

An Ecofeminist reading  
of  
Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from War Zone* and Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* : An Overview

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**Abstract**

This article proposes to undertake an ecofeminist reading of Temsula Ao's 'These Hills Called Home: Stories from War Zone' and Mamang Dai's 'The Legends of Pensam'. These two writers belong to two different states but still their texts display the same notion of ecofeminism. Both showcase the dehumanised and devalued condition of women and nature at the hands of dominant patriarchal social set-up. Woman and nature are being shown as marginalised and discriminated by the patriarchal society through imposition of some common attributes in them. In addition, the texts also highlight the two paradoxical sides of woman—both as victors and victims. Sometimes, the women emerge as victorious in the tussle between insurgency factions and Indian military while on the other hand women fall easy prey to the sinister designs of some opportunists. The article tries to understand the way woman makes their presence felt by their stance in decision making and how they become the backbone of their household. As primary source I have used the select texts to highlight the notion of ecofeminism. Secondary sources in the form of books, journals etc. have been used for theoretical underpinning of the concerned issues. The study is descriptive and qualitative in nature.

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, patriarchal, marginalised, insurgency, Indian military

## Introduction

Literature from Northeast India is as old as the literature from mainland India. But literature in English from Northeast India is relatively a new literature. This corpus of writing is a recent thing in comparison to the literatures in English from other parts of India. As a discourse of self-expression, it took shape casually in the eighties and the nineties of the twentieth century, while Indian provincial writing in English began in Bengal much before Independence. In Northeast, the writers writing at present are the first generation of writers who deal with, among all the core issues grappling with the region, the most dominant and recurrent theme of woman-nature relationship in their works.

As an academic discipline, this woman-nature relationship is termed as 'ecofeminism'. In broader terms, ecofeminism stands for ecological feminism and in that way it is a branch of feminism that looks at the connections between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "Ecofeminism is defined as a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society". The term was first coined by French author and feminist Francoise d' Eaubonne in her book 'Le Feminisme ou la Mort (1974). It holds the view that patriarchy is responsible for the exploitation of women and the destruction of nature.

## Aims and Objectives of the article

The primary objective of the proposed research article is to make an ecofeminist reading of some select texts of two celebrated and formidable literary voices from North-east India. They are – Temsula Ao from Nagaland and Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh. The texts selected for study are Temsula Ao's *These Hills called Home: Stories from War Zone (2006)*, *Laburnum for My Head: Stories (2009)* and Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam (2006)*. The purpose of the proposed article is to show how both nature and women are exploited, tortured and made to suffer by human beings and male-dominated society respectively. In the name of development and scientific advancement, human beings constantly cause damage to nature and thus pose a great threat to flora and fauna of natural world. Women's status has also remained the same throughout the ages. Women very often become victims of violence in both patriarchal and matrilineal social set-up. They are always marginalised and treated as 'other' by the dominant male group. There is no doubt that nature-women relationship and the basic tenet of ecofeminism pervades through all writings from North-eastern writers. The research proposal under study seeks to highlight the above issues in a detailed manner.

## **Research Methodology**

The proposed research article uses qualitative methods and is based on in-depth analysis of the concerned texts. It is descriptive in nature where the researcher studies and attempts to understand the texts from an ecofeminist point of view. The paper attempts to describe systematically the invariable link between nature and women and highlights miserable living condition of both nature and women taking some select texts into consideration. The study is also explanatory that strives to clarify why and how there is a relationship between nature and women in terms of their marginalised oppressive state at the hands of dominant ‘self’ here the human beings in general and men in particular. In preparation of this research paper both primary and secondary data have been applied. Secondary data are used in the form of reference books, journals, magazine volumes, internet etc. As for primary data, close and rigorous reading of the concerned texts is made taking into account the various aspects of ecofeminism in them.

## **Interpretation**

One of the common features of North-eastern literature is the expression of common political, economical or social problems such as the problem of insurgency separatist movements or the issue of rampant corruption in the bureaucracy. Geographically, the two writers selected for study belong to two separate states but they share some common and recurrent themes in their writings that bind them in one single thread. Besides issues like identity crisis, search for roots, self-assertion or claims for a political space, it is the ecology of the region and feminist concern that predominantly seem to reflect in their literary works. In Temsula Ao’s short story collection *These Hills called Home: Stories from War Zone*, we notice the saga of ordinary people in an atmosphere of violence and bloodshed. The author here talks about the predicament of the marginalised and the most vulnerable sections of the society i.e. children, housewives, older people or even the militant in a violent atmosphere of insurgency. Ao believes that in such a war zone “there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms.” Almost all the stories of this collection depict an ecofeminist perspective where women’s position is often marginalised and devalued at the hands of patriarchal society. They are shown as victims of violence at both emotional and physical level. For example, the sentence like “We know how to deal with women like you” spoken by one officer in the first chapter called ‘The Jungle Major’ clearly outlines the gender biasness and male hegemony. Another line from the story ‘The Night’: “please protect my daughter as best you can. See that they do not abuse her physically.” clearly reveals the miserable living condition of women in society. There are numerous lines in the stories where the exploitation and oppression of women by men is evident. The ecology of the land is also noticed to be at a hazardous state as human beings exploit and destroy natural resources for their own selfish motif and desire. There are lines from

the story 'The Jungle Major' such as "The houses were ransacked by the security forces, the grain in their barns was burnt and the people themselves were herded into camps away from the village and kept in virtual imprisonment inside areas fenced in by bamboo stockades" which vividly brings into light the dismal picture of nature. Most of the stories in this story collection reveal Ao Naga women's closeness to nature than man, who spend most of their times at their cultivated land and thus help in running their household. Right from agricultural work to the final harvesting of crops, women play a significant role in Ao-Naga society. Moreover, the select texts clearly reveal two aspects of women's status in their society. On one hand, women and nature are compared and treated as marginalised and discriminated by the patriarchal social setup through imposition of some common attributes in them, on the other hand, women in some stories are presented as shattering the glass ceiling and carving a niche in the society as an independent, daring women. Indeed, we notice two paradoxical sides of women -both as victors and victims. Mostly in these stories, women are presented as victims of violence in the tussle between Indian military and the separatist insurgency factions. However, some stories also relate how women emerge even though they are being silenced as voiceless, how they tackle their life amidst brutality done by armed forces, how they support financially as a backbone of the family and how they preserve nature and protect environment from the environmental degradation. The lines from the chapter 'The Last Song' –"Apenyo was only nine months old then. From that time on, it was a lonely struggle for the mother, trying to cultivate a field and bring up a small child on her own" delineates the type of role that woman has to play in society. In a way, the women make their presence felt by subverting the notion of patriarchal set –up and deep seated culture and tradition of the society.

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is a delightful blend of myth and history of the tribe of Adis of Siang valley that spans Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet. It is a lyrical and moving tribute to the human spirit presented through an intricate web of stories, images and the history of a tribe. There are nineteen tales in *The Legends of Pensam* which are indeed an interconnected group of stories spelling out the ethos of the Adi tribal life and their belief system. She brings her personal knowledge of the primitive customs and beliefs of her people to recount many legends that influence the lives of Adis. The work is teemed with many memorable characters who lead a very vulnerable life influenced by spirits, shamans and unnatural events. Divided into four different sub-titled sections, namely "a diary of the world", "songs of the rhapsodist", "daughters of the village" and "a matter of time", the stories describe the metamorphosis of a group of Adi people from a primordial society into one evolving towards a modern set up, living, dreaming and experiencing life at a certain point in time. Based on ecological implications, the book has sufficient potential to be approached from the perspective of ecocritical study. The notion of ecofeminism also runs deep within the text. Specifically, the third section of the novel namely, 'daughters of the village' deal with tribal myths, legends and folklores that have a powerful note of ecofeminism in them The Adi society which is represented in the text beautifully showcase

the mutual co-existence and relationship between nature and women. Ecofeminism among all ideas and principles also contends that patriarchal domination of nature ensues from the belief that nature is divine and feminine. A close reading of this text tells us that there are no lines of thought where the Adis worship nature as divine. They definitely revere nature but this reverence arises from a belief that dislodging the balance in nature would result in destruction. Being an animist tribe, the Adis always live in congruence with green nature and strived their best to disseminate myths and folklores to its surroundings in an attempt to safeguard nature from any harm. The nature-woman relationship which is the basic tenet of ecofeminism is reaffirmed through these traditional tales. Women have a tender care for the society at large and for her immediate family. Like nature, they too sustain life and their close proximity with the world of nature as it shares a caring attitude in them. But again like nature, it is the women who are kept in the periphery and remain unheard by the patriarchal society.

### **Conclusion**

The texts selected above for study bring forth issues both perennial and contemporary. Issues like war and violence, death and destruction, oppression and exploitation, anxiety and crisis of identity are always an integral part in the lives of people hailing from the regions of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. In the midst of all these circumstances, the marginalised sections (women, children, and elderly people) often suffer the most. They are always at the mercy of dominant male groups. The select texts clearly highlight postcolonial concepts of women's lack of space, displacement, rootlessness, homelessness and lack of individual identity. Similarly, the destruction of ecology in the name of technological development by human beings is very much conspicuous in the select texts. There are several stories that show how the environment is damaged and degraded by man-induced harm. In a way the select texts vividly displays the inextricable link between nature and women and their domination and oppression at the hands of patriarchal social set-up and capitalism. The proposed article attempts to argue that the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to do overcome this, one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualise the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one's culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organisation to bring about new social forms. From the readings of the select texts, it is quite evident that the Northeast writers are very much preoccupied with the notion of ecology and people's consciousness about it. The select text brings into focus the urgent need of conserving the ecology of the land and providing due attention to the needs and aspirations of women. Thus the body of writing that is taken for study here is hoped to enrich the minds of people about the knowledge of ecofeminism issues and to make them take the pledge of honouring both women and nature and in that way subvert the notion of patriarchal domination and oppression from the heart of the society.

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