

# Representation of Poetic Landscape, Nature, and Ecology in the poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract**—Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai are two well-known poets from Northeast India whose works strongly reflect their deep connection to nature. Their poetry basically talks about nature as not just a background or setting, but a living, breathing presence that is closely tied to culture, tradition, and identity. Ao's poems often describe forests, hills, and rivers as carriers of memory and history. Her writing draws from oral traditions and the lived experiences of her community, showing a strong bond between people and the natural world. These landscapes in her poetry are filled with stories passed down through generations, reflecting the cultural and emotional meaning attached to them. On the other hand, Dai, inspired by the beauty of Arunachal Pradesh, brings natural elements like rivers and mountains to life in her poems. She uses myths, folklore, and indigenous beliefs to express how nature is part of human life, not separate from it. Her poetry also expresses concern about the loss of tribal culture and the destruction of the environment. The poetic works of Ao and Dai present nature as a vital part of human experience and cultural identity. Their poetry helps us understand how deeply nature and culture are linked in tribal communities. As a whole they portray nature as a living presence rooted in memory, myth, and indigenous belief. While Ao reflects on loss and identity through landscape, Dai blends spirituality and ecology, offering lyrical visions shaped by cultural and environmental awareness. Purpose of the study is to examine how Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai depict nature as a living, cultural, and spiritual force, and how their poetry contributes to ecocritical discourse and the preservation of indigenous ecological knowledge.

**Index Terms**—Nature, Ecology, Poetic Landscape, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Northeast Indian literature, which was once not given much attention in mainstream Indian writing, has now become an important and powerful voice. This literature is shaped by the region's diverse cultures and is rich in storytelling, traditional beliefs, and local ways of thinking. It reflects the real-life experiences, struggles, and wisdom of tribal communities that were often ignored in Indian English literature. A special feature of this writing is the strong connection between people and nature. The natural surroundings thick forests, flowing rivers, high mountains, and quiet valleys are not just beautiful places, but are also important in shaping the thoughts, emotions, and culture of the people (Doley, 2024)<sup>1</sup>. Writers from Northeast India often write deeply about nature and how their communities relate to it through their beliefs, stories, and spiritual practices. In their work, nature is not just a background, but a living and meaningful part of life. It is closely linked with rituals, myths, and old stories that have been shared from one generation to the next.

Among the many important literary voices from Northeast India, Temsula Ao from Nagaland and Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh stand out as two of the most respected and powerful poets. Their poetry does more than just describe the beauty of the natural world it brings nature to life. They show forests, rivers, mountains, and other natural elements as living, breathing forces that are deeply connected to people's memories, traditions, and identities. For both poets, nature is not separate from human life. Instead, it is a

part of who we are emotionally, spiritually, and culturally.

Through their poems, they present a way of thinking in which people and nature are closely linked. Their writings show how the land carries stories from the past, holds the pain of past struggles, and gives strength to communities facing change. Nature, in their work, is like a guardian of history, a silent witness to sorrow and survival, and a symbol of the strength and courage of indigenous cultures. Their poetry not only tells personal or community stories but also offers deep ideas about life, loss, identity, and healing through the natural world. Personal experience with collective memory, both Ao and Dai use poetry to protect traditional knowledge and bring attention to the need for harmony between people and the environment.

Objective of this Study: The objective of this study is to highlight how their poetic works contribute to ecological thinking and cultural preservation through literary expression. The significance lies in how their voices help us rethink the human-nature relationship from an indigenous and ecocritical perspective.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted is primarily literary and thematic analysis, with a focus on ecocriticism a critical approach that studies the relationship between literature and the natural environment.

## III. UNDERSTANDING ECOCRITICISM AND INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS

Ecocriticism is a branch of literary criticism that explores the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It emerged as an academic field in the 1990s, focusing on how texts represent nature, ecological issues, and the human-nature connection (Chingangbam, 2014)<sup>2</sup>. This examines how literature reflects environmental values, criticizes ecological destruction, and offers alternative ways of thinking about the natural world. In today's context of climate change and ecological crisis, ecocriticism is highly relevant, as it helps readers understand how cultural attitudes toward nature are shaped and challenged through literature.

Indigenous perspectives on nature differ greatly from dominant modern views. While modern approaches

often treat nature as a resource to be used or controlled, indigenous worldviews see nature as sacred, alive, and interconnected with all living beings. For indigenous communities, the land is not just property or background it is home, history, teacher, and spiritual guide. Plants, animals, rivers, and mountains are considered living entities with memory and agency (Sinha, 2024)<sup>3</sup>. These beliefs are often expressed through oral traditions, myths, and rituals. The ecology, oral tradition and identity of tribal communities are deeply linked. Stories about the origin of rivers or spirits of the forest carry ecological knowledge and cultural values. These oral narratives pass from one generation to another, shaping the community's sense of belonging and responsibility toward the environment. For poets like Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, this connection forms the foundation of their poetic landscapes. Their work brings forward a way of seeing nature that is rooted in respect, memory, and coexistence, offering valuable insights in the field of ecocriticism.

## IV. ABOUT TEMSULA AO

Temsula Ao (1945–2022) was a renowned poet, short story writer, and ethnographer from Nagaland. A member of the Ao Naga tribe, she dedicated much of her life to documenting and preserving the oral traditions and cultural narratives of her community. She served as a professor of English at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong, and played a key role in bringing Northeast Indian literature into national focus (Sarkar, 2023)<sup>4</sup>. She received several prestigious awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Padma Shri for her contributions to literature and education. Ao's literary work spans across genres such as poetry, short fiction, and cultural documentation but her poetry remains particularly powerful for its lyrical beauty and cultural depth.

## V. MAJOR POETRY COLLECTIONS

Some of her important poetry collections include:

- Songs That Tell (1988)
- Songs That Try to Say (1992)
- Songs of Many Moods (1995)
- Songs from the Other Life (2007)
- Songs Along the Way Home (2019)

These poetry collections reflect Temsula Ao's deep bond with memory, landscape, history, and cultural identity. Her verses draw from personal and collective experiences, portraying nature as a space filled with ancestral voices, emotional depth, and a sense of rooted belonging.

#### VI. THEMES IN HER POETRY

- **Nature as Memory and History:** In Ao's poetry, the natural landscape hills, rivers, forests is not just scenery but a living archive of tribal memory and cultural history. Nature remembers. For instance, in *Songs from the Other Life*, nature is often portrayed as a silent witness to personal and collective experiences of loss, trauma, and survival.
- **Oral Tradition and Landscape:** Ao's poems are deeply rooted in the oral storytelling tradition of the Naga people. The landscape becomes a medium through which these oral stories are carried forward. In many of her poems, one can sense the voice of the elder or storyteller speaking through the land itself.
- **Displacement and Belonging:** Themes of rootlessness, exile, and the search for belonging appear throughout her work. As a Naga woman who grew up amidst political turmoil and cultural transition, Ao often used poetry to reflect on the experience of cultural dislocation. The natural world becomes a place where belonging is negotiated and memory is kept alive.

#### VII. ANALYSIS OF POETIC LANDSCAPE IN TAMSULA AO'S WORKS

Temsula Ao constructs a landscape that is not merely scenic but sentient alive with memory, myth, and ancestral presence. In the poem "The Last Song", she writes, "The tree I planted / remembers the day / you left", transforming the tree into a symbol of enduring memory and silent mourning. It is not a passive element of the natural world but a living witness to emotional rupture, holding within it the weight of separation and loss. Similarly, in "Stone-people from Langerak", Ao invokes the Ao Naga creation myth "They say / we came out / of stones" to fuse geography with genesis, myth with identity. Lungterok, the

sacred place of origin, becomes more than a location; it is a cultural cornerstone, embedding the people's history into the very soil and rock of the land.

Through such imagery, Ao's poetry dissolves the boundary between human consciousness and the natural environment, illustrating how landscape, for tribal communities, is both a physical space and a repository of collective memory. Her work operates within an ecocritical and postcolonial framework, challenging modern detachment from nature and asserting the indigenous understanding of nature as a living, relational force. Ao's poetic vision is not of nature as object, but as subject where forests murmur with ancestral voices, hills guard stories, and the wind becomes an agent of oral tradition. Her verse becomes a powerful act of cultural remembrance, ecological reflection, and spiritual re-rooting, offering a deeply embodied narrative of belonging and loss.

#### VIII. ABOUT MAMANG DAI

Mamang Dai, born in 1957 in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, is one of the most celebrated literary figures from Northeast India. She belongs to the Adi tribe and has made significant contributions as a poet, novelist, journalist, and civil servant. Trained in history and journalism, she also worked with the Indian Administrative Service and the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) (Sankhyan & Sigroha, 2019)<sup>5</sup>.

Dai received the Padma Shri in 2011 for her contribution to literature and education and was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her novel *The Black Hill* (Biswas, 2019)<sup>6</sup>. Her writings are deeply rooted in the spiritual and ecological consciousness of Arunachal Pradesh, blending myth, memory, and nature in a unique lyrical voice.

#### IX. MAJOR POETRY COLLECTIONS AND NOVEL

- River Poems (2004)
- Midsummer Survival Lyrics (2014)
- The Black Hill (2014, novel)

These works examine the deep connection between people, land, and memory, drawing on folklore and indigenous beliefs to create a distinctive worldview where nature holds cultural meaning, ancestral

knowledge, and emotional depth, shaping both identity and collective experience.

#### X. THEMES IN HER WORK

- **Nature as Myth and Spirit:** Dai's poetry often presents nature as a sacred force. Rivers, trees, and mountains are animated through myths and spiritual beliefs. In her poetic world, nature is not separate from life but forms the very soul of human existence.
- **Ecology and Indigenous Cosmology:** Her poems reflect a deep awareness of the indigenous worldview where humans are part of a larger ecological and cosmic order. This sense of interconnectedness gives her writing a strong ecocritical dimension, emphasizing balance and harmony with nature.
- **Cultural Loss and Environmental Degradation:** Dai also expresses concern over the loss of tribal traditions and the destruction of natural landscapes due to modern development. Her work mourns not just the loss of trees and rivers but also the erasure of stories, rituals, and beliefs that kept human and nature in balance.

#### XI. ANALYSIS OF POETIC LANDSCAPE IN MAMANG DAI'S WORKS

Mamang Dai's poetic landscape is one where the physical world breathes with spirit, memory, and ancestral wisdom. In "The Voice of the Mountain", she writes, "I am the keeper of the voice / of the mountain. / I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain," positioning the speaker as both witness and vessel of the mountain's consciousness. Here, the mountain transcends its physical form to become a spiritual entity embodying the indigenous belief that nature is sentient, that landscapes are not inert but guardians of stories and time. This worldview, deeply rooted in tribal cosmology, also flows through River Poems, where Dai writes, "The river has a soul. / It knows, stretching long past the skin of the earth." In this line, the river is not a metaphor, but a being with awareness and memory, capable of knowing and remembering beyond human perception. By giving voice to natural elements, Dai resists the objectification of nature, instead reaffirming its

agency and sacredness. Her lyrical anthropomorphism invites the reader into a worldview where ecology is not science alone, but spirit and story.

In her novel *The Black Hill*, Dai further expands this vision by blending history, colonial encounters, and indigenous belief systems, showing how the landscape becomes a living canvas where myth, identity, and resistance coalesce. Her poetic vision thus becomes a counter-narrative to modern alienation from the environment offering instead an ethic of coexistence and reverence. Through mythic language and spiritual intimacy with the land, Mamang Dai reclaims the ecological wisdom of tribal consciousness and resists the cultural erosion brought on by modernity and colonial disruption. Her work reminds us that living with the land not apart from it is not only possible but essential to sustaining both cultural memory and ecological balance.

#### XII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: TEMSULA AO AND MAMANG DAI

Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, though writing from different tribal and geographical backgrounds, share striking thematic and philosophical similarities in their treatment of nature and ecology (Mandal, 2020)<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, their unique styles, cultural settings, and literary expressions offer distinctive voices within the broader framework of Indian ecocritical literature.

#### XIII. SIMILARITIES

- **Nature as a Living Entity:** Both poets portray nature not as a passive backdrop but as a conscious, spiritual presence. In their poetry, rivers, forests, and mountains are sentient beings capable of remembering, mourning, and guiding. For Ao, the landscape holds ancestral memory; for Dai, it holds mythic and cosmic energy. In both, nature is animate and deeply connected to human life.
- **Use of Myth, Memory, and Tradition:** Ao and Dai draw heavily from oral traditions, folklore, and tribal mythology. Their poems are infused with stories passed down through generations. These stories are not just cultural heritage but also vessels of ecological wisdom. Myth becomes a way to understand the environment and one's place within it.

- **Ecological Awareness Rooted in Culture:** Both poets show that environmental awareness is not a modern idea but has always existed in indigenous knowledge systems. Their writing reflects a world where ecological balance and spiritual harmony are central to life. The poems challenge modern, exploitative attitudes toward nature by offering alternative, community-based perspectives.

#### XIV. DIFFERENCES

- **Style and Tone:** Temsula Ao's poetry often carries a tone of quiet reflection, sorrow, and personal grief. Her verses are marked by an elegiac quality as she contemplates displacement, memory, and loss. In contrast, Mamang Dai's work is more expansive and lyrical, with a tone that merges mythic grandeur with philosophical contemplation. Dai's language is more fluid and metaphorical, while Ao's is grounded and direct.
- **Regional Influence:** Ao's poetry is rooted in the cultural context of the Ao Naga tribe and the landscape of Nagaland, shaped by experiences of political unrest and cultural erosion. Dai's work reflects the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh, influenced by its cosmology, terrain, and belief in nature spirits. These different landscapes and histories shape their poetic expressions and imagery.

#### XV. THEIR COLLECTIVE CONTRIBUTION TO ECOCRITICAL LITERATURE IN INDIA

Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai have significantly expanded the landscape of Indian English poetry by introducing indigenous ecological consciousness into the mainstream literary conversation. Their works challenge the conventional, anthropocentric view that places humans above or apart from nature a perspective often reinforced by colonial and modernist frameworks. Instead, their poetry offers a more holistic and interconnected understanding of the natural world, where rivers, mountains, forests, and stones are not passive scenery but living entities with memory, spirit, and agency.

Portraying nature as sacred, sentient, and central to cultural and spiritual identity, Ao and Dai contribute a

vital body of work to ecocritical literature in India. Their poems are deeply informed by tribal belief systems, oral traditions, and ancestral ties to the land foregrounding environmental ethics that emphasize harmony, respect, and reciprocity. In doing so, they reclaim and revitalize indigenous voices that have long been excluded from dominant literary and environmental discourses (Patil & Patil, 2025)<sup>8</sup>. Their collective contribution not only enriches Indian English poetry with regional and cultural depth but also provides critical tools for rethinking sustainability, ecological justice, and the role of literature in environmental awareness. Through their visionary writing, Ao and Dai open new pathways for understanding the inseparability of nature and culture in the Indian context.

#### XVI. RELEVANCE OF THEIR WORK TODAY

The poetry of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai holds profound relevance in today's world, both globally and within the Indian context, where environmental degradation, climate change, and cultural erosion have become urgent and interconnected challenges (Bhattacharyya, 2017). Their literary contributions offer more than aesthetic value; they serve as critical reflections on the loss of harmony between humans and nature. In a time when rapid industrialization, deforestation, and the decline of traditional knowledge systems threaten both ecological balance and indigenous identities, Ao and Dai's work remind us of a worldview where nature is sacred, reciprocal, and deeply embedded in everyday life.

Rooted in indigenous philosophies, their poetry not only highlights the richness of tribal traditions but also challenges dominant narratives that separate culture from nature. Their verses act as a mirror revealing what is being lost and a guide pointing toward more sustainable, respectful ways of living. In doing so, they preserve and promote ecological wisdom that modern society often overlooks. By weaving myth, memory, and landscape together, Ao and Dai offer powerful poetic responses to contemporary crises, urging a return to coexistence, cultural rootedness, and environmental consciousness. Their work is not just literary; it is ethically and politically significant in reimagining a more inclusive and sustainable future.

## XVII. POETIC LANDSCAPES AS LIVING ARCHIVES OF NATURE AND CULTURE

Nature, Ecology, and the Poetic Landscapes of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, the natural world is not a mere setting but a living archive of cultural memory and ecological consciousness. At a time when global environmental challenges such as deforestation, climate change, and biodiversity loss threaten both ecosystems and traditional ways of life, the poetry of Ao and Dai offers a vital reminder of the deep bond between people and the land (Lalrinfeli, 2024). Their works, grounded in indigenous worldviews, reflect an age-old relationship where nature is seen as sacred, alive, and emotionally responsive. Especially in the context of Northeast India, where rivers, hills, and forests shape both identity and survival, their poems preserve vanishing ecological knowledge and offer an alternative to exploitative models of development.

Through lyrical expressions rooted in myth, oral tradition, and spiritual belief, Ao and Dai turn the poetic landscape into a space of resistance and renewal. The natural elements in their poetry—trees, stones, rivers, and mountains—are not inert objects but carriers of ancestral wisdom and communal memory. In giving voice to these elements, they affirm the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. Their poetry becomes a cultural and ecological document, urging readers to recognize that protecting nature also means protecting stories, identities, and ways of being. In doing so, they not only contribute to ecocritical literature but also offer a poetic framework for sustainable thinking one that values respect, harmony, and coexistence over dominance and destruction.

## XVIII. CONCLUSION

The poetic works of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai offer deep and meaningful insights into the interconnection between nature, culture, and identity. Through their unique perspectives rooted in indigenous traditions, both poets present nature not as a distant or decorative element, but as a living force deeply woven into the lives and histories of their people. Their poetry goes beyond aesthetic beauty, serving as a voice for ecological awareness, cultural preservation, and resistance against the erasure of tribal knowledge. Both Ao and Dai redefine the human-nature relationship by portraying the

environment as sacred, animate, and emotionally responsive. Their poems bring attention to the spiritual and ecological consciousness embedded in tribal worldviews, challenging modern, utilitarian attitudes toward the environment. Through their use of myth, memory, and oral traditions, they affirm a deep cultural connection to land that encourages respect, care, and coexistence.

Their contribution to Indian English literature is significant. As voices from the Northeast, they add diversity, richness, and urgency to contemporary literary discourses, especially in the areas of ecocriticism and indigenous studies. Their works broaden our understanding of ecological writing by incorporating non-Western, non-urban experiences of nature. There is ample scope for further research based on their writings. Comparative studies with other indigenous poets globally, feminist ecocritical readings of their work, or explorations of environmental justice in their poetry could offer new dimensions of interpretation. Their poetry opens important conversations not just in literature, but in education, environmental ethics, and cultural policy making their voices essential for both literary and ecological thought today.

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