



Comparative study of the representation of the Assamese panorama in the works of Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai & Robin Ngangom

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Abstract

Northeast India is situated geographically amongst hills, valleys, rivers and forests makes up eight states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. Each state has its own cultural and linguistic identities; however, because of common historical experiences of ecological connection and political marginalization, along with the presence of 'Indigenous' cosmologies, these states create a landscape of literature that goes against the grain of mainstream homogenisation. In this section of Indian Writing in English, writers Temsula Ao of Nagaland, Mamang Dai of Arunachal Pradesh and Robin Singh Ngangom of Manipur have represented this literary landscape, not only as beautiful scenery, but as historical palimpsests embodying collective memory, conflict, identity, tradition, and ecological concern. The writers have responded to reductive national narratives and have contributed to developing a hybrid literary aesthetic intertwined with an awareness of the land and their personal cultural consciousness. This article will provide an overview of how the three authors have represented the Northeastern Indian literary landscape thematically, comparing them according to thematic interest in each writer's work, as well as comparing preferred narrative techniques for expressing them, through memory, landscape, and socio-political issues. This comparative analysis illustrates that all three authors placed their work within the context of the land, but each placed it within its context of historical/modern experience and consequently represent Northeastern India differently from one another: Ao uses the oral tradition, Dai uses her ecological and cultural continuity, and Ngangom uses the context of restless identity and violent memories to convey their distinct visions of the region, yet present complementary rather than competing views.

Keywords:

Conflict, identity, tradition, ecology

Introduction

Temsüla Ao (1945–2022) was born in Jorhat, Assam, and predominantly lived in Nagaland during her formative years. A poet, short story author and ethnographer, Ao's position as an academic at the North Eastern Hill University makes her one of the major voices in English literature from the Naga community. Ao has published numerous collections of poetry, including *Songs That Tell* (1988) and *Songs From The Other Life* (2007), as well as popular collections of short stories, such as *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and *Laburnum for My Head*, which won her the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Ao's writing is composed of a complex web of interactions between oral tradition, the collective memory of a people and the wartime violence that devastated much of Nagaland. (Rudra, 2019) Ao's representation of Northeastern India comes from the idea of storytelling as a means of remembering and valuing a culture. In her poem "The Old Story Teller," Ao refers to storytelling as a means of keeping history alive in our collective memories, and as a way to keep our traditions and ways of life intact, in the face of social and political changes to society. This concept of storytelling is both an act of resistance against colonisation and of treasuring the collective memory of a group. Ao's belief in the importance of oral tradition disrupts the traditional linear writing of history, and highlights the aesthetic of indigenous cultures that cannot always be simply classified. Unlike the colonial or dominant cultural view that often represents the hills as exotic settings, Ao's universe is one in which war and grief, memory and myth, share the same space.

Ao's representation of Nagaland through short fiction highlights a different reality than the idealistic representations often made in works about Native Americans. In her novel "These Hills Called Home," Ao employs a structure that mixes stories of daily life in Nagaland with the stark realities of life during the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA) and a long history of ethnic insurgency, using both to depict the haunting legacy of violence on homes, community rituals disrupted by terror, and an evolving landscape of beauty and savagery. The hills and forests become active participants in each narrative, and at times their silence speaks louder than human language. In so doing, Ao dismantles the

stereotype of the Northeast as a picturesque "other" culture, presenting a landscape shaped by history, community resilience, and indigenous worldviews. (Anthony, 2021)

Moreover, Ao addresses identity on multiple levels. At the personal level, she draws upon her Ao Naga heritage, and at the tribal level, she reflects upon her experience as a member of the Ao Naga people. She situated her concept of identity within the oral and ecological traditions of the Ao Naga people, thus challenging the homogenizing concept of Northeast India. Through the interweaving of oral lore and contemporary narratives, the geographical landscape of Nagaland becomes a repository for both collective identity and collective trauma. . (Pyngrope , 2019)

Temsula Ao connects the representation of the panorama with the political history of the Naga Hills - the landscape changes from being passive to active, as it now represents the effects of conflict. Also, Ao describes that jungles of Assam and Nagaland have two configurations. They are a place for maintaining ancestral heritage through sustenance yet also creates "war zones" due to the potential presence of an insurgent or army approaching (indicated by rustling leaves). Ao's representation of the panorama includes the oral histories of the people who live in the area. As demonstrated in the poem "Old Story," hills contain the information and identity of a tribe. When individuals disconnect from the land, their identity and corresponding stories may be lost. Ao connects the environmental destruction and exploitation of resources with the destruction and exploitation of Native women's bodies, demonstrating that "desecration" of hills by outsiders illustrates the violence experienced by Indigenous women. (Prasad, 2019)

Mamang Dai: Ecological Continuity and Cultural Roots

Mamang Dai (b. 1957) is a poet, novelist, and journalist from Pasighat in Arianagal Pradesh whose poems and novels are written in the style of the Donyi-Polo tradition. Her most notable works are "River Poems" and "The Legends of Pensam," both of which have received many awards, including a Sahitya Akademy Award for the latter. Her writing reflects her connection to her Adi tribe's culture and, importantly, engages directly with the ecological and cosmological experiences of the land and its people (Jacques, 2019).

In contrast to a simplistic romantic view of nature, Dai positions the Northeast as an active participant in a dialogue about culture and land through examples of poems such as "The Voice of the Mountain," in

which the mountain itself speaks, as an entity that holds memory, history and spirituality. Land is seen not as inert but as something that houses both memory and myth to form the collective consciousness of the communities that live on it.

The Writing of Dai offers an ecological worldview as it is understood from the perspective of Donyi-Polo spirituality and in an Animistic context, where water, trees, and mountains are seen as a source of sacredness. Dai's view of nature is a holistic and integrated connection between the environment and culture, as opposed to a division between the two as seen in environmentalism. Her view has much in common with other ecocritics who advocate for understanding nature as part of Indigenous Identity rather than a backdrop to Indigenous societies.

While Temsula Ao focuses on conflict within her writing, Mamang Dai focuses on the continuity and strength of communities over time. Mamang Dai acknowledges the impact of politics and culture on life, however, she has emphasised the relationship between the people and the environment, both natural and man-made, in her work. In River Poems, for example, Mamang uses the river as a means to demonstrate the impact of the natural world on people and their memories, rites and rituals. The river "sings" with the voices of the ancestors and provides a link between myth and history that neither alone can provide.

In this sense, Mamang Dai offers a broader view of the world that incorporates all forms of grief and healing, while simultaneously situating all people and cultures within a framework of tradition and the environment as part of the legacy of our ancestors. (Pathak, 2019) In comparison, Mamang Dai's portrayal of the river as a sense of belonging to the community of Arunachal Pradesh contrasts sharply with Temsula Ao's depiction of the hills; both authors depict their respective homelands through their works. Temsula Ao portrays the mountainous region of Arunachal Pradesh through her poetry, while Mamang Dai portrays her homeland through her prose and novels. Both authors use the symbols of the hills and rivers as a means to express their cultural heritage, and Mamang Dai uses the river as a central metaphor for her writing. In works such as *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hills*, Mamang Dai portrays the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries, particularly the Siang River, as central themes in her writing. As seen in her poem "Small Towns and the River," Mamang Dai's portrayal of the water in the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries is one of omniscience—something that can move through space and time, carrying with it the memories of the people who have lived along its banks. Unlike the fleeting lives of people, the river has

permanence; therefore, the permanence of the river creates a spirit of ecological balance or "spiritual ecology."

Dai's artwork connects with the spiritual world in which she lives, and she connects the region of the Northeast with a place of spirituality. Her earlier work depicts the Northeast as a sacred landscape where the boundaries separating human existence from the spiritual world are not clearly defined. Later, Dai began creating works expressing her "ecological angst" due to concerns about the blocking of watercourses and the cutting down of trees for development, moving her toward a more activist position. (Wilfred, 2021)

A prominent characteristic of Mamang Dai's narrative world is her emphasis upon the landscape around her. In both *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill*, the physical geography of Assam and its surrounding hill country serve not just as backdrops to her stories but rather form an essential living part of each author's story and serve to shape the characters and their surroundings. Rivers, mountains, forests, and valleys are used extensively throughout both texts, representing the deep relationship between the land and the people living on it that is a characteristic of the Assamese and tribal cultures.

The Legends of Pensam depicts the fictional village of Pensam as being situated within the Siang River Valley, which has many forests, flowing rivers, and mist-clad mountains. The cyclical structure presented within this work of fiction reflects both the repeating cycles of nature and the cycles of tribal life.

In addition to regulating agriculture, time and seasons also determine amounts of time spent celebrating, which explains how rivers like the Siang function as a vehicle for carrying the past to each generation; each story or piece of memory echoes and informs the next. As such, this aspect of the Siang is indicative of the Assamese sensibility, wherein rivers like the Brahmaputra serve a much broader purpose than just being landforms—they provide the foundation for civilization, mythology, and livelihood (Sajal, 2022).

Just as the river Siang carries the memories and experiences of all Assamese people, Dai's depiction of Assam in *The Black Hill* provides insight into how this region will change through colonialism. The representation of Assam in the twentieth century is more than just a result of the British Administration's control over Assam; rather, the author's use of place-based and landscape-based metaphors enables the

reader to experience Assam as it would have been experienced through the eyes of the indigenous populace.

Dai's portrayal of Assam during the nineteenth century, when Assam and hill areas began to be first integrated into the colonial system of administration, provides an alternative history to what is often provided by colonial historians who focus solely on their perspective of the events of the day, which tends to be devoid of any and all community input. (Nayar, 2020)

The arrival of missionaries, explorers and administrators disrupts the balance of society/culture in the area. In Dai's work we see an underlying tension between curiosity and fear, hospitality and resistance, as first contact is made with the colonizers, who represent new ideas and ways of life. The forests and hills of Assam, which are thickly forested with incredible biodiversity and are not easily traversable by outsiders, are used to symbolize the autonomy of the indigenous peoples and their resistance to easy colonisation.

The Legends of Pensam portray how colonisation changes history but does not always represent it directly. Colonisation disrupts pre-existing structures, economic activities and cultural values, but many times these changes are not visible until much later in time. The slow, gradual change of the way in which colonisation acts on the local people can be understood through these novels. Together these two novels give us a broad view of the history of Assam; from its earliest times up until today and the impact colonisation has had on this area.

Ecology is an important aspect in Mamang Dai's understanding of Assam. Her portrayal of the landscape is similarly influenced, in that it illustrates the interconnectedness of people and nature. The forests of Assam are places where the people found food and spiritual support; rivers were important to the people; and they depended on animals as friends and symbols.

In both of these works, ecology is presented as a primary source of the communal welfare of the peoples of Assam. When the environment is disrupted (for example: when there is overhunting of game animals or when the forests are cleared for agricultural purposes or when outsiders interfere with the Assamese/tribal peoples' relationship with the Earth), this disunity creates negative moral and social issues. The ecological ethics that Mamang Dai portrays echo traditional Assamese and tribal beliefs concerning living in harmony with nature.

The Black Hill similarly underscores the ecological impact of colonial expansion. The mapping and exploitation of land threaten indigenous ways of life. By foregrounding these issues, Dai situates the Assamese panorama within contemporary debates on environmental conservation and sustainable living. (Pramod , 2021)

Robin S. Ngangom: Memory, Identity, Violence, and the Fragmented Landscape

Born in 1959, Robin S. Ngangom is a bilingual poet (in English and Manipuri) and translator from Imphal, Manipur, who has published such works as *Words and the Silence*, 1988 *Time's Crossroads*, 1994 and *The Desire of Roots*, 2006. As a poet, Ngangom explores duality through identity by merging the English tradition with the Manipuri tradition to express place, culture, and the psychological landscape created by political and historical upheaval in memory.

In much of Ngangom's poetry, the region he writes about is in transition: a place where nostalgia for what was once home meets the harshness of the present. This point can be seen in the poem "Homeland I Left," in which the speaker remembers living in a childhood landscape of Manipuri seasonal festivals and marketplaces, yet he is also confronted with images of violence, dispossession and loss. The resulting experience produces a complex landscape combining both beauty and wounding.

Ngangom's landscape differs from those of other poets, such as Dai, whose view of an environment reflects ecological issues, and Ao, whose description of his environment incorporates myth and tale. Instead, Ngangom depicts the psychological and political landscape of the hills and the streets of Manipur as they bear witness to armed conflict, state sanctioned violence, and broken identities. The loss that is both personal and community defines the poet's perception of the land; the landscape of the poet's mind is never simply aesthetic; rather it is entangled with the destructive consequences of the actions of man throughout history and politics.

In his translingual poetics, Ngangom highlights the relationship between language and identity and how both interact with one another. By writing in both English and Manipuri, Ngangom creates a connection to the local tradition of the Northeast while also engaging with the global literary discourse. However, he also emphasizes the view that this is exclusively a Meitei cultural memory and therefore places greater

importance on its significance. This dynamic reflects Ngangom's overall critique of the language politics in postcolonial societies as he sees English being used to both translate and resist the plurality of Northeast India and integrate it into the larger literary discourse of the world.

In addition to this, Ngangom challenges the notion that the Northeast should be viewed as unitary. His poetry often depicts the fragmentation of culture as not simply an aesthetic choice, but rather as an accurate representation of the various socio-political ruptures within Northeast India and the complexity of the region's contemporary experience in terms of culture and identity. Memory, loss, identity, and violence occupy the same space in the landscape of Ngangom's poetry, creating a dichotomy between the natural beauty of the landscape and the political turmoil that exists in the area.

As a Manipuri poet currently residing in Shillong, Robin Ngangom offers an urban, "deracinated" perspective of the region. He often writes about the theme of "longing" and conveys this in the imagery depicted in the work "Native Land" through such phrases as the "rivers are running red" and "the bird song is gone". Ngangom depicts the Assamese/Northeast landscape as a "stricken land", where the "staccato of weaponry" signifies a lack of peace.

Ngangom's work often contrasts the "idyllic" past of the hills with the "absurd" present. He utilizes "black humor" to depict a panorama that is beautiful yet terrifying—a place where one "meditates brokenly on love" amidst "statistics of murder." Unlike the purely tribal rootedness of Ao or Dai, Ngangom writes from the perspective of the "intellectual on the edge." He acknowledges his position in the "periphery," scrawling history on the "delusive margins" of the Indian nation-state.

Comparative Analysis

1. Landscape as Cultural Text

All three authors treat *landscape* as more than mere setting. For Ao, the hills are communal memory and historical witness; for Dai, landscape embodies spiritual and ecological continuity; for Ngangom, land becomes a locus of memory, identity and conflict. Their treatment of the panorama moves beyond visual aesthetics toward *cultural and political geography*.

2. Memory and Identity

Memory functions differently across their works:

- Ao uses memory as narrative substructure, creating stories that reclaim indigenous histories and resist marginalizing national narratives.
- Dai positions memory within ecological rhythms, blending ancestral knowledge with living nature.
- Ngangom embeds memory in political trauma and loss, showing how *remembered landscapes* become sites of personal and collective anguish.

Each author's approach to identity is similarly distinct, with Ao emphasizing tribal oral legacies, Dai foregrounding cultural continuity, and Ngangom navigating hybrid linguistic identities shaped by political realities.

3. Conflict and Ecology

Ao's depiction of conflict is central; war and insurgency shape human experience and landscape. Ngangom's poetic terrain is likewise steeped in socio-political instability. Dai, while not ignoring political strife, foregrounds ecological balance and human-nature relationships, often as mechanisms of healing. Their works collectively map the Northeast's ecological and socio-political paradoxes — where lush landscapes coexist with political violence and cultural erosion.

4. Narrative Strategy

Three writers in English from the Northeastern part of India are giving us a voice and creating a new way of thinking about the area: Tamsüla Ao, Mamang Dai, and Robin S. Ngangom. Their work all has different ways of showing what these writers are feeling and experiencing, but they all are showing us an idea of what it looks like to live in the Northeastern part of India. The land, historical memory, culture and conflict are all used in the three authors' writing to explain the Northeastern region.

Conclusion

Tamsüla Ao recreates historical memories that have been hidden; Mamang Dai creatively illustrates the idea of continuity in an ecological and cultural sense; and Robin Ngangom, through poetry, shows how

memory, and conflict can be expressed in different languages. Together, they have produced an understanding or a "panorama" of the Northeastern part of India as a region where beauty, pain, the past and the present, Nature and Politics cannot be separated from one another. While Temsula Ao tells us how the land has been damaged, and Mamang Dai expresses the spirit of the land, Robin Ngangom mourns what we have lost. By using their different modes of writing, they are bringing about a new way of seeing the Northeastern part of India and how it has been represented in literature for many years.

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