

A Socio-Semiotic Study of the Select Poetry of Temsüla Ao

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Abstract:

This paper undertakes a socio-semiotic analysis of the select poetry of Temsüla Ao to examine how signs, symbols, language choices and cultural codes function as carriers of social meaning in the representation of Naga identity, history, trauma and resistance. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of socio-semiotics as proposed by M. A. K. Halliday, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, the study treats Ao's poetry as a cultural text embedded in the historical and political realities of Northeast India. The poems are examined as semiotic systems that encode collective memory, indigenous consciousness and postcolonial anxiety. The analysis foregrounds symbolic clusters such as land, silence, folklore, ritual, violence, and the female body as signifying structures through which Ao constructs counter-narratives to dominant nationalist discourse. Indigenous oral traditions and communal memory function as semiotic resources that resist historical erasure and assert cultural identity. English, as a colonial inheritance, is refashioned into a hybrid space where native metaphors, local idioms and cultural imagery restructure its semantic field. Ao's poetic diction destabilizes the binaries of centre–margin, modern–primitive and national–ethnic by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies. Further, pain, displacement and political conflict are encoded through silence, metaphor and recurring imagery, transforming trauma into a semiotic register of suffering and survival. Ao's poetry thus emerges as a cultural archive documenting the emotional landscape of a historically marginalized region. The study concludes that Ao's poetry is not merely literary expression but a socio-semiotic act of meaning-making that reconstructs identity, preserves cultural memory and challenges hegemonic narratives.

Keywords: culture, language, identity, poetry, tradition, semiotics

Northeastern English literature occupies a distinctive and prominent space in the arena of Indian writing in English mostly belonging to the land of seven sisters namely, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim, this body of work reflects their unique historical experiences, cultural diversity, and political and social marginalization of the region. Despite of having the status of being geographically and culturally an integral part of India, the Northeast has often been marginalised to the periphery. The Literature from this region, particularly written in English, therefore performs the dual function of articulating the local cultural memory with distinctive idiomatic expression translated from the native language while negotiating the visibility within the broader national literary canon. Writers such as Temsüla Ao, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Anjum Hasan, Robin S. Ngangom, and Mitra Phukan exemplify this negotiation explicitly in their writings. The seven states of the north-east correspond to the seven different emotions and reflections of their inner culturally alive native consciousness amid the chaotic cultural and linguistic hybrid space very categorically represented in their

writings.

English emerges as both a colonial legacy and a medium of empowerment for Northeastern writers. The multilingualism in northeast encompasses Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Austroasiatic languages rendering English as the most accepted lingua franca that allows writers and poets to reach wider audiences without privileging one indigenous language over another. However, English is not used in a homogenizing manner, as mentioned before all seven sisters of the northeast have seven different emotions and those myriad of emotions have their own distinctive flavour in their expression in terms of language and cultural consciousness presented in their poetry, hence explains the many Englishes used by different poets belonging to different regions with different language, experience and cultural nativity. As Braj Kachru (1983) argues in the context of Indian English, the language undergoes nativisation, absorbing local idioms, myths, and rhythms.

In Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), and Mamang Dai's *River Poems* (2004), English is nativized throughout the process of writing to give an expression to one's oral traditions, the linguistic references together with the culture and mythology related to the region. Thus, English in the Northeast becomes a site of resistance, transforming from a colonial imposition into a medium of nativised expression well aware of the harm caused by colonisation.

Northeastern English literature is deeply concerned with questions of identity, memory, nostalgia, culture, tradition, language expression, colonisation and belonging. Three thematic clusters dominate in this context, where the first one is, history and memory. It is evident in the writings of northeast poets in their expression of culture and nostalgia, they often address the colonial past, nationalist movements, and the recurrent expression of insurgencies. Robin S. Ngangom's poetry captures the anguish of violence in Manipur, while Kire's fiction foregrounds the trauma of Naga political struggles whereas Temsula Ao refers to the loss of culture, language, tradition and identity criticising the colonial past together with the destruction of nature and Mamang Dai throughout her poetry tries to express herself through nature.

The second one is nature and Ecology where landscape is not merely a backdrop but a participant in storytelling. Dai's poems, Kire's novels, and Ao's stories together with poetry highlights the interdependence of humans and nature, reflecting indigenous cosmologies. This ecological sensitivity resists modern extractive economies positions literature as an act of environmental witnessing together with individual resistance and identity establishment. The third is hybridity and marginality where identity is represented as fluid and liminal, shaped by ethnic diversity, migration, and political conflict. Writers often articulate a sense of alienation from "mainland" India while asserting rootedness in local traditions. These themes collectively produce what Stuart Hall (1994) calls "cultural identity as being and becoming" where identity is anchored in memory and tradition but is also reconstituted in the present through negotiation and resistance. A central concern in Northeastern English literature is the politics of representation. Writers from the region often resist reductive stereotypes imposed by mainstream Indian media, where the Northeast is frequently represented as exotic or conflict-ridden. Literature becomes a counter-discourse that reclaims the authority to narrate.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) questions "Can the subaltern speak?", resonates here. Northeastern writers use English to assert subaltern voices in a space where their histories have been marginalized. Yet, this assertion is fraught with the use of English risks alienation from grassroots readerships who primarily read in local languages. Thus, English literature from the region occupies a liminal position, simultaneously local and global, subaltern and cosmopolitan.

Temsula Ao's writing resonates on multiple thematic levels that is the social, political and economic

history, memory, language, cultural identity, gender, and ecology. Her poetry explores transgenerational trauma, insurgency, and the burden of collective memory and lost language and culture. In a critical reading of select poetry, she uses personal and familial narratives to reflect on macro-historical realities, creating an image of relevance and crisis in the contemporary world, that defines Naga identity. While looking from a feminist perspective, her work reflects on the status of women as survivors, intermediaries, and moral anchors in a society dominated by men. According to a doctoral thesis on her writing, Ao represents Naga women not just as victims, but as an intelligent, instinctive caretakers of both community and nature. Her poetry frequently foregrounds ecological awareness, where she portrays earth and nature in the image of a woman who was once pristine and beautiful but now has been raped, stripped out of her beauty and left astray as represented in poems like “Lament for an Earth” and “My Hills,” she links environmental degradation to cultural uprootedness, suggesting an ecofeminist sensibility together with the loss of language where the land and its people are deeply intertwined. While examining her career and life it is quite evident that she was person of words, she practiced what she wrote. As chairperson of the Women’s Commission, she pushed for reforms that would give Naga women agency in customary institutions. She established this fact categorically that her feminism was not merely theoretical but rooted in the application of lived social concerns.

Temsula Ao’s poetry in English nativises the language in ways that preserve and projects her Ao-Naga culture, oral traditions, and ecological memory. Her English is deeply rooted in local myth, folklore, and landscape, yet remains accessible in its lyrical, elegiac, and meditative register. This hybrid use of English helps her negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity, preserving a distinctly Naga voice even while writing in a colonial language. Her poetry is conversational with a typical lyrical cadence of a folklore, that reflects on the nativisation of verses.

She consistently frames her poems as *songs*. As noted by critics, all her poetry collections bear the word “Songs,” which reflects her expression corresponding to her oral tradition. She explains that there’s no other word in culture and linguistic archive close enough to use a word for poems other than songs because her oral tradition immersed in stories only reflects the essentiality of songs. In her introductory poem “Songs Dedicatory” (from *Songs That Tell*), she writes:

“Which sometimes / Imitate / Greater bards for a kindred heart / who knew and understood / long before I knew them.”

Critically, this is important to notice that by calling her poems “songs,” she recovers a traditional Naga mode of memory-transmission that is the tradition of oral singing, but renders it in English. In doing so, English becomes a vessel for her community’s historical consciousness, rather than a tool of alienation. Hence, the first step of nativisation begins.

In her poem “The Stone-People from Lungterok”, Ao draws on Ao-Naga myth where she conjures ancestral figures emerging from “Lungterok” (which means “six stones” in Ao Naga language and mythology. She writes with a mixture of reverence and ambivalence, using rich adjectives like “barbaric and balladic,” which corresponds to “savage and sage” in order to describe the sensibility and life of her ancestors. This use of English is not neutral or imported wholesale rather, she infuses culturally specific referents like Lungterok, the myth of stone-people, seamlessly into English syntax, thereby indigenising the language. Her English does not displace her cultural identity rather it carries it and creates a melange of a culturally aware modern identity.

In her poem “Blood of Other Days”, Ao addresses cultural hybridisation and the impact of colonialism and Christianity. As described by critics, she writes:

“We borrowed their minds / Aped their manners / Adopted their gods / And became perfect mimics.” This is a potent example of how her English voice critiques colonial violence: she uses English to name the “tribe of strangers ... armed with only a Book” (allusion to Bible) who judged her people’s traditions as “tedious primitive nonsense.” Her English, thus, becomes a counter-colonial tool, she reclaims the language to expose and resist the historical erasure and exoticisation of her community. She nowhere elaborates on the world God while talking about her native culture, the Ao-Naga culture is full of spirits, there’s no concept of death but an after-life amid mortals.

Her poetry often evokes nature, ancestral land, and ecological reciprocity. According to environmental literary critics, her body of work can be read as a “biocultural manifesto,” preserving indigenous ecological knowledge in English. For instance, in poems like “My Hills” or “Lament for an Earth,” she links ecological degradation to the loss of cultural roots. Critics note that she sings the “landscape ... as an objective correlative for her mindscape.”

By writing in English about local ecology, she localises the global language: the colonial tongue becomes a means to articulate *regenerative futures*, not just to mourn environmental loss but as a means to revive her identity and cultural consciousness.

In the poem “The Old Storyteller”, Ao contrasts oral storytelling with the written “book.” She evokes a Naga myth of the “Original Dog” that ate a written script, thereby symbolising how written tradition was lost and replaced by orality. In English, she gives voice to the grandmother-storyteller figure:

“when memory fails and words falter ... I am overcome by a bestial craving ... to wrench the thieving guts ... out of that Original Dog ... and consign all my stories ... to the script in his ancient entrails.”

This passage is deeply hybrid: English imagery (“words falter,” “memory fails”) merges with Naga myth (“Original Dog,” oral traditions), showing how Ao uses English to mediate between the past (orality) and the present (writing). She does not simply adopt English, she *re-frames* it in her own cultural idiom of assertion in terms of identity and language. Critics note that Ao’s work transcends narrow ethnic or regional identity: while deeply rooted in Naga traditions, her themes (identity, loss, nature, conflict) also have universal resonance. By using English (a global, cosmopolitan medium), she dialogues not just with her immediate community, but with a broader readership: Indian English readers, and even international audiences. But she does this without diluting the specificity of her cultural context.

Temsula Ao’s use of English is a conscious act of nativisation. Rather than treating English merely as a colonial legacy, she appropriates it, hybridises it, and transforms it into a language of memory, myth, and ecological belonging. Through her poems that she prefers to call as “songs” in the deepest sense she re-anchors English in her Ao-Naga heritage, and in doing so, asserts a hybrid identity that is rooted in tradition yet open to modernity. In the course of her explanation, she also attempts to establish the real meaning of modernity by staying close to the roots, otherwise when it comes to identity, the individuals remain a stray who belongs to none of the worlds within and has no identity to assert on, a feeling that she felt in Minnesota. A similar feeling through which one A. K. Ramanujan, Toru Dutta, and Aurobindo Ghosh went through in the course of identity crisis. Temsula Ao, establishes that lost identity well through her poetry and by attempting to inculcate the idioms of her native language to English, she asserts her pain and her existence in Indian literary canon with immense power, authority and autonomy. In her poetry, English becomes not a tool of erasure, but a medium of cultural reclamation and her writings become a cultural archive of authority, a way to articulate her community’s past, imagine its future, and share its stories with the world before it becomes a forgotten lore.

The two poetry collections that have been extensively studied in this chapter are *Book of Songs: Collected*

Poems 1988-2007 (2013) and *Songs Along the Way Home* (2017)

The first major poem from the *Book of Songs* where she talks about her native identity and the birth of her community is “Stone-People from Lungterok”

In “Stone-People from Lungterok,” Ao draws from the Ao Naga creation myth, where she explains that there were six stones, three large who turned into three men and three small stones which turned into three women, it is an accepted belief that they have emerged from Lungterok, which literally means “six stones. This mythic origin grounds Ao’s poetic imagination deeply in her community’s oral tradition.

The poem begins with:

“Lungterok,
The six Stones
Where the progenitors
And forebears
Of the stone-people
Were born
Out of the womb
Of the earth.”

By personifying the earth as a womb, Ao uses maternal imagery to convey a profoundly organic, life-giving relationship between her people and the land. She does not represent it as a mere myth, it establishes the relation of belonging and interconnection between the land, the nature and its people. She describes her ancestors in paradoxical, oxymoronic terms, “barbaric and balladic,” “savage and sage,” “the poetic and the politic.” These juxtapositions are important as they show that her ancestors were not one-dimensional warriors, but beings who encompassed both the raw and the refined, the spiritual and the pragmatic aspects of life and society. Later in the poem, she writes of the stone-people as:

“The worshippers ...
Of trees and forests,
Of stones and rivers ...
Believers of soul ...
Its sojourn here ...
And passage across ...
Into the hereafter.”

Here, she is not only evoking a spiritual reverence for nature, but also conceptualizing the soul as embedded in the landscape. She refuses a strict human/nonhuman divide, by using English to render these ecological and spiritual ideas, she nativises the language where English becomes a container for Indigenous cosmology and not a foreign medium that flattens it. The ending of the poem or rather song springs up a question, that is, “Was the birth adult when the stone broke? / or are the STONE-PEOPLE yet to come of age?” This is a powerful moment. She wonders whether her ancestors were born fully formed (wise, mature) or whether their “coming of age” is still in process. The question reflects a hybrid identity, her people are ancient, but they are not static. Through English, she stages this conceptual ambivalence in universal philosophical language (birth, maturity, becoming), yet the content remains rooted in her Ao Naga mythology.

She uses Standard English syntax but loads it with mythic content (“six Stones ... womb of the earth”) that is specific to her Naga heritage. Her diction (“progenitors,” “worshippers,” “sojourns”) and her metaphorical framework combine to make English a medium of cultural memory, rather than a colonial

imposition. Through the use of the word ‘sojourn’ she explicitly states that there is the concept of after life in Naga culture and the spirit never dies. The myth of Lungterok becomes a persistent symbol in her poetic identity, mediated through English but deeply Naga in conception.

Another poem from the same poetry collection, “The Old Storyteller”, she imagines a grandmother figure whose role is to tell stories in order to preserve cultural memory. The grandmother as a storyteller, laments that her grandsons dismiss her counsel as “ancient gibberish.” In the concluding lines, she says that “when memory fails and words falter ... I am overcome by a bestial craving ... to wrench the thieving guts ... out of that Original Dog ... and consign all my stories ... to the script in his ancient entrails.” The “Original Dog” is a reference from Naga myth. According to tradition, a dog once ate the written script of the Naga people. The grandmother’s desire to *wrench the guts* of the dog and consign her stories “to the script in his ancient entrails” is a vivid, grotesque metaphor, but deeply meaningful where she wants to re-embed her people’s stories in the very tissue of their mythic past, even if that means violent reclamation. Ao (as interpreted by critics) frames storytelling not just as nostalgia, but as responsibility where she sees “telling stories” as a moral imperative for generational continuity. The verbs “tell,” “listen,” and “hear” recur, emphasizing a triadic ethics that corresponds to the storyteller that speaks, the listener pays attention, and memory is sustained. English in this poem is not smooth but “domesticated”, it’s charged with mythic and oral energies. The metaphor of “thieving guts” and “script ... in his ... entrails” is raw and corporeal. By using English to talk about a dog devouring a sacred script, the poet is subverting the written tradition where she suggests that the loss of text has to be compensated, not just by oral retelling, but by reconceiving what writing means (even in English through its nativized version). The image of a grandmother in the poem is a symbol of the preserver of cultural memory. Her “bestial craving” is not just violence for its own sake but it’s a metaphor for reconnection through which she wants her stories to be physically and spiritually re-rooted hence English becomes a site of struggle, it is not simply a colonial legacy but a space where memory is contested, negotiated, and re-inscribed through mythology and thence a nativized version is achieved.

Finally, Ao’s style itself through her deployment of English infused with Naga rhythms, orality, and myth, is part of her feminist assertion. In an interview, she reflects on how her writing style resists flattening her culture into “quaint folklore” by reworking English to carry her people’s voice authentically. This linguistic reclamation is feminist as it affirms that women’s stories and the stories of marginalized cultures deserve to be told in a language of power, reshaped on their own terms. In sum, the idioms of assertion in Ao’s poetry whether through voicing the unwritten, drawing connections between ecological and gendered harm, grounding feminism in native cultural memory, or reclaiming English itself and form a robust feminist poetics. Her work is not about simple protest; it’s an act of imaginative reconstruction, of creating space for women’s voices that both resist and become rooted in her richly specific, Naga-Northeastern world.

Temsüla Ao’s poetry embodies idioms of assertion that negotiate between oral tradition and written English, cultural memory and modern identity, silence and testimony. Through songlike structures, proverb-like brevity, direct address, ecological metaphor, and nativized English, Ao creates a poetics that asserts presence against political violence, affirms cultural identity against erasure, and articulates gendered experience against invisibility. Her work demonstrates that assertion is not merely what the poet says that it is how the poet says it. Ao transforms idiom into instrument: a linguistic tool for cultural preservation, ethical intervention, and decolonial resistance. Her poetry stands as an archive of assertion.

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