

Re-positioning Women and Reconfiguring Power: A Feminist Reading of Tamsula Ao's Short Stories.

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the representation of women in Tamsula Ao's short stories *The Last Song* and *The Pot Maker*, and argues that Ao reconfigures conventional gender hierarchies by positioning her women characters as autonomous, skilled, and resilient agents. While Simone de Beauvoir conceptualises women as historically constructed as "the second sex," Ao's narratives challenge this universal paradigm by situating women at the centre of labour, decision-making, cultural transmission, and resistance. Through the figures of Libeni, Apenyo, Arenla, and Sentila, the stories explore maternal independence, artistic inheritance, occupation-based agency, oral tradition, and embodied defiance in the face of military violence and patriarchal judgement. The absence or passivity of the father figure further destabilises the normative masculine axis of authority. Drawing on feminist theorists such as Beauvoir, V. Geetha, and classical assumptions from Aristotle, this paper demonstrates how Ao's fiction configures women not as victims but as creators, labourers, memory-keepers, and moral anchors. Ultimately, Ao articulates a feminist aesthetic unique to the North-East, where womanhood becomes a locus of power rather than inferiority.

Introduction

Across cultures and across history, women have been relegated to the margins of social recognition, intellectual capability, and material entitlement. Simone de Beauvoir famously names this condition as women being cast as "the second sex," a category assigned not merely by biology but by deeply embedded cultural hierarchies that privilege masculine identity as the norm and feminine identity as derivative. From classical civilisations such as the Greeks and Romans, to Vedic India, to present-day social structures, gender has operated as an instrument of power. Access to education, healthcare, property, career advancement, mobility, and legal personhood has been historically restricted for women. Literature, both classical and contemporary, bears ample testimony to this inequality.

Within this broad legacy of gendered subordination, Tamsula Ao's fiction emerges as a striking intervention. Writing from Nagaland, she provides an alternative cartography of power: women in her short stories are not merely passive sufferers or symbolic figures; they are decision-makers, labourers, creators, and moral centres. Her collections, *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*, present North-Eastern tribal life with lyrical imagery, stark violence, and deep emotional resonance. Her language is simple, yet the themes she handles — militarisation, patriarchy, memory, community, tradition, trauma — are complex. In her narratives, women do not simply endure life; they navigate, reshape, and often subvert the patriarchal roles assigned to them.

This essay analyses "*The Last Song*" and "*The Pot Maker*" and argues that Tamsula Ao actively undermines the inherited cultural idea that women are weak, dependent, or intellectually inferior. Through her women characters — Libeni, Apenyo, Arenla, and Sentila — Ao constructs new models of autonomy, labour, inheritance, and resistance. In doing so, she creates a gendered discourse that is markedly different from mainstream Indian literary tradition.

Temsula Ao and the Context of North-East Indian Writing

Temsula Ao writes within a socio-political region long marked by insurgency, militarisation, identity conflicts, and cultural negotiation. The North-East is often represented within national discourse as peripheral, yet within this so-called “periphery,” we find distinct power structures. Women in many tribal societies of the region have historically enjoyed greater mobility, active labour participation, and sometimes even economic independence compared to their counterparts in mainland patriarchal structures.

Ao’s women are heirs to a cultural economy of skill — weaving, agriculture, pottery, song, and oral storytelling. These are not simply aesthetic accomplishments; they are sources of livelihood, identity, and intergenerational heritage. Ao uses these elements to relocate women’s agency within labour and tradition.

Absence of Patriarchal Authority: The Significance of the Non-Dominant Father

In both stories, the patriarch is either absent or functionally powerless. The default cultural assumption — that men are breadwinners and women depend on them — is unsettled at the outset.

In *The Last Song*, Zhamben dies when Apenyo is still an infant. Maternal independence emerges as a necessity, not an aberration. In *The Pot Maker*, Sentila’s father, Mesoba, is neither violent nor authoritative; instead, he is gentle and submissive — the antithesis of the normative patriarchal model. He is ridiculed as “henpecked,” a term loaded with gender anxiety. This public mockery itself reveals how society equates masculinity with control. Ao uses Mesoba to expose the constructed nature of patriarchy: masculinity is never natural; it is performed, demanded, and socially enforced.

Thus, women occupy economic centrality in the home, not because they are “allowed” to, but because they already are the ones sustaining it.

Women’s Labour as Power and Choice

Ao’s women undertake labour that is not feminised but physically demanding: farming, transporting soil uphill, pot-making, and weaving. These are tasks typically gendered as “male” in the mainstream patriarchal imagination. Yet Libeni and Arenla perform them as routine.

Crucially, Ao also emphasises **choice**, not merely obligation. Libeni refuses remarriage because she does not wish to compromise her autonomy. Her community members attempt to persuade her that a man is needed to “protect” and “support” her — yet this patriarchal logic collapses in the face of her competence. She tills the land, earns a living, and nurtures her daughter, without waiting to be authorised by a husband.

Similarly, Sentila chooses the physically demanding art of pottery against her mother’s advice. Arenla’s warning is not patriarchal — it is simply practical: pottery is labour-intensive and less profitable than weaving. Yet Sentila persists, learns in secrecy, and excels. Ao thus establishes women not merely as workers but as **independent agents of skill acquisition**.

Rebutting the Classical Philosophical Paradigm

Greek philosophy placed women as intellectually deficient. Aristotle famously argued that women lack rationality and therefore should not participate in public decision-making. Deities in Greek mythology reflect this bias — Zeus is celebrated for virile authority; Hera is reduced to jealousy and rage.

Ao’s stories dismantle this philosophical lineage. Apenyo and Sentila possess intelligence, clarity of purpose, and individual artistic talent. They acquire knowledge not through formal teaching but through observation — a form of cognitive labour often discredited within patriarchal epistemology.

Where classical tradition equates women with emotional excess, Ao represents women as strategic thinkers.

Women’s Bodies, Community Honour, and Violence

V. Geetha argues that women are culturally positioned as the bearers of community identity. Therefore, assaulting a woman symbolically assaults the community to which she belongs. In *The Last Song*, when the army assaults Apenyo, this principle becomes painfully embodied. The violence is gendered and political

simultaneously. Apenyo is punished not because she is individually threatening, but because she refuses to fear male authority. Her body becomes the battleground upon which power is asserted.

Libeni, when she intervenes to protect her daughter, is subjected to the same violation. The army uses sexual violence as a weapon of domination. Yet Ao subverts even this moment — Apenyo's singing refuses to be silenced. Even in death, her voice continues to haunt the perpetrator. The captain eventually loses sanity. Ao thus rewrites the narrative of female victimhood: the oppressed woman becomes the agent of psychological vengeance.

The final hum in the air — the “last song” — is not death; it is the survival of memory.

Inheritance, Knowledge Transmission, and Stri-Dhan

Historically, women were not allowed to inherit property. Manusmriti defined Stri-Dhan as gifts to women that needed division among heirs. Even in modern India, widows are often denied land rights, as documented by P. Sainath in *Nero's Guests*. Yet in *The Last Song*, Libeni owns and cultivates land. Land becomes the basis of dignity and independence.

In *The Pot Maker*, inheritance is not land but knowledge — the art of pottery. This inheritance is matrilineal, passing from grandmother to mother to daughter. Sentila becomes the custodian of skill, not because the men give permission, but because the women choose to continue the legacy.

Thus, Ao constructs a counter-historical lineage: women can be heirs not only to cultural memory but also to economic craft.

Oral Tradition, Memory, and Authority in Storytelling

History, as Simone de Beauvoir notes, is primarily written by men. Historiography privileges male authorship, male subjects, and male voices. Romila Thapar, one of the few women historians, is an exception within a male-dominated discipline. In Ao's *The Last Song*, the figure who preserves memory is an older woman, a storyteller who carries the narrative of Black Sunday forward.

Here, pedagogy itself becomes feminised, but not in a belittling sense. Oral tradition becomes a powerful mechanism of preservation. New generations are not taught through documents but through song. And those songs are voiced by women. Thus, Ao relocates the authority of historical meaning away from institutional male authors and into communal feminine narrators.

Male Honour, Village Authority, and Gendered Social Expectations

In *The Pot Maker*, village elders call Mesoba — not Arenla — to explain household affairs. They know Arenla is the one who refuses to initiate Sentila into pottery. Yet they summon Mesoba because patriarchy requires the symbolic presence of the male head. V. Geetha rightly argues that men represent the normative subject, while women are defined in relation to men. Ao exposes this ironically: the so-called “head” is powerless at home, and the “subordinate” woman wields real influence.

Gender is revealed as a social script — a performance — not a biological truth.

Conclusion

Temsula Ao's stories offer a transformative feminist perspective. She does not deny that violence, hierarchy, and patriarchal judgment exist. Instead, she positions women as actors who navigate—and often subvert—these structures. Libeni, Apenyo, Arenla, and Sentila are not passive recipients of destiny. They are labourers, artists, mothers, innovators, storytellers — and, in subtle and explicit ways, resisters.

They subvert classical philosophical assumptions (Aristotle), patriarchal interpretation (V. Geetha), and cultural material conditions (Sainath). Women in Ao's world do not merely suffer oppression; they challenge it — through work, through voice, through memory, through skill, and through the fierce continuation of cultural knowledge.

Temsula Ao writes in a landscape scarred by militarisation and communal anxiety. Yet her women remain luminous markers of resilience. Their lives demonstrate that agency does not always announce itself through public power — sometimes it manifests through the quiet act of choosing one's craft, refusing remarriage, tilling one's land, or singing despite the threat of bullets.

In *The Last Song* and *The Pot Maker*, womanhood becomes not a secondary identity but a site of strength. Ao's fiction thus reframes gender — not as lack, but as power.

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