

**Ecofeminism in North-East Indian Literature:
A Select Study of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai's Poetry**

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Abstract:

Since Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term “ecofeminism” in 1974, scholars have increasingly examined the interrelationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature within patriarchal social structures. Ecofeminism challenges the hierarchical modes of thought that justify the domination of both women and the environment and advocates a more ethical and sustainable relationship between human beings and the natural world. Situated within this theoretical framework, the present study examines the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, two significant literary voices from North-East India whose works foreground indigenous ecological consciousness and the intimate relationship between human communities and nature. Through a close reading of selected poems, the study investigates how women, forests, rivers, mountains, land, and cultural memory are represented as interconnected entities within indigenous worldviews. Drawing upon the ecofeminist perspectives of Vandana Shiva, Karen J. Warren, Val Plumwood, Maria Mies, and Greta Gaard, the paper argues that both poets challenge anthropocentric and patriarchal assumptions by presenting nature as a living, sacred, and communicative presence rather than a passive resource. While Temsula Ao's poetry often highlights ecological loss, cultural displacement, and the violence inflicted upon both women and nature, Mamang Dai's poetry emphasizes spiritual interconnectedness, environmental harmony, and the agency of the natural world. The study further demonstrates that the poetry of both writers contributes to the articulation of a distinctly indigenous ecofeminist discourse rooted in environmental ethics, cultural survival, and social justice. Ultimately, their works advocate an alternative vision of coexistence based on reciprocity, ecological responsibility, and respect for all forms of life.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, North-East India, Nature, Ecology, Gender, Environmental Justice.

Introduction

Ecofeminism has emerged as one of the most significant critical approaches for understanding the interconnected realities of environmental degradation and gender-based oppression. Since its formulation by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, ecofeminism has developed into a multidisciplinary field of inquiry that examines the ideological, cultural, social, and economic structures responsible for the domination of both women and nature. Ecofeminist thinkers argue that patriarchal societies have historically constructed hierarchical binaries such as man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, and human/non-human, thereby legitimizing the subordination of women and the exploitation of the natural environment. Consequently, ecofeminism seeks not only to expose these structures of domination but also to promote more equitable and ecologically sustainable modes of existence.

The relevance of ecofeminism becomes particularly evident in the context of North-East India, a region distinguished by its remarkable ecological diversity, cultural plurality, and strong indigenous traditions. Comprising eight states and more than two hundred tribal and ethnic communities, the region possesses a rich heritage of environmental knowledge and cultural practices that have evolved through centuries of interaction with forests, rivers, mountains, and agricultural landscapes. Nature occupies a central position in the social, spiritual, and cultural life of many indigenous communities, where ecological relationships are often understood in terms of reciprocity rather than domination.

Although women in several North-Eastern societies have traditionally enjoyed greater social mobility and economic participation than women in many patriarchal caste-based societies elsewhere in India, gender inequality continues to exist in various forms. Women are frequently excluded from traditional decision-making institutions, customary political structures, and systems of land ownership. At the same time, rapid modernization, environmental degradation, resource extraction, displacement, and socio-political conflicts have transformed indigenous relationships with land and natural resources. These developments make the region particularly significant for ecofeminist inquiry because they reveal the complex intersections of gender, ecology, culture, and power.

Among the most important literary voices to emerge from North-East India are Tamsula Ao and Mamang Dai. Their poetry consistently reflects a deep engagement with landscape, memory, indigenous identity, and environmental consciousness. Although neither poet explicitly identifies as an ecofeminist theorist, their writings reveal concerns that resonate strongly with ecofeminist principles. Through their representations of forests, rivers, mountains, ancestral memory, and community life, both poets challenge exploitative attitudes toward nature and advocate ethical relationships grounded in indigenous ecological knowledge.

Temsula Ao, a distinguished Naga poet, writer, and ethnographer, frequently explores the interconnections between land, memory, cultural identity, and ecological loss. Her poetry records the experiences of indigenous communities confronting cultural transformation, political violence, and environmental disruption. Similarly, Mamang Dai, one of the most celebrated literary figures from Arunachal Pradesh, portrays nature as a living and spiritual presence intimately connected with human existence. Drawing upon the Adi worldview, her poetry emphasizes ecological harmony, animism, and the sacred dimensions of the natural world.

While a considerable body of scholarship has examined the ecological and cultural dimensions of Ao's and Dai's writings separately, comparatively fewer studies have undertaken a sustained ecofeminist analysis of their poetry. Existing research has primarily focused on ecocriticism, indigenous identity, environmental consciousness, and cultural memory. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how both poets articulate the interconnected experiences of women, nature, and indigenous communities within the socio-cultural context of North-East India. Through a comparative ecofeminist reading of selected poems, the paper explores how these writers challenge patriarchal and anthropocentric modes of thought while envisioning alternative ecological futures grounded in indigenous ethics of coexistence and environmental responsibility.

Review of Literature

Ecofeminism has evolved as a significant critical framework for understanding the interconnected oppression of women and nature within patriarchal social systems. Since its emergence in the 1970s, ecofeminist scholars have challenged anthropocentric and andocentric ideologies that legitimize the domination of both the environment and marginalized groups. The theoretical contributions of scholars such as Vandana Shiva, Karen J. Warren, Val Plumwood, Maria Mies, and Greta Gaard have been particularly influential in shaping contemporary ecofeminist discourse and provide a useful framework for examining the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai.

Vandana Shiva establishes a powerful relationship between ecological destruction and the marginalization of women under patriarchal and capitalist models of development. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), Shiva argues that women, especially those belonging to indigenous and rural communities, possess valuable ecological knowledge because of their close engagement with land, forests, water resources, and agricultural practices. She critiques modern developmental policies for reducing nature to a commodity and undermining traditional systems of ecological sustainability. Shiva's concept of "maldevelopment" is particularly relevant to the North-Eastern context, where large-scale developmental projects, environmental exploitation, and commercialization have increasingly threatened indigenous ecosystems and traditional ways of life. The ecological

concerns reflected in the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai resonate strongly with Shiva's critique of development models that prioritize economic growth at the expense of ecological balance and community well-being.

Karen J. Warren provides one of the most comprehensive philosophical foundations for ecofeminist thought. In *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (2000), she argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are linked through what she terms the "logic of domination." According to Warren, patriarchal societies construct hierarchical dualisms such as man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, and human/non-human, where the former category is consistently privileged over the latter. These dualistic structures legitimize various forms of domination and exclusion. Warren's formulation is particularly useful in analysing the poetry of Ao and Dai because both poets challenge hierarchical distinctions between humans and nature. Their works consistently portray rivers, forests, mountains, and landscapes as living entities possessing agency, memory, and spiritual significance rather than as passive resources available for human exploitation.

Val Plumwood further develops ecofeminist criticism through her examination of Western philosophical dualisms. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), she argues that the separation of humans from nature has enabled systems of domination that justify environmental exploitation. Plumwood identifies anthropocentrism as a central feature of modern thought and demonstrates how the logic of human superiority mirrors other forms of oppression, including patriarchy and colonialism. Her critique is particularly relevant to indigenous literatures because many indigenous cultures reject the rigid separation between humans and the natural world. The poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai repeatedly undermines anthropocentric assumptions by presenting nature as a communicative and sacred presence. Their poetic representations of forests, rivers, mountains, and ancestral landscapes embody the relational worldview advocated by Plumwood and emphasize ecological interconnectedness rather than human mastery.

Maria Mies expands ecofeminist inquiry by linking environmental degradation with economic exploitation and social inequality. In collaboration with Vandana Shiva, she argues in *Ecofeminism* (1993) that capitalist systems depend upon the appropriation of both women's labour and natural resources. According to Mies, the logic of accumulation that drives modern development often marginalizes indigenous communities and disrupts ecological balance. Her emphasis on subsistence economies, local knowledge systems, and community-centred forms of sustainability provides an important framework for understanding the environmental ethics embedded in North-Eastern literature. The poetry of Ao and Dai frequently foregrounds indigenous knowledge traditions and community-based relationships

with nature, thereby offering a critique of developmental paradigms that threaten ecological and cultural survival.

Greta Gaard significantly broadens the scope of ecofeminist theory by emphasizing the intersections among ecology, gender, race, class, colonialism, sexuality, and environmental justice. In *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993), she argues that environmental problems cannot be separated from broader structures of social inequality and political domination. Gaard's intersectional approach is particularly useful for analysing literature from indigenous communities because it recognizes that environmental degradation often accompanies cultural marginalization and political exclusion. Her work provides a valuable lens through which to understand how the poetry of Ao and Dai links ecological concerns with questions of identity, memory, displacement, and cultural continuity.

Within the specific context of North-East India, the writings of Walter Fernandes and Patricia Mukhim provide important socio-cultural perspectives that complement ecofeminist theory. Walter Fernandes has extensively documented the effects of displacement, land alienation, and development-induced environmental change on tribal communities. His studies reveal that women often bear the most severe consequences of ecological disruption because their livelihoods remain closely tied to forests, water resources, and communal lands. Fernandes further demonstrates that despite the relatively high social status enjoyed by women in several tribal societies, significant inequalities persist in matters of land ownership and political authority. These observations help contextualize the concerns reflected in the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, where environmental loss frequently coincides with cultural fragmentation and social disempowerment.

Similarly, Patricia Mukhim's writings on gender and tribal society challenge idealized representations of matrilineal cultures in the North-East. While acknowledging the social visibility of women in many indigenous communities, Mukhim points out that political authority and decision-making power often remain concentrated in male hands. Her observations highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of gender relations within tribal societies and reinforce the relevance of ecofeminist approaches that examine the intersections of ecology, culture, and power.

Although a growing body of scholarship has explored the ecological dimensions of North-Eastern literature, much of the existing research has concentrated on ecocritical readings of individual authors or on broader discussions of indigenous identity and environmental consciousness. Comparative ecofeminist studies focusing specifically on the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai remain relatively limited. Moreover, existing scholarship has often overlooked the ways in

which their poetic representations of nature are intertwined with questions of gender, cultural memory, environmental justice, and indigenous ecological knowledge. The present study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a comparative ecofeminist analysis of selected poems by both writers. Through this approach, the paper aims to demonstrate how Ao and Dai articulate a distinctive indigenous ecological vision that challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric assumptions while advocating more sustainable and ethical relationships between human beings and the natural world.

Discussion and Findings

Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai occupy an important position in contemporary North-East Indian literature because both poets articulate a profound ecological consciousness rooted in indigenous cultural traditions. Although their poetic voices emerge from different tribal communities and historical experiences, both writers portray nature not as a passive background to human activity but as a living and sacred presence intimately connected with identity, memory, and community. Through an ecofeminist reading of their selected poems, it becomes evident that both poets challenge anthropocentric and patriarchal assumptions while advocating an ethical relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Temsula Ao's poetry emerges from the socio-cultural landscape of Nagaland and reflects the experiences, beliefs, and collective memories of Naga communities. As a poet, folklorist, and ethnographer, Ao consistently foregrounds the interconnectedness of land, culture, ancestry, and ecological existence. Her poetry frequently addresses environmental degradation, cultural displacement, and the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems under the pressures of modernization and socio-political conflict. Although she does not explicitly employ ecofeminist terminology, many of her poems reveal concerns that align closely with ecofeminist principles.

Among Ao's poems, "Lament for an Earth" offers perhaps the clearest articulation of ecological loss through a distinctly gendered imagery. The poem begins with an evocative description of an untouched forest:

"Once upon an earth
There was a forest,
Verdant, virgin, vibrant..."

The alliterative phrase "verdant, virgin, vibrant" constructs the forest as a living and fertile entity. Significantly, the use of the word "virgin" feminizes the landscape and associates nature with ideas of purity, fertility, and generative power. From an ecofeminist perspective, this feminization is not merely decorative but functions as a critique of the structures that objectify both women and nature. The forest is represented not as an economic resource but as a living presence possessing intrinsic value.

As the poem progresses, Ao depicts the destruction of the forest through images that parallel sexual violence and bodily violation. The poet mournfully observes:

"Alas for the forest"

and later refers to

"the evidence

Of her rape"

The image of rape serves as a powerful metaphor for environmental destruction. By presenting ecological exploitation through the language of gendered violence, Ao exposes the ideological connections between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature identified by ecofeminist theorists such as Karen Warren and Val Plumwood. The forest becomes a symbol of a violated earth whose suffering reflects the consequences of patriarchal and capitalist modes of development. The poem thus transforms environmental destruction into an ethical and political issue rather than merely an ecological concern.

Another significant ecofeminist dimension of Ao's poetry emerges in "Stone-People from Lungterok." Unlike "Lament for an Earth," which focuses on ecological loss, this poem celebrates indigenous ecological identity and the sacred interconnectedness of all forms of life. The poem traces human origins to the natural world itself:

"Out of the womb

Of the earth

The metaphor of the earth as a womb establishes a maternal relationship between nature and humanity. Human beings are represented not as masters of nature but as its offspring. Such imagery challenges anthropocentric assumptions and affirms an indigenous worldview grounded in reciprocity and interdependence. The poem resonates strongly with Vandana Shiva's argument that indigenous cultures often perceive nature as a living and nurturing entity rather than a commodity.

Ao further emphasizes the intimate relationship between humans and non-human life forms through the lines:

"Knowledgeable

In birds' language

And animal discourse"

These lines dismantle the rigid separation between human and non-human existence. Communication with birds and animals symbolizes a form of ecological consciousness that recognizes the agency of the natural world. Such representations challenge the hierarchical dualisms criticized by ecofeminist thinkers and suggest a more inclusive understanding of community. Similarly, the lines

"Spirits

Of trees and forests

Of stones and rivers"

reveal an animistic worldview in which natural entities possess sacred significance and spiritual agency. Trees, rivers, forests, and stones are not inert objects but active participants in the ecological community. Through such imagery, Ao presents an indigenous ecological ethic founded upon respect, coexistence, and mutual dependence.

The poem "The Hill" further develops this ecological sensibility. Although less overtly political than "Lament for an Earth," it portrays the landscape as a living presence capable of nurturing memory, identity, and emotional belonging. The hill functions as a repository of cultural experience and collective memory rather than a geographical object. The poem resists modern forms of alienation that separate human beings from the natural world and reaffirms the intimate bond between community and landscape.

Like Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai draws extensively upon indigenous ecological traditions in her poetry. Emerging from the Adi cultural milieu of Arunachal Pradesh, Dai consistently portrays nature as a living, spiritual, and communicative presence. Her works challenge anthropocentric assumptions by presenting rivers, mountains, forests, and landscapes as active participants in human existence. The environmental consciousness evident in her poetry reflects a worldview in which the sacred and the ecological are inseparable.

One of Dai's most celebrated poems, "Small Towns and the River," offers a powerful expression of indigenous ecological philosophy. The poet writes:
"The river has a soul."

This simple yet profound statement rejects modern conceptions of nature as an inert resource. The river is endowed with consciousness, memory, and agency. It exists not merely as a physical entity but as a spiritual presence that participates in human life.

The ecological significance of the river is further emphasized in the lines:
"the river knows the immortality of water."

Knowledge, memory, and wisdom are attributed to the river, thereby challenging anthropocentric notions of human superiority. The poem suggests that nature possesses forms of understanding inaccessible to human beings. Such representations align closely with Val Plumwood's call for the recognition of nature as an active subject rather than an object of human control. The line

"we all want to walk with the gods"

further deepens the poem's ecological and spiritual dimensions. The desire to "walk with the gods" symbolizes humanity's aspiration to live in harmony with the sacred

forces embodied within nature. Rather than seeking mastery over the environment, the poem advocates coexistence and ecological humility. This perspective reflects both indigenous environmental ethics and ecofeminist critiques of domination.

Another important poem, "The Voice of the Mountain," directly challenges anthropocentric assumptions by granting speech to nature itself. The opening declaration:

"I am the voice of the mountain"

establishes the mountain as an autonomous speaking subject. Through this poetic strategy, Dai reverses conventional hierarchies that privilege human voices over non-human existence. The mountain becomes a bearer of memory, wisdom, and experience. Nature is therefore transformed from an object of observation into a participant in dialogue.

In "An Obscure Place," Dai explores the relationship between landscape, memory, and cultural identity. The statement:

"The history of our race begins with the place of stories"

suggests that collective identity is inseparable from geographical and ecological belonging. History, culture, and memory emerge from a specific relationship with place. From an ecofeminist perspective, the line underscores the importance of preserving both ecological and cultural environments.

Similarly, the repeated declaration:

"There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains."

emphasizes the enduring presence of nature amidst historical and political change. The mountains symbolize continuity, resilience, and ancestral memory. They function as witnesses to human history while remaining independent of human ambitions.

The political dimension of Dai's ecofeminism becomes evident in the lines:

"Yesterday we gave shelter to men,

who climbed over our hills

for the glory of a homeland, they said."

These lines reveal how political conflicts and territorial ambitions disrupt ecological and cultural harmony. The hills represent more than physical geography; they embody identity, memory, and belonging. The poem therefore critiques forms of domination that threaten both indigenous communities and their environments.

Dai's later collections continue to develop these ecological concerns. In *The Balm of Time*, she writes:

"The tree stands still

watching with ancient eyes."

The tree is endowed with consciousness and historical memory. Nature becomes a witness to human actions, thereby challenging assumptions of human centrality. Similarly, the lines:

"Yes, I believe in gods,

in the forest faith of good and evil,

spirits of the river,
and the dream world of the dawn."

affirm an indigenous worldview grounded in spiritual relationships with the natural world. Forests and rivers are presented as sacred entities deserving reverence rather than exploitation. Such representations resonate strongly with ecofeminist principles of interconnectedness and ecological responsibility.

A comparative reading of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai reveals both shared concerns and distinctive emphases. Both poets reject anthropocentric assumptions and portray nature as a living presence endowed with agency, memory, and sacred significance. Their works consistently challenge developmental paradigms that treat land, forests, and rivers as commodities. Furthermore, both writers foreground indigenous ecological knowledge as an alternative to exploitative models of modernity.

However, important differences also emerge. Ao's poetry often emphasizes ecological destruction, historical trauma, and cultural loss. Her representations of environmental degradation frequently employ images of violence and violation, thereby exposing the destructive consequences of domination. Dai, in contrast, places greater emphasis on spiritual interconnectedness, ecological harmony, and the sacred dimensions of nature. While Ao foregrounds resistance and mourning, Dai often highlights continuity, coexistence, and renewal.

Together, the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai demonstrates that ecological concerns cannot be separated from questions of gender, culture, memory, and social justice. Their works embody what Greta Gaard describes as an intersectional ecofeminist perspective in which environmental degradation, cultural marginalization, and political domination are interconnected phenomena. By drawing upon indigenous traditions and ecological knowledge systems, both poets challenge dominant narratives of progress and development and envision more sustainable relationships between human beings and the natural world.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai through the lens of ecofeminism in order to explore the interconnected representations of women, nature, indigenous identity, and ecological consciousness in North-East Indian literature. The analysis demonstrates that both poets challenge anthropocentric and patriarchal modes of thought by portraying the natural world as a living, sacred, and communicative presence rather than a passive object of human exploitation. Their poetry foregrounds the intimate relationship between human communities and the environment, thereby affirming an indigenous ecological ethic rooted in reciprocity, coexistence, and respect for all forms of life.

The study reveals that Temsula Ao's poetry is deeply concerned with the consequences of ecological destruction, cultural displacement, and historical trauma. Through poems such as "Lament for an Earth," "Stone-People from Lungterok," and "The Hill," Ao highlights the interconnected experiences of environmental degradation and cultural loss. Her representation of the violated forest as a feminized landscape exposes the ideological structures that enable the domination of both women and nature. At the same time, her poetry celebrates indigenous ecological knowledge and emphasizes the sacred relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Similarly, Mamang Dai's poetry articulates a profound ecological vision grounded in the spiritual traditions of the Adi community. Poems such as "Small Towns and the River," "The Voice of the Mountain," and "An Obscure Place" challenge anthropocentric assumptions by granting agency, memory, and voice to rivers, mountains, forests, and landscapes. Her poetic vision underscores the inseparability of nature, culture, and spirituality and advocates a harmonious mode of existence based on ecological balance and mutual dependence. By portraying nature as a source of wisdom, continuity, and renewal, Dai offers a compelling critique of modern developmental ideologies that prioritize material progress over environmental sustainability.

A comparative reading of both poets further reveals that despite differences in cultural background and poetic emphasis, Ao and Dai share a common commitment to indigenous ecological values. While Ao's poetry often foregrounds ecological loss, violence, and resistance, Dai's work emphasizes spiritual interconnectedness, environmental harmony, and cultural continuity. Together, their writings contribute to a distinctly North-Eastern articulation of ecofeminism that extends beyond conventional Western formulations of the theory. Their works demonstrate that environmental issues cannot be separated from questions of cultural survival, social justice, and indigenous identity.

The study therefore concludes that the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai significantly enriches contemporary ecofeminist discourse by incorporating indigenous epistemologies and environmental ethics into literary representations of nature. Their writings offer an alternative vision of development and progress founded not on domination and exploitation but on ecological responsibility, cultural memory, and sustainable coexistence. In an era marked by accelerating environmental crises and ecological uncertainty, the ecological insights embedded in their poetry remain profoundly relevant and contribute meaningfully to ongoing debates on environmental justice, indigenous rights, and sustainable futures.

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