

Ao's *Songs from the Other Life* (2007) can be interpreted as an exploration of ecofeminist resilience and embodied knowledge set against a backdrop of environmental distress and cultural tradition. The poem "Appeasement" is steeped in the cultural practices of the Naga tribes, particularly the Ao-Nagas, who historically engaged in rituals involving sacrifices to appease gods during times of environmental hardship, such as droughts or famines. *Lijaba*, referenced in the poem, represents the deity or spirit to whom sacrifices are made, symbolizing the primal forces believed to govern life and death in the Naga worldview (Ao, 2013, p. 268). The poem addresses issues of gender inequality and vulnerability within traditional societies. The selection of a young maiden as a potential sacrifice highlights the systemic oppression and objectification of women, whose bodies are often commodified and sacrificed to appease male-dominated power structures. In "A Village Morning", Ao explores traditional gender roles within the village context (Ao, 2013, p. 182). The woman's day starts early, dictated by the needs of her family and the community. She engages in a series of tasks—from stirring embers and cooking rice to attending to her children and livestock—that underline her pivotal role in sustaining daily life. The poem underscores the interconnectedness of village life. The woman's actions ripple through the community: feeding pigs, fetching water, and instructing her children are not merely personal duties but contributions to the village's collective welfare. Ao portrays the woman's resilience amidst adversity. Despite limited resources and the physical toll of her labor, she manages her tasks with efficiency and determination. Her ability to navigate through challenges—like the scarcity of water and the husband's indifference—reflects the resilience required to sustain life in rural environments.

Regenerative Visions in Temsula Ao's *Songs along the Way Home* (2017)

Ao's poems portray the natural environment as integral to identity, survival, and memory. Poems like "Wood-Smoke", "Heritage", and "Mother" are replete with sensory imagery of hearths, forests, rivers, and hillsides that sustain communities both materially and spiritually. In "Wood-Smoke", the domestic hearth signifies not only physical nourishment but also the continuity of cultural practices tied to the land. Similarly, "Heritage" reflects on how artefacts and natural resources, when uprooted, lose their "original aura," symbolizing the disruption of

sustainable indigenous practices by modern appropriation (Ao, 2017, p. 63). Sustainability is also a key undercurrent in "Possessions" and "Treasures", which question materialistic obsessions and affirm the value of "mundane" resources and relationships. In "Mothers–II", the earth is personified as a violated mother, "denuded" by exploitative practices, warning that humanity's self-destructive exploitation of natural resources threatens planetary survival (Ao, 2017, p. 73). The critique of human greed in "Bonsai-God"—where the failure to manipulate a tree into divinity becomes a metaphor for unsustainable human intervention—further underscores Ao's ecological vision (Ao, 2017, p. 13). Ao's poetry resonates strongly with indigenous ecocritical frameworks, which foreground the interdependence of humans and non-humans. In "Song-Bird", the disappearance of avian melodies reflects a larger disruption in the natural order caused by captivity and habitat destruction (Ao, 2017, p. 25). Similarly, "The Path" uses the village track as a metaphor for community knowledge and ecological harmony passed through generations. In "Grandchildren" and "Legacy", the poet articulates how cultural memory and ecological wisdom are inherited together (Ao, 2017, p. 38, 75). "Heaven and Earth" also critiques abstract religious geographies, arguing instead that heaven is "where my heart throbs and earth that clime where it ought to thrive," expressing an indigenous cosmology rooted in the land (Ao, 2017, p. 40). Poems such as "The Accidental Pilgrim" and "When You Reach Home" further reflect indigenous philosophies of journey and return, wherein the land and its rhythms dictate spiritual and communal wellbeing (Ao, 2017, p. 57-61). The cycle of life and death in nature evoked in "Evening Casualties", "Dirge", and "End of Days" parallels traditional beliefs about mortality and ecological regeneration (Ao, 2017, p. 86, 93). Temsula Ao's work often situates the exploitation of the environment alongside the marginalization of women, echoing ecofeminist concerns. In "Mothers–I" and "Mothers–II", the imagery of Earth as a ravaged mother parallels the lived realities of impoverished women who are left to sustain their families amidst ecological and economic collapse (Ao, 2017, p. 70-73). Similarly, in "The Edge" and "Home-Coming", domestic violence against women is depicted alongside the destruction of domestic and natural spaces, suggesting interconnected systems of patriarchal and environmental domination (Ao, 2017, p. 16-18).The poem "Daughters" directly addresses gendered anxieties about lineage and inheritance, while "Mother" and "Legacy" reframe motherhood as a site of strength and continuity (Ao, 2017, p. 67, 75). These representations of women as custodians of culture and ecology echo ecofeminist ideas that value traditionally "feminine" practices of care, sustainability, and community building. Ao's poetic style often reflects the oral traditions and narrative modes of her indigenous heritage, aligning with ethnopoetics. Many of her poems, such as "Forgive Me", "The Path", and "When You Pray", incorporate the rhythms of speech, proverbial wisdom, and community storytelling (Ao, 2017, p. 52-55). This aesthetic preserves the voice of elders and ancestral memory, ensuring the survival of cultural knowledge. In "Heritage", the poet explicitly contemplates the alienation of artefacts from their cultural origins, while in "Wood-Smoke" and "Mother", everyday practices like cooking, farming, and storytelling become vessels for cultural transmission. "My Own Music" similarly foregrounds personal and collective memory through music, a key oral tradition. Through "Glory Days", "For Christ and All", and "Be Not Afraid", Ao also documents the intersections of Christianity and Naga cosmology, showing how indigenous spirituality adapts and survives (Ao, 2017, p. 44-49). This documentation is not nostalgic but dynamic, reflecting the evolving forms of cultural sustainability. Several poems, including "Evening", "Evening-Spectres", "Evening Upon Me", "Silence of Evening", and "Last Songs", use twilight and evening as metaphors for both human mortality and environmental decline (Ao, 2017, p. 85, 94). These poems convey a sense of urgency, suggesting that the erosion of ecological and cultural systems parallels the passage of time. In "Exile", the "evening of the soul" becomes the ultimate form of alienation, signaling a loss of connection to community and environment (Ao, 2017, p. 81).

Ao's sixth and final poetry collection, *Songs along the Way Home* (2017), represents a pinnacle of biocultural wisdom where ecological stewardship, ancestral memory, and spiritual syncretism converge. Published when Ao was 74, this introspective work moves beyond documenting environmental trauma to model regenerative futures through Naga cosmological frameworks. The collection culminates Ao's ethnographic-poetic journey, affirming that "the truest map home" lies in honoring ecological kinship. As she stated at its Dimapur launch: "Whatever I write comes from inner urge to acknowledge" (Ao, 2019). Unlike her earlier eco-elegies, this collection—described by Heritage Publishing House as her 'most introspective work'—centers biocultural renewal through ancestral protocols. Ao's late style embraces what she termed "the natural sweetness of life" (Ao, 2019), weaving childhood memories of Changki village with visionary appeals for ecological continuity. Three key innovations define this collection – intergenerational witness, where poems address grandchildren as future custodians; and ritual syncretism which maintains that Christian and animist traditions merge in agrarian rites. These elements reflect Ao's deepening engagement with Sukracharya Rabha's *rasong* philosophy—"the being of

existence" rooted in "community participation and Nature-Human symbiosis" (Collins and Nisbet, 2012, p.265). Having witnessed Nagaland's militarization and deforestation, Ao offers not lament but ceremonial blueprints for healing fractured human-nature relationships.

CONCLUSION

Ao transcends mere lamentation by activating oral tradition as a living conservation strategy. Her poetry functions as archival ecology, reviving mythic sanctions that enforce ecological ethics and engaging in taxonomic resistance by preserving ethnobiological lexicons. This deliberate linguistic and narrative act counters epistemicide and keeps indigenous ecological knowledge vibrant and relevant. As Ganesh Devy observed, Nagaland was for Ao "the 'orange tree' that remained with her" wherever she went – a symbol of rootedness, specific identity, and generative potential (Devy, 2023). Her poetry is the fruit of that tree, offering not just the taste of a specific land and culture, but the seeds for a more sustainable and just future. It is a future predicated on listening to the wails of the ghosts of trees, heeding the lessons embedded in ancestral stories and names, and recognizing, as Ao implored, that accepting difference can "mean transcending the 'local' to discover the 'universal'" (Ao, 2010, p. 169). In a world facing cascading ecological crises, Temsula Ao's voice from the Northeast resonates as a profound and urgent call to rebuild our relationship with the earth on principles of care, respect, and enduring reciprocity – principles encoded in the very language and stories of her people. Her work stands as a vital bridge between indigenous ecological knowledge and the global imperative for sustainability, demanding recognition not as regional literature, but as essential planetary wisdom.

Ao's poetry, rooted in the ecological and cultural landscapes of Northeast India, frequently engages with environmental degradation as a deeply gendered experience. Her poems do not merely lament the loss of forests; they frame deforestation as a form of gendered violence, where the destruction of the land is paralleled with the violation of the female body. This thematic convergence reflects an indigenous ecofeminist worldview in which the earth is perceived as feminine, generative, and nurturing—and its violation represents both ecological and patriarchal aggression. Ao's metaphorical association of land with womanhood is most powerfully articulated through the poetic embodiment of hills, forests, and rivers as maternal figures. In poems such as "My Hills" and "Stone-People from Lungterok", the land is personified as a nurturing entity, provider of sustenance, wisdom, and spiritual grounding (Ao, 2013, p. 109, 107). The loss of forest cover, then, is not simply a matter of ecological concern; it signifies a rupture in the cultural and gendered lifeworlds of indigenous communities. The trees are not mere timber—they are maternal protectors, memory keepers, and carriers of tradition. Deforestation in Ao's poetry often coincides with narratives of displacement, poverty, and women's suffering, suggesting that ecological violence disproportionately impacts female bodies and roles. In agrarian and tribal communities, women are the primary gatherers of forest produce—firewood, herbs, and food—which are not just economic resources but symbolic extensions of their reproductive and nurturing identities. The stripping of forests leads to an erosion of women's autonomy, safety, and cultural authority. Ao subtly renders this through poetic silences and absences—where once vibrant, green settings are replaced by emptiness, despair, and dislocation. Moreover, deforestation in her work often allegorizes colonial and patriarchal conquest. The imposition of commercial forestry, capitalist land use, and extractive economies is depicted as an intrusion—much like the historical colonization of indigenous lands and women's bodies. The forest, feminized and fertile, is subjected to domination and control. This analogy draws from a long-standing ecofeminist tradition which sees the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women as structurally interconnected under systems of patriarchy and capitalism. In poems like "The Old Story-Teller" Ao presents a generational rupture—elders mourn the fading forest and the vanishing tales tied to it, while younger women are shown as increasingly estranged from both the land and their inherited knowledge systems (Ao, 2013, p. 240). Here, the erasure of forests becomes an erasure of feminine epistemologies, disrupting the matrilineal transfer of ecological knowledge, rituals, and folk practices. By embedding gendered meaning into environmental destruction, Ao's poetry challenges readers to rethink deforestation not merely as an ecological crisis but as a cultural and gendered trauma. Her poetic voice becomes a witness to both the wounded earth and the silenced women who suffer alongside it. As such, Temsula Ao's ecopoetics offers a powerful critique of environmental and gender injustice. Through her symbolic fusion of woman and earth, she presents deforestation as an act of gendered violence—both material and metaphorical. Her work calls for a reimagining of ecological resistance, one that acknowledges the intertwined fates of forests and women, of landscape and body, of memory and survival.

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