



# ECOCRITICISM IN POETRY: THROUGH THE LENS OF MAMANG DAI AND TEMSULA AO'S SELECTED POEMS

**Shasanka Sekhar Bhattacharjee**

**Independent Researcher**

**Sanjay Regon**

**Guest Faculty**

**Department of English**

**Sadiya College, Tinsukia, Assam**

**Abstract :** North- East India, often described as an ecological hotspot, is home to both remarkable biodiversity and vibrant ethnic diversity. The region's landscape- its hills, rivers and forests- are not merely backdrops to human life but deeply interwoven with cultural identity and collective memory. This profound connection between land and people finds voice in the poetry of writers like Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai. Their works remind us that nature is not just a resource but a living presence that shapes community, spirituality and tradition. Through their verses, we encounter themes of ecological grief, the sacredness of rituals and enduring presence of nonhuman life. Ao and Dai highlight how the loss of nature is felt not only environmentally but also emotionally and culturally, as it threatens the very fabric of identity. Their poetry embodies awareness that human survival and ecological preservation are inseparable. In a world increasingly distanced from its roots, their works remind us that the people of North- east India remain profoundly connected to their environment. Their voices call for an ecological consciousness that recognizes the land as both home and heritage, where culture and nature are bound in an unbroken relationship.

**Index Terms - North-East India, Ecological hotspot, ethnic diversity, Ecocriticism, cultural memory, Ritual practices, Anthropocentrism.**

## INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is a discipline of literary and cultural studies that investigates the relationship between literature and the natural world. It investigates how nature, ecology, and environmental issues are represented in texts, as well as how literature can change or reflect human views toward the natural world. Ecocriticism emerged in the late twentieth century, particularly in the 1990s, in response to global environmental issues such as climate change, deforestation, and pollution, emphasizing the role of culture and literature in fostering ecological awareness. William Howarth says at the beginning of his essay 'Some Principles of Ecocriticism':

Eco and critic both derive from Greek, Oikos and kritos' and in tandem they mean "house judge," which may surprise many lovers of green, outdoor writing. A long-winded gloss on ecocriticism might run as follows: "a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature' berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action." So the ortos is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls Jour widest home," and the kritos is an arbiter of taste who "wants the house kept in good order, no boots or dishes strewn about to ruin the original decor. (Howarth, 69)

At its core, ecocriticism challenges anthropocentrism (the belief that humans are the center of existence) and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings. It urges readers to perceive environment not merely as a backdrop for human activity, but as an active participant with inherent value. Through this lens, literary works are examined to see how they depict landscapes, animals, rivers, forests, and even environmental destruction, as well as how such portrayals affect ecological consciousness. Basically, it is a shift of consciousness, a shift from man-centered to environment-centered.

In short, ecocriticism is a critical approach to literature that examines nature and the environment in order to build a more sustainable and respectful connection between humans and the natural world. .

## DIVING INTO THE ECOCRITICAL WORLD OF MAMANG DAI

While talking of the literature of North-East India, we can not omit its ecocritical prospect. Nature and natural elements play a pivotal role in the North-Eastern literature. From the bed-time stories of children to the deep lyrical poems of a heartbroken poet, from the folk culture and literature to the post-colonial narratives of North-East, we witness a strong link to nature. In the writings of authors like Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Robin Ngangom, Mitra Phukon, Mamang Dai and so many more, we see

how their thoughts and narrations are the result of a deep introspection on nature and human life's interconnectedness. Of all these names, this essay will emphasise upon the two most celebrated poems of the two most renowned poets of North-East.

Mamang Dai's poems are concerned with Arunachal Pradesh's time of insurgency and the changes and challenges brought by the advent of modernism. But she also roots a connection to nature while delving into these themes. For Dai, nature is the greatest source of inspiration. In an interview with Arundhati Subramaniam, Dai explains:

I know not everyone will feel the same way about land and landscapes. I am very attuned to the spirit of the place and the natural world, wherever it may be. This is my response. To me it is a living presence. (Dai)

In her poem "Small Towns and the River", Dai praises the permanence of nature and shows how timid and fragile the human life is in front of it. The famous British Poet Karthleen Shirley Toulson contrasts the permanence of nature and transiency of human life in her poem "A Photograph" -

And the sea, which appears to have changed less/Washed their terribly transient feet. (Toulson, lines 8-9)

Mamang Dai has also brought this theme out beautifully in her poem "Small Towns and the River"-

Small towns always remind me of death./ My hometown lies calmly amidst the trees./ it is always the same,/ in summer or winter,/ with the dust flying,/ or the wind howling down the gorge. (Dai, lines 1-6)

Here, Dai regards the town to be the same which is basically a place of changelessness. It is like the town is stuck motionless. But the nature surrounding the town is also devoid of any change. Yet the stillness in nature is not anything lacking progress, it is the eternal place where no change affects the peace and tranquillity one may find in it. The poem describes a small town beside a great river. It alternates between the legendary presence of the river, which embodies memory, loss, and timelessness, and the everyday life of the town—its streets, its residents, its hardships. The images alternate between the eternal (the "river flowing," "immortality of the soul") and the present (the "dusty streets," "town's sleep"). The poem contrasts the huge, everlasting river (nature, myth, memory) and the little, precarious town (human habitation). This contrast establishes the eco-critical region in which nature and myth outlive human life, which is portrayed as transient. The poem acknowledges loss but affirms continuity through recollection and the river's unending flow, thus it is not gloomy.

Towns may grow and shrink, their structures may collapse, and their inhabitants may fade into oblivion. The river, on the other hand, flows forever, unaffected by human history. This illustrates a fundamental eco-critical issue: that human existence is fleeting and unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Mamang Dai puts the story back on the permanence of nature in a world where anthropocentrism—or human-centered thinking—is becoming more and more prevalent. The river is a living force that transcends human civilizations; it is not merely a resource.

By stating that the river also has a soul, Dai emphasises that nature is a consciousness. It guides human life too. It sees and carries a history or saga of human civilization. River brings life.

Just the other day someone died./In the dreadful silence we wept/ looking at the sad wreath of tuberose./

Life and death, life and death./ only the rituals are permanent. (Dai, lines 7-11)

Here, tradition is the bridge between generations. Again, we see culture or tradition is something which affects nature and affected by nature. As to Mamang Dai, rituals and river (nature) gives permanence to human life. Immortality of water is permanence of nature and the permanence of culture and the history it (the river) witnesses. The symbolic and cultural aspects of ecology are frequently emphasized in ecocriticism. For the Adi people, rivers are not just water bodies; they are sacred beings tied to myths of origin, migration, and death. The river in the poem contains eras of memories. Towns disappear and people die, but the river never forgets. Here, the ecocritical viewpoint highlights how ecological phenomena, such as rivers, are cultural archives that contain myths, histories, and identities in addition to being physical aspects. The river is legendary (an eternal testimony to human transience) and ecological (life-giving water, sustaining soil).

To flow cutting through land, as observed by the poet, is an action of hurting something. So the pain of the people of the small town or Arunachal due to the insurgency can be seen in the flow of the river which currents carries grief in it.

In "The Environmental Imagination", Lawrence Buell's states four Criteria of Environmental Texts. Firstly, "The nonhuman environment is not merely a framing device but a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history." In the poem, the river is not a backdrop but an active presence shaping memory and meaning. Secondly, "The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest." The river has its own life, independent of human concerns. Thirdly, "Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation." The poem reminds us of human fragility and ecological dependence. Lastly, "The environment is a process rather than a constant." The flowing river embodies process, change, and continuity.

The poem "Small Towns and the River" bears a strong adherence to both nature and rituals. The sun represents a better promising future where people are not lost but threaded with the antique sense of belongingness to their culture and nature. Nature is the source of human life and culture. Just like everything comes back to its origin. Man must come back to its culture, its root and ultimately to nature.

According to Dai, reverence for nature is ingrained in the ancient beliefs of the Adi community, to whom she belongs. Life exists in everything. All life is sacrosanct, including rocks, stones, trees, rivers, and hills. This is known as Donyi-Polo, which literally translates to "Sun" and "Moon" as the physical embodiment of a supreme deity, or what she refers to as the "world spirit." Like Wordsworth, the Adi Tribe believed in a spirit-filled natural world. As a result, they revered the trees, rivers, and mountains. According to Dai herself, nature is "a living presence" that one may emphasize and connect with. So in the last line where Dai expresses a strong desire to walk with the Gods is metaphorically points to men's natural instinct to be one with the environment. Nature is a spiritual place for people and Dai and the whole Adi tribe pays respect to it while stating that all they yearn is to be one with it.

The environment becomes a speaking topic in Mamang Dai's "The Voice of the Mountain," as the mountain recounts what it sees and recalls. Because the nonhuman is not just the backdrop but also the narrator and ethical agent, the poem is perfect for ecocritical analysis due to its perspective point (a "high platform") and its recurring image-language, which includes rivers, ferry lights, winds, and boulders.

With the opening line, "From where I sit on the high platform / I can see the ferry lights crossing / criss-crossing the big river," (Dai, lines 1-3) the poem establishes a clear spatial perspective. This viewpoint underscores the mountain's role as a witness while also literalizing its physical height. The speaker is not just a rock but an observer with historical memory because of the

mountain's position, which permits an expanded temporality—"I can outline the chapters of the world." Dai animates nature by giving the mountain a speaking subject, supporting the ecocritical assertion that nonhuman beings are capable of moral significance, agency, and meaning.

"My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks / In the transfer of symbols / I am the chance syllable that orders the world / Instructed with history and miracles," is one of the later stanzas that openly assert the existence of several voices within the mountain. This small collection of pictures is significant because the mountain's voice is not unique to the area; it is associated with the sea, the desert, the rain, birds, and the history. Here, personification serves as an epistemological tactic rather than a rhetorical device because the mountain is aware of its interconnectedness with different ecologies. From an ecocritical perspective, this challenges anthropocentrism and fosters a profound ecological consciousness, as the inherent diversity and worth of nature are affirmed rather than subservient to human objectives.

Dai frequently connects natural imagery to cultural memory, such as the warrior with the "blood of peonies," the people who offer presents, and the "chapters of the world" that the mountain may "outline." These pictures demonstrate how the landscape is infused with human history. Ecological memory serves as cultural memory because the poetry depicts continuity—the past reenacts itself in the present—and the land remembers languages, rites, and losses. According to Buell, this is a cultural production of nature in ecocritical terms; the landscape functions as an archive rather than a passive environment. Research on Dai often highlights how her poems combine environmental memory and tribal oral history, making them an ecological document and an ethical call to action.

The poem occasionally shifts from observation to ethics. The mountain expresses an eco-spiritual sensibility when it talks about recurring cycles, peoples, offerings, and the promise of renewal. Human life is not situated outside or above natural cycles, but rather is a part of them. In statements like "I am the desert and the rain," opposites are condensed into a single voice, implying an integrated ontology in which fecundity and mortality, abundance and scarcity, are all parts of a single living system. The combination of ecological reciprocity and reverence (gifts, offerings) reflects Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which advocates for a moral relationship between humans and the biotic community rather than dominance.

A postcolonial corrective can also be found in Dai's mountain-voice. The poem opposes colonial objectification of the Northeast as just gorgeous and prioritizes indigenous ways of knowing, including as oral tradition, ritual, and the landscape as ancestor. Erasure is resisted by the mountain's "voice," which demands a local cosmology that can be understood on its own terms. Such resistances where ecology and cultural identity intersect are sought for by postcolonial ecocriticism; Dai's poem is a prime example of this, as it demonstrates how environmental representation can also be a reclaiming of authority and history.

By giving rivers, mountains, winds, and deserts a voice and a presence, the poem "The Voice of the Mountain" demonstrates how alive nature is. Like a living book that documents everything over time, the mountain is more than just a silent mass; it is a repository of memory and history. It also offers a spiritual message by implying that human life and death are part of a broader natural cycle, where individuals eventually return to the land and become one with it again. The poem's main theme is interconnectedness: nothing in nature exists in isolation since the river knows the mountain, the mountain knows the people, and the people coexist peacefully with the land, forming a close connection between the natural world and human existence.

Reading Mamang Dai's poems ecocritically reveals how she turns the land and the river into living subjects that carry memory, history, and moral force. In "The Voice of the Mountain," nature speaks as witness and guardian, demanding ethical regard, while in "The Small Town and the River" the fragile human settlement is contrasted with the eternal flow of the river, reminding us of mortality and continuity. Together, these poems articulate a clear eco-critical vision: that human identity, culture, and memory are inseparable from ecological landscapes, and that to understand ourselves we must recognize the enduring voice of nature which sustains and outlives us.

#### A CLOSE READING OF THE POETRY OF TEMSULA AO

The poem "Soul Bird" foregrounds nature with the hawk symbolizing the spirit that rises beyond earthly rituals. It opens in a luminal space, an ongoing funeral ritual, where human ceremony and avian movement are observed simultaneously. The speaker watches –

They are chanting prayers,/ But I watch a lonely hawk/ Soaring/ Amidst the swirling blue. (Ao, 44)

The poem begins by contrasting the collective act of human ritual with the solitary yet majestic presence of the hawk. Ecocriticism, which studies the relationship between literature and the environment, helps us see how Ao attributes spiritual significance to the nonhuman. The hawk becomes more than a bird; it is a "soul bird", an embodiment of transcendence, freedom and continuity. Its presence challenges the anthropocentric assumption that human rituals alone govern the meaning of death. Instead, the bird, a part of nature, emerges as the true witness to human morality. The imagery of the sky and clouds situates death within a cosmic continuum. The hawk's circling flight suggests cycles of return and renewal, while the whiteness of clouds disrupted by dark wings highlights the inevitability of change. In this sense, the poem positions ecological elements as active participants in human grief. Rather than portraying nature as background, Ao presents it as a co-actor, thus reinforcing indigenous ecological philosophies where the natural world is inseparable from human destiny.

Also the hawk's presence is not incidental but symbolic of ecological consciousness. The bird "emitting unearthly sounds" represents both a spiritual messenger and an ecological participant in the rituals of death. Ecocriticism stresses the agency of the nonhuman world and Ao's hawk embodies this agency, disrupting the notion that only human beings interpret and respond to mortality. Furthermore, the hawk's circling flight contrasts with the grave "fenced in by newly-cut bamboo." The bamboo fence symbolizes human attempts to enclose, demarcate and control the space of death. Yet the hawk, soaring above, resists these enclosures. Its unbounded flight affirms nature's refusal to be confined by human limitations. This opposition between enclosure and openness mirrors the ecological principle that life is continuous, interconnected and subject to human mastery.

See that keening bird in the sky?/ That's your mother's soul/ Saying her final goodbye./ It is over/ Come, Let us home now. (Ao, 45)

Through these lines fuse the natural and the spiritual, affirming that the bird is not merely part of the landscape but the very embodiment of the landscape but the very embodiment of the deceased's soul. From an ecocritical perspective, the hawk

represents an ecological witness that carries human grief into the realm of nature. Rather than relying solely on ritual chanting, the mourners recognize the bird as the medium of farewell, thus acknowledging nature's active role in human mortality. The poem's imagery underscores the idea that death is not an isolated event but part of an ecological continuum. The hawk's movement in "hesitant circles" suggests cycles of departure and return, echoing natural processes of renewal. The clouds, the sky and the bird together create an ecological setting in which the soul's journey mirrors the rhythms of the earth. Ecocriticism invites us to see death not simply as the end of an individual life but as a transforming within ecological cycles. The bamboo fence, cut from living plants, also points to this paradox life sacrificed to mark death. In highlighting such details, Ao reminds readers that every human act, even rituals of mourning, draws upon and impacts the ecological world. Death, therefore, cannot be disentangled from ecology; it is an event where human and natural realities converge. This poem resists a secular, instrumental reading of nature. Where modernity would regard the hawk as biological object, Ao reassigns it cultural significance. The grandmother's interpretation contests scientific reductionism and defends an embodied knowledge where the landscape and its creatures are repositories of relational meaning.

In "The Old Story Teller", the speaker describes a life devoted to recounting ancestral narratives stories of origin, of humans emerging "from the six stones," of warriors, tigers and the forces of nature (Ao, Book of songs 115). Storytelling here is not mere entertainment; it is a repository of ecological memory. Tales preserve knowledge about topography, ancestral relationships with animals, sacred sites, and modes of subsistence. The poem frames oral narrative as a pragmatic and ethical technology for maintaining human environment relations. The stories Ao references founding of villages, worship of forces of nature, animals animated in narrative assert nonhuman personhood. Animals and forces of nature are not passive backdrop but participants in the community's origin stories. This is crucial for ecocritical reading: personhood is extended beyond humans to a network of beings whose histories interweave.

A central grief in the poem is generational rupture: the grand children dismiss the stories as "ancient gibberish" (Ao 118), preferring books to oral lore. This generational shift is more than cultural; it signals ecological amnesia. The poem's grandfather warns that forgetting stories would mean losing our history or previous practices. As mentioned in the poem –

We would lose our history/Territory, and most certainly/Our intrinsic identity. (Ao, 116)

Territory here is both cultural and environmental memory contains knowledge about land boundaries, sacred groves, and stewardship practices. When oral traditions fade, the community loses practical environmental knowledge that has governed land use and species relations. The narrator treats storytelling as a "racial responsibility" (Ao 117), language that at once signals identity formation and the ethical duty to transmit ecological knowledge. The urgency culminates when memory fails and the storyteller fears consigning stories to "the script in his ancient entrails"- an image of burial that suggests stories being swallowed by an impersonal archive or institutionalization that strips them of living context. Some Scholars including Nandini Bhattacharya (2016) argue that Ao's storyteller embody the fragile continuity of oral traditions in the face of modernity and Dolly Kikan (2019) points out that indigenous storytelling often encodes ecological practices such as foraging, hunting and land rituals. Ao's poem dramatizes this cultural function, suggesting that ecological memory is always mediated through human narration. The speaker recalls ancestral figures as-

Warriors and were – tigers/ Came alive through the tales/ As did the various animals/ Until we invented human language/ And began calling them savage. (Ao, 115)

The fragments of cultural memory that bridge history and ecology. As Easterine Kire observes, the decline of oral storytelling among Nagas is intertwined with the disruption of ecological lifeways, making Ao's lament not merely cultural but also environmental. The storyteller becomes a repository of both communal memory and ecological knowledge, holding together strands of myth, ritual, and practical wisdom about the land. When these oral traditions diminish, the loss is not only of a cultural archive but also of an ecological ethic that guided generations in their interaction with forests, rivers, and animals. In Tamsüla Ao's poetry, the figure of the storyteller embodies this endangered legacy. The oral imagination is not a static cultural inheritance but a dynamic practice that re-creates a people's relationship with their environment. For example, myths about the origins of rivers or taboos around hunting seasons functioned historically as ecological safeguards, transmitted through storytelling. Thus, when modernity and state structures marginalize these practices, both memory and ecology suffer. Scholars such as Dolly Kikon argue that indigenous stories encode strategies of survival, where ecological rhythms shape cultural forms of expression. Ao's work dramatizes this inseparability, suggesting that to silence the storyteller is to silence the forest itself.

Tamsüla Ao's "Soul Bird" and "The Old Story Teller" offer an ecocritical corrective to modern separations of culture and nature. Her poems model how storytelling functions as ecological knowledge, how animals and rituals resist reduction to mere objects, and how generational transmission is essential for environmental stewardship. Reading Ao ecocritically reveals the stakes of cultural forgetting: not only the loss of identity but the erosion of embedded environmental wisdom. Ao invites readers to attend to the more-than-human actors in everyday life and to recognize that stories—spoken, embodied, and practiced—are crucial acts of conservation.

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