

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Slow Violence, Indigenous Ecology and the Environmental Imagination in Temsula Ao's Fiction

Prof. (Dr.) Dushyant B. Nimavat

Professor, Department of English, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India;
dushyantnimavat@gujaratuniversity.ac.in

Accepted version published on 5 May 2026

 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20038083>

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Temsula Ao's short fiction collections *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) through the intersecting frameworks of ecocriticism and environmental humanities, with specific attention to Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" and Lawrence Buell's theorisation of the environmental imagination. It argues that Ao's fiction articulates a distinctive ecological consciousness rooted in Ao Naga indigenous knowledge systems, wherein landscape, community, and cosmology are co-constitutive. The paper contends that the militarisation of Nagaland's hills during decades of insurgency and counterinsurgency constitutes a form of slow violence that is simultaneously ecological and cultural—an attritional degradation of both the physical environment and the indigenous epistemologies that sustained human-nature reciprocity. Through close analysis of selected stories, the paper demonstrates how Ao's narratives function as acts of environmental witnessing that refuse to separate ecological destruction from political violence, and how they preserve indigenous ecological knowledge as a repository of alternative futures.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Slow Violence, North East Indian English Literature

FULL PAPER

Introduction

The literature emerging from India's North East occupies a peculiar position within the broader cartography of Indian English writing. As Tilottoma Misra has observed, the sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilisational discourse has deeply affected the emerging literati of this region (Misra xviii). Produced at the margins of the national literary imagination, shaped by decades of armed conflict, ethnic complexity, and a relationship with the Indian state that has oscillated between assimilation and alienation, this body of writing carries within it a set of concerns that mainstream Indian literary criticism has only belatedly begun to address. Among these concerns, the relationship between landscape, community, and violence holds a particularly charged significance—one that the field of ecocriticism, despite its expanding global reach, has not yet explored with the rigour demanded by the region's literature.

Temsula Ao (1945–2022), the Ao Naga poet, short story writer, and ethnographer who served as Professor of English at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, stands as one of the most accomplished literary voices to have emerged from this region. Awarded the Padma Shri and the Sahitya Akademi Award, Ao produced a body of work that spans six poetry collections, two short story collections, and ethnographic studies of Ao Naga oral traditions. Her fiction—particularly *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009)—engages with the turbulent history of Nagaland from the 1950s onward, a period marked by the Naga nationalist movement, Indian military operations, insurgency, and the slow, grinding transformation of a society whose relationship with its physical environment was being altered by forces both external and internal.

This paper reads Ao's two short story collections through the intersecting frameworks of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. It draws upon Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence"—a violence that occurs gradually and often invisibly, dispersed across time and space, and disproportionately borne by the poor and the dispossessed (Nixon 2)—to argue that the militarisation of Nagaland's landscape constitutes a form of ecological devastation that is inseparable from its cultural consequences. The paper further contends that Ao's fiction preserves indigenous Ao Naga ecological knowledge as a counter-narrative to the degradation wrought by conflict and modernisation, articulating what this paper terms an *environmental imagination of the margins*—a mode of ecological consciousness that

is at once local and political, rooted in place yet responsive to the large-scale forces reshaping that place.

The argument proceeds through five interconnected sections. Following this introduction, a literature review surveys existing ecocritical scholarship on Ao and identifies the gaps this paper seeks to address. The methodology section outlines the theoretical framework. The analysis and discussion section, the paper's core, undertakes close readings of selected stories from both collections, organised around three thematic axes: the militarised landscape as a site of slow violence; indigenous ecology and the cosmological grounding of human-nature reciprocity; and the gendered dimensions of ecological destruction. The conclusion reflects on the implications of this reading for ecocritical practice in the Indian context.

Literature Review

Ecocriticism, as a formalised field of literary inquiry, traces its origins to Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's landmark collection *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), which defined the discipline as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty xviii). Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) established the criteria for what he termed "environmental texts"—works in which the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a constitutive element whose presence signals that human history is implicated in natural history (Buell 7). Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) extended ecocritical inquiry into postcolonial territory, forging what he described as a "creative alliance" between environmental and postcolonial studies—two fields that had, until then, largely ignored each other (Nixon 4). Nixon's concept of slow violence—a violence that is gradual, attritional, and dispersed across time and space—proved particularly generative for reading literatures from conflict zones where environmental degradation and political violence are entangled.

Scholarship on Temsula Ao has grown substantially since her Sahitya Akademi Award. However, the majority of critical engagement has focused on themes of insurgency, trauma, identity politics, and the gendered dimensions of political violence. Watitula Longkumer's study of *These Hills Called Home* reads the collection through the lens of "terror lore," examining how Ao's stories document the lived experience of the Naga insurgency (Longkumer 1). The *Rupkatha Journal* has published analyses of transgenerational trauma transmission in Ao's fiction, tracing how stories such as "The Last Song" and "An Old Man Remembers" situate their narrators as historical subjects relaying collective traumatic experience.

Research on the political and social realities of Nagaland in Ao's work has documented how her stories depict ordinary citizens caught between the Indian military and underground insurgent organisations.

Ecocritical readings of Ao, by contrast, remain relatively sparse. N.D.R. Chandra and Nigamananda Das's early study, *Ecology, Myth and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India* (2007), laid important groundwork by situating Ao within the broader ecological traditions of the region's poetry (Chandra and Das 35). Neeraj Sankhyan and Suman Sigroha's essay "An Ecocritical Reading of Poetry from India's Northeast" (2017) examines Ao's poetry as expressing a "deep love and concern for ... indigenous cultures, traditions and fragile environments" (Sankhyan and Sigroha 57). Recent scholarship has engaged with Ao's poetry through ecofeminist and ethnopoetic lenses, reading her verse as a "biocultural manifesto for indigenous sustainability" that documents the disintegration of human-nature reciprocity under extractive capitalism. Pramod K. Nayar's definition of ecocriticism as a mode that attends to the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes toward nature and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it, has also been applied to Ao's work (Nayar 253).

What existing scholarship has not fully accomplished, however, is a sustained ecocritical reading of Ao's *prose fiction* that brings together the ecological and the political dimensions of her narratives within a unified theoretical framework. Most ecocritical studies of Ao have focused on her poetry; most studies of her fiction have focused on trauma and identity. This paper addresses that gap by reading *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* through the combined optics of Nixon's slow violence, Buell's environmental imagination, and the indigenous ecological epistemologies that Ao's fiction both depicts and enacts.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutic approach grounded in close textual analysis of selected stories from Ao's two short fiction collections. The theoretical framework is tripartite. The primary analytical lens is Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, deployed here not in its original context of environmental degradation caused by industrial capitalism but adapted to the specific conditions of a militarised landscape—one in which decades of counterinsurgency operations, forced village relocations, and the disruption of traditional land-use practices have produced an attritional degradation of both the physical environment and the cultural systems embedded within it.

The second theoretical resource is Lawrence Buell's criteria for environmental texts, particularly his insistence that literary works can function as acts of "environmental imagination" when the nonhuman environment is represented as a process rather than a constant, and when human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation (Buell 7–8). Ao's fiction, this paper argues, meets Buell's criteria in ways that are distinctively shaped by Ao Naga cosmology and the region's specific history of conflict.

The third component of the framework draws upon indigenous ecological knowledge as articulated through Ao Naga oral traditions, particularly the cosmology of Lijaba (the Earth-Maker deity), which conceives of Nagaland's terrain as an intentional creation—a sacred geography rather than an inert resource. This indigenous epistemological grounding distinguishes Ao's ecocritical consciousness from Western environmentalist paradigms and situates her work within the "biocultural" tradition of indigenous ecological thought.

The methodology follows the Fish Model of research design, proceeding from contextual framing through analytical engagement to a discussion of scholarly implications. The analysis draws upon all ten stories of *These Hills Called Home* and selected stories from *Laburnum for My Head*, treating the two collections as complementary articulations of a unified ecological vision.

Analysis and Discussion

1. The Militarised Landscape: Slow Violence and the Ecology of Conflict

Nagaland's modern history is inseparable from conflict. The Naga nationalist movement, which gathered force in the 1950s with demands for sovereign statehood, provoked a military response from the Indian state that included the imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), forced village groupings, punitive raids, and a sustained military presence across the hills. Ao addresses this history in the preface to *These Hills Called Home*, titled "Lest We Forget," where she observes that Nagaland's story of self-determination "started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got rewritten into one of disappointment and disillusionment" (Ao, *These Hills* x). The stories that follow unfold against a landscape reshaped by this violence—not only in the immediate, spectacular sense of burned villages and razed forests, but also in the gradual, attritional sense that Nixon's concept of slow violence is designed to capture.

In stories such as "The Last Song" and "The Jungle Major," the Naga hills function not merely as a scenic backdrop to human conflict but as participants in it.

The forced relocation of villages, a counterinsurgency tactic employed to deny underground fighters cover and sustenance, constitutes an act of ecological violence: it severs the relationship between communities and the specific landscapes—the forests, water sources, and cultivable slopes—that had sustained them over generations. This is precisely the kind of violence Nixon describes as “dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2): its effects are not concentrated in a single dramatic event but accumulate over decades, altering the physical terrain and the human practices embedded within it. The hills that Ao’s title invokes as “home” are not static topographic features; they are lived environments whose ecological character is being degraded by the very forces that claim to be defending or liberating them.

Ao’s narrative technique reinforces this sense of attritional transformation. Rather than presenting a single, continuous storyline, the collection offers ten discrete stories that function as fragments of a larger devastation—each one illuminating a different facet of the violence and its environmental consequences. The cumulative effect is itself a literary enactment of slow violence: no single story captures the full scope of what has been lost, just as no single event can encapsulate the ecological degradation of a region subjected to decades of military operations. The reader must assemble the larger picture from the fragments, much as the communities Ao writes about must reconstruct their relationship to a landscape rendered unfamiliar by conflict.

The destruction is not confined to the physical terrain. In “An Old Man Remembers,” the elderly narrator recounts how the arrival of armed forces transformed the rhythms of agricultural life—the seasonal cycles of jhum (shifting) cultivation, the communal management of forest resources, the ceremonial relationship with the land—into a militarised routine governed by curfews, patrol schedules, and the constant threat of punitive action. This disruption of what we might call, following Buell, the “environmental imagination” of a community—its collective capacity to perceive and respond to the nonhuman world as a site of meaning and obligation—constitutes a form of ecological violence that is invisible to conventional frameworks of conflict analysis, which tend to count bodies and buildings but not the degradation of human-nature relationships.

II. Indigenous Ecology: Lijaba, Sacred Geography, and the Cosmological Roots of Environmental Consciousness

One of the most distinctive features of Ao’s ecological vision is its grounding in Ao Naga indigenous cosmology. The Ao Naga creation narrative centres on Lijaba,

the Earth-Maker, a deity whose mythic agency sanctifies the terrain of Nagaland as an intentional creation rather than an accidental formation. This cosmology establishes what scholars have described as a “sacred geography”—a framework in which rivers, hills, forests, and animals are imbued with spiritual significance and are understood as participants in a reciprocal relationship with human communities. Ao’s fiction is shaped by this cosmological inheritance, even as her narratives document its erosion under the combined pressures of militarisation, modernisation, and the proselytising impact of Christianity, which, as J.P. Mills observed, required converts to abandon the traditional songs and practices through which ecological knowledge had been transmitted across generations (Mills 402).

In *Laburnum for My Head*, Ao’s engagement with indigenous ecological knowledge becomes more explicit. Nature in this collection operates not as a metaphor or backdrop but, as scholars have observed, as a character—a presence as constitutive of the fictional world as Malgudi is to R.K. Narayan’s writings. The stories explore the interplay between environmental and human conflicts through a lens that is informed by indigenous understandings of the land as a living, responsive entity. The laburnum tree of the title story, for instance, functions as an emblem of the entanglement between human desire and ecological consequence: the protagonist’s wish for the tree to flower over her grave articulates a vision of posthumous belonging that is rooted in the specific ecology of the Naga hills, a vision in which human identity is continuous with, rather than separable from, the natural world.

This indigenous ecological consciousness stands in marked contrast to the frameworks that have dominated Western ecocriticism. Where much Euro-American environmental writing operates from a position of nostalgic recovery—lamenting a lost wilderness, advocating for the preservation of nature as a space separate from human habitation—Ao’s fiction articulates an ecology of habitation. The Ao Naga relationship with the land is not preservationist but participatory: the forest is not a pristine space from which humans must withdraw but a co-inhabited terrain whose health is maintained through reciprocal practices of use, ritual observance, and communal regulation. The disruption of this reciprocity—through military occupation, forced displacement, and the cultural rupture of conversion—constitutes, in Ao’s fiction, the most profound form of ecological loss.

Kishor Kumar has observed that Nagaland in Ao’s writing “is not just a setting; it is the soul of her poems” (Kumar 13). Champa Chettri has similarly noted that the distinctive feature of North Eastern literary writing is its “true representation of contemporary events and problems like ecological degradation, corruption, loss of

identity and cultural values, conflict, migration and violence” (Chettri 23). These observations hold with equal force for Ao’s prose fiction. The hills, forests, and rivers of Nagaland in *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* are not interchangeable with any other landscape; they carry the specific weight of Ao Naga cosmological meaning, historical memory, and ecological knowledge. When Ao writes about the destruction of a village or the burning of a forest, she is writing about the destruction of an entire epistemological system—a way of knowing the world through the land that cannot be reconstituted once the land has been rendered uninhabitable or unfamiliar.

III. Gendered Ecologies: Women, Land, and the Body under Siege

A sustained attention to gender inflects Ao’s ecological vision. In stories such as the harrowing account of Apenyo in *These Hills Called Home*, who is subjected to sexual violence by soldiers during a raid on her village, the violation of the female body is presented in explicit parallel with the violation of the land. This is not merely a rhetorical device; it reflects a deeper structural insight that ecofeminist theory has articulated in various registers: the recognition that the domination of nature and the domination of women are interconnected expressions of the same logic of exploitation. In the specific context of Nagaland, where women’s bodies have historically served as the primary mediators between community and environment—through agricultural labour, the gathering of forest produce, the management of water sources, and the transmission of ecological knowledge through oral tradition—the military assault on women’s bodies is simultaneously an assault on the ecological practices they sustain.

Ao’s poetry, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, foregrounds the female body as both a site of resistance and vulnerability, paralleling it with wounded landscapes. In her prose fiction, this parallel is worked out through narrative rather than metaphor. The women of *These Hills Called Home* are not symbolic figures; they are concrete agents whose daily practices—tending fields, managing households, preserving food, transmitting stories—constitute the material basis of the community’s ecological relationship with its environment. When military operations disrupt these practices, the ecological consequences are inseparable from the gendered ones: women are displaced from the land they know how to cultivate, from the forests they know how to navigate, from the rhythms of seasonal labour that structure both their livelihoods and their identities.

In *Laburnum for My Head*, this gendered ecological consciousness finds expression in stories where women’s relationships with trees, gardens, and

domestic landscapes become sites of quiet but persistent resistance to the forces of degradation. The collection's tonal register is notably different from the raw urgency of *These Hills Called Home*, where the earlier collection records atrocity and survival, *Laburnum for My Head* attends to the subtler textures of a life lived in the aftermath of violence—the slow work of ecological and emotional repair. The geopolitical and social contexts of Nagaland are explored through the interplay between environmental and human conflicts. However, the emphasis shifts from spectacular violence to the attritional, everyday processes of environmental change that Nixon's framework is designed to illuminate.

IV. Implications and Directions

The reading of Ao's fiction proposed in this paper carries several implications for ecocritical scholarship. The foremost is methodological: it demonstrates that ecocriticism, when applied to literatures from conflict zones in the Global South, cannot remain a matter of identifying nature imagery or cataloguing environmental themes. It must attend to the specific political, military, and cultural forces that shape the ecological conditions under which literature is produced. Nixon's slow violence provides an indispensable conceptual resource for this task. However, it must be supplemented by attention to indigenous epistemologies that offer alternative frameworks for understanding human-nature relationships—frameworks that Western ecocriticism has historically marginalised.

The second implication concerns the category of North East Indian English Literature itself. The environmental humanities offer a productive lens for reframing this body of writing beyond the familiar coordinates of insurgency, identity, and ethnicity. The ecological richness of Northeast India—one of the world's biodiversity hotspots—is not incidental to its literary production; it is constitutive of it. Ao's fiction, as this paper has argued, is unintelligible without attention to the specific ecological textures of the Naga hills, just as the ecological crisis of the region is unintelligible without attention to the political violence that has shaped it. An ecocritical approach thus opens a pathway toward reading North East Indian literature on its own terms, rather than as a peripheral supplement to the metropolitan Indian literary canon.

The third implication is theoretical. Ao's fiction challenges the dominant tendency in global ecocriticism to theorise the environment primarily through the categories of Western environmental thought—wilderness, sustainability, the Anthropocene. The indigenous ecology embedded in Ao's narratives offers a different vocabulary: one of reciprocity, sacred geography, and communal

stewardship, grounded in the specific cosmology of the Ao Naga people. Engaging with this vocabulary on its own terms, rather than translating it into Western categories, represents a decolonial imperative for ecocritical practice—one that aligns with the broader project of decolonising the environmental humanities.

Future research might productively extend this framework to the fiction of other North East Indian writers—Easterine Kire’s ecological narratives from Nagaland, Mamang Dai’s engagement with Arunachal Pradesh’s riverine landscapes, and Arupa Patangia Kalita’s depictions of ecological change in Assam—to construct a broader ecocritical cartography of the region’s literary output. Comparative studies linking North East Indian ecological writing with indigenous literatures from other conflict-affected regions of the Global South would further consolidate the field’s methodological contributions.

It should be acknowledged, however, that the application of ecocritical frameworks—even postcolonial ones such as Nixon’s—to indigenous North East Indian literatures carries its own risks. The primary risk is one of epistemological appropriation: the reduction of indigenous ecological knowledge to illustrative material for theoretical arguments formulated elsewhere. Ao’s fiction resists this reduction through its insistence on the irreducible particularity of the Ao Naga experience, its refusal to universalise the local, and its commitment to the specific textures of place, memory, and community that constitute its ethical core.

Conclusion

Temsula Ao’s short fiction collections *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* articulate an ecological consciousness that is at once indigenous and modern, local and political, elegiac and resistant. Through the framework of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, this paper has demonstrated how Ao’s narratives inscribe the militarised landscape of Nagaland as a site of slow violence. In this space, political conflict and ecological degradation are mutually constitutive processes that cannot be analytically separated. The analysis has shown how Ao’s fiction preserves Ao Naga indigenous ecological knowledge—rooted in the cosmology of Lijaba, the practices of communal land management, and the gendered labour of environmental stewardship—as a counter-narrative to the degradation wrought by decades of insurgency, counterinsurgency, and modernisation.

The paper has argued that Ao’s fiction meets Buell’s criteria for environmental literature in ways that are distinctively shaped by the region’s history and by the indigenous epistemologies that inform her writing. Nature in Ao’s fiction

is not a backdrop, a metaphor, or a resource; it is a co-participant in the community's life, whose degradation signals a crisis that is simultaneously ecological, cultural, and existential. The destruction of the Naga hills is, in Ao's literary imagination, the destruction of a world—not in the hyperbolic sense of apocalyptic environmentalism, but in the precise sense that a specific, irreplaceable configuration of landscape, knowledge, and practice is being undone.

Ao's environmental imagination of the margins offers a necessary corrective to the metropolitan biases of both Indian literary criticism and global ecocriticism. It reminds us that the most urgent ecological narratives are often produced not from positions of academic detachment but from within the lived experience of environmental degradation—from the wounded hills and remembered forests of communities whose relationship with the land is neither abstract nor romantic but a daily negotiation with survival, memory, and hope.

Works Referred

Ao, Temsula. *Laburnum for My Head*. Penguin, 2009.

---. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Penguin, 2006.

---. *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988–2007*. Heritage Publishing House, 2013.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. Princeton UP, 1995.

Chandra, N.D.R., and Nigamananda Das. *Ecology, Myth and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India*. Sarup, 2007.

Chettri, Champa. "Contemporary Naga Poetry: Themes and Concerns." *Literary Orbit*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2019, pp. 22–29.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia P, 1996.

Kumar, Kishor. "Temsula Ao: A Voice from the Hills." *Writers of the Northeast*, edited by D.C. Pattanaik, Prestige, 2008, pp. 10–25.

Longkumer, I. Watitula. "Reading Terror in Literature: Exploring Insurgency in Nagaland through Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*." *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1–15.

Mills, James Philip. *The Ao Nagas*. Macmillan, 1926.

Misra, Tilottoma, editor. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. Oxford UP, 2011.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Pearson, 2017.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

Sankhyan, Neeraj, and Suman Sigroha. "An Ecocritical Reading of Poetry from India's Northeast." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, pp. 54–63.