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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 36: Temsula Ao & Easterine Kire

BINOD MISHRA

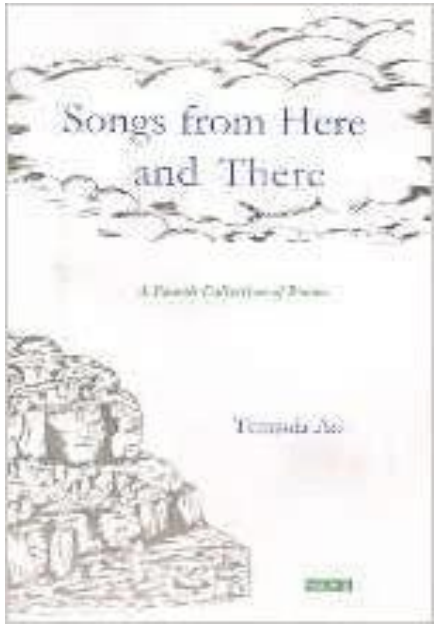
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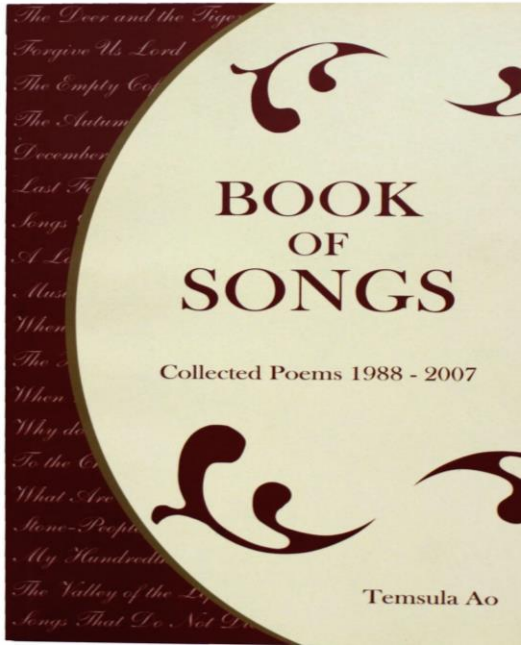
Temsula Ao

- ✓ Born in 1945 in Jorhat, Assam
- ✓ Fulbright Fellow at the University of Minnesota 1985–86.
- ✓ Poet, novelist, short story writer, and ethnographer
- ✓ Retired as Professor from NEHU
- ✓ Has been the Director of North East Zonal Cultural Centre
- ✓ Honoured with Padmashri in 2007
- ✓ Conferred with Sahitya Akademi in 2013
- ✓ Has been translated into Odia, Bengali, Kannada, and German

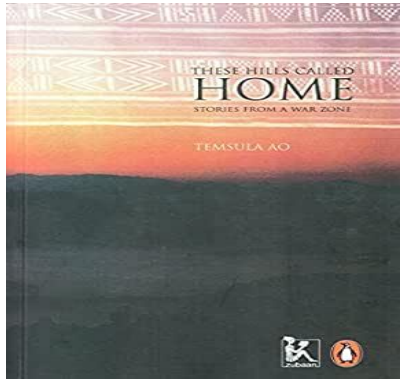
Her Literary Corpus

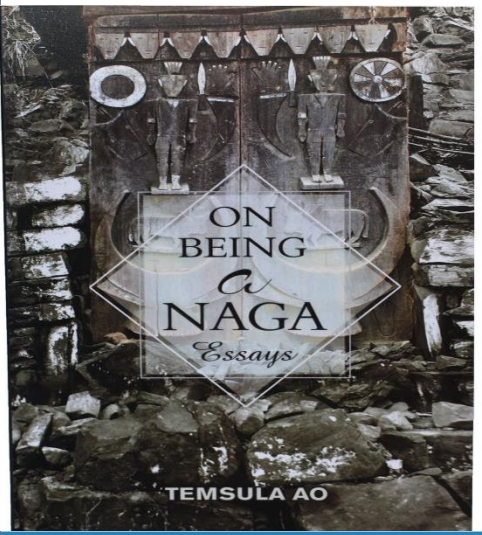


- Poetry Collections
  - *Songs that Tell* (1988)
  - *Songs that Try to Say* (1992)
  - *Songs of Many Moods* (1995)
  - *Songs from Here and There* (2003)
  - *Songs from the Other Life* (2003)
  - *Book of Songs* (2013)

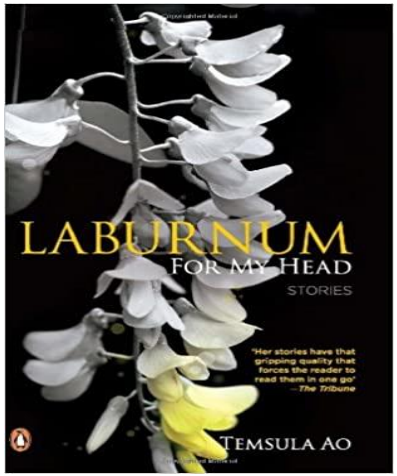


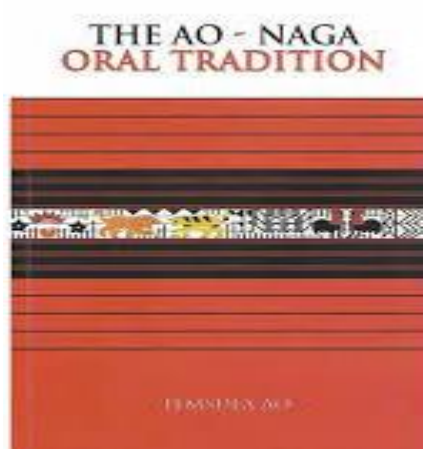
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- Short Story Collection
  - *These Hills Called Home- Stories from a War Zone (2006)*
  - *Laburnum for My Head* (2009)
- Memoir
  - *Once Upon a Life* (2013)
- Ethnography
  - *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (1999)
  - *The Tombstone in My Garden*





General Themes of Her Poetry

- Cultural significance of Ao-Nagas
- Clash of cultural values
- Oral history of Ao-Naga
- Politics of place
- Commodification of nature
- Destruction of natural grandeur because of industrialization and development projects
- Dislocation because of the unwanted change and transformation
- Integration of present and past

"But to-day
I no longer know my hills,
The birdsong is gone,
Replaced by the staccato
Of sophisticated weaponry." (*My Hills*)

Temsula Ao's Views on Loss of Identity, Culture, and Tradition of Northeast India

"The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people."

"The Old Story-Teller- A Nagaland Poem"

I have lived my life believing
Story-telling was my proud legacy.
The ones I inherited
From grandfather became
My primary treasure
And the ones I garnered
From other chroniclers
Added to the lore.
When my time came I told stories
As though they ran in my blood
Because each telling revitalized
My life-force
And each story reinforced
My racial reminiscence.
The stories told of the moment
When we broke into being
From the six stones and
How the first fathers founded
Our ancient villages and
Worshipped the forces of nature.

Contd…

Warriors and were-tigers
Came alive through the tales
As did the various animals
Who were once our brothers
Until we invented human language
And began calling them savage.
Grandfather constantly warned
That forgetting the stories
Would be catastrophic:
We would lose our history,
Territory, and most certainly
Our intrinsic identity.
So I told stories
As my racial responsibility
To instil in the young
The art of perpetuating
Existential history and essential tradition
To be passed on to the next generation.
But now a new era has dawned.
Insidiously displacing the old.

Contd.....

My own grandsons dismiss
Our stories as ancient gibberish
From the dark ages, outmoded
In the present times and ask
Who needs rambling stories
When books will do just fine?
The rejection from my own
Has stemmed the flow
And the stories seem to regress
Into un-reachable recesses
Of a mind once vibrant with stories
Now reduced to un-imaginable stillness.
So 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.

Critical Analysis of the Poem

- The poem is about the oral tradition of Ao-Naga community.
- This legacy should be continued generation to generation.
- Reference to six stones which are regarded as the sources of origin of Ao-Naga community.
- Tradition Vs. Modernity
- Glorification of the past
- Acknowledgement of history and search for the ‘real’.

Stone Poems of Temsula Ao

- Wrote a number of stone-poems.
- Stone- poems are inspired by the myth of Ao-Naga's origin from six stones.
- Three of the stones represent male while remaining three represents female.
- She delineates the landscape which is in harmony with nature.
- But industrialization and development projects are destroying that natural bond of Ao-Naga community.
- Also symbolizes rootedness in her ethnic values.
- Some stone poems- *Stone Poem from Lungterok, Illusion, Prayer of a Monolith, When a Stone Wept*.

"Then the road-builders came
And slapped sticks of dynamite
To his underbelly
....." (Illusion)

From *"When a Stone Wept"*

The womb of the young earth nestling
Beneath the huge stones heaved
Dislodging their foundations of expelling
Her secrets through the phenomenal birth.

After the great upheaval the stones stirred,
Anxious to establish permanent moorings
In a landscape they knew would soon
Be dominated by the new species.

As they dispersed east, west, north, and south.
One among them, irresolute about their route
Rolled herself down a hill resolving
To lay her claim on a mossy bank nearby.

Contd…

Where the west-bound stone stopped
To propose that she join him on his quest
She politely refused and being weary
Slipped into heedless carefree sleep.

In the morning she found him gone
But strangely felt his presence
As if a deep imprint was left
Somewhere in her deepest self.

"Turning it into graveyard of the earth
Where an abandoned stone-mother
And her disowned children still conspire
To create a shroud of stones
……."

Critical Analysis of the Poem

- Demand for a territory which will lead them to relocate their lost identity.
- Delineation of myth has become a site to reclaim the forgotten past.
- This ‘myth’ is a part of collective memory of Ao-Naga community.
- Preservation of place and natural surrounding around her

“To All
Who can still
Sense the earth
Touch the wind
Talk to the rain
And embrace the sun
In every rainbow”
(Preface to *Songs from the Other Life)*

From *Songs from the Other Life*

And entangled my woman-self
in an un-seemly mesh
Of spirit, human and beast.
So I implore,
Grant me this last prayer
So that when I cross over
To the region
Beyond the sun
Like all others of my kind
The iridescent fumes
Of the last sunset
Will dissolve my several selves
Be they spirit, woman or tiger
And raise a rainbow there
Against our composite tears. ("A Tiger-Woman's Prayer")

He calls me barren and says I am a curse
On his clan and demands a son by next harvest
Or he'll take another woman who will
Hold his seed and give him sons.

The old woman still remembers
How the frightened eyes concentrated
On the leaf she shredded to determine
The mystery of the young wife's despair.

When she finished divining
She looked at the hopeful wife
And whispered 'Go home my child,
You will bear many sons.

She chuckles now in recalling
The part she left unsaid, and how
The woman bore many sons
But for another man.
("The Leaf-Shredder")

From Songs from the Other Life

She slowly turns heavenwards
As her red-rimmed eyes
Settle on the circling
And silhouette, then with a sudden
Unseemly whoop
She draws me closer
Whispering in my ear,

"See that keening bird in the sky?
That's your mother's soul
Saying her final good-bye,
It is over
Come, let us go home now". ("Soul-Bird")

In your Arju too I hear
You are the best story teller…

So when your maternal uncle comes
I shall tell my mother to tell my father

That his daughter prefers
The house of bamboo and thatch

Where the bonfire of our hearts
Will shame the flame of the hearth

And in that house I shall place
My precious loom

To wear you a *langtem* every season
And a *sunak* at every *Moatsu*

(" Woman to Man")

Easterine Kire

- ✓ Born in 1959 to an Angami Naga family in Kohima,Nagaland, India.
- ✓ Poet, novelist, translator, and short story writer.
- ✓ Interested in performing Jazz poetry
- ✓ Also writes children books
- ✓ Settled in Norway
- ✓ Conferred with Sahitya Akademi in 2018.

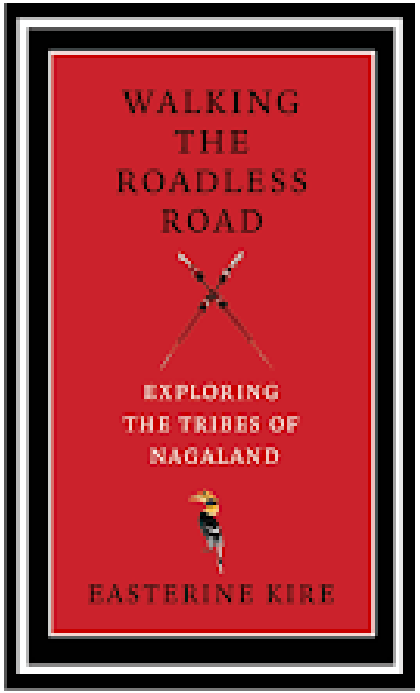
“I felt we needed to create written Naga literature. We have so much oral narratives but with oral dying out, it’s all going to be lost.” (Kire)

Her Literary Corpus

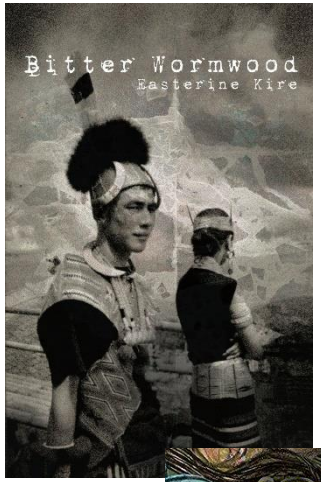


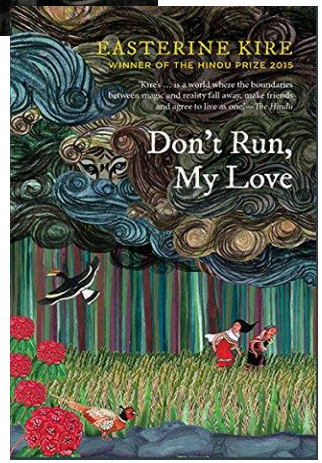
- Poetry Collections
  - *Kelhoukevira* (1982)- first book of poetry in English by a Naga poet.
  - *Jazz Poetry and Other Poems* (2012)
  - Translated many oral poems of her homeland into English

- Non-Fiction
  - *Walking the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland* (2019)- about the history and life-style of Naga people

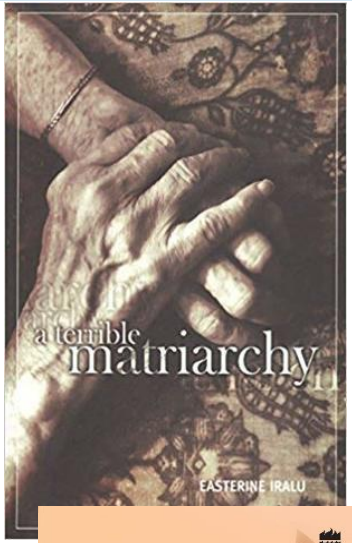


Fiction





- *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003)- First novel in English by any Naga writer
- *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007)
- *Mari* (2010)
- *Bitter Womanhood* (2011)
- *When the River Sleeps(2012*)
- *Don't Run, My Love* (2017)





Kelhoukevira (1982)

- First book of poetry by any Naga poet in English.
- The title is a word from the Angami dialect which means “life in a better place/paradise”.
- It mourns the warriors of Nagaland who lost their lives in Indo-Naga conflict of 1950s.
- The conflict resulted in great displacement and unrest in Naga region.
- Many youth took arms to fight for the state which caused lots of violence and unrest in the area.
- The poet also shows the great cultural tradition of Nagaland.

Contd….

- But the cultural heritage of Nagaland was destroyed because of the unfortunate events which happened in this land of natural grandeur.
- Thousands of Naga people lost their lives because of the bloodshed and killings.

"How many men, how many women,

how many children they have killed for crying out freedom

I can not recall." (*After reading 'Wounded Knee'*)

- This kind of unrest led to many unwanted habits like drug addiction and corruption in this region
- The poet advocates peace and justice after elaborating the grand scale of violence occurred in this land.

Some lines from ***Kelhoukevira***

“They brought in their dead by night
Their proud warriors, their mighty warriors
The brave beloved of the gods
To rest under troubled skies
And battle-scarred lands
That some portion of a vanquished field
May forever remain Nagaland, forever Nagaland.”

“The golden fields, they lay unreaped
As blood freely flowed
And mingled with the rains
And stained the virgin soil
Like a thousand scarlet sunsets
Back of the blue, blue hills.”

Contd….

“Their hearts too grieved to heed the harvest
Maidens ceased song and mourned the brave ones
And blindly followed a broken people
Who turned their backs
And slowly walked away
From a burning village, a burning village.”

“And there were some in foreign lands
Who still spoke of Kelhoukevira
While her fields lay barren and desecrated
Her songs sacrificed to the wind
Her warriors to the Great Spirit
They trampled her silent hills
And squeezed the life out of her
And washed their guilt in her blood.”

“Narcissus”

Last night the shadows chased me
And the winter moon screamed in my ears
Ah Calcutta, I could not sleep.
I watched
Your silent city weave
A tapestry of poems, songs, dead roses
And a pair of deep brown eyes.
I saw
A thousand gipsy summers
Ride down Midnight avenue
I travelled
National highway 37
And spoke to the wild geese at dawn
I heard
The paddy-birds in the rice-fields
Singing Ave Maria.

Contd..

And when the thorn-bird brought me back
You did not hear my goodbye
Farewell Virgo
I leave you
Part of my evening song
And the dreams autumn borrowed last year
Take care
Of your solipsism
And give my love
To Dylan on the twelve thirty
He'll be wearing an Arabian night.

Critical Analysis of the Poem

- About the conflict between nature and city-life.
- Failure of communication between two lovers or two human beings
- Use of metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, and transferred epithet
- Mythological reference to “Arabian night” is symbolic of male ego.
- Illusion Vs. Reality

Oral tradition of Nagaland

Every man is a story.
Every story has something in common
With the stories of the rest of humanity.
And yet, each story is different from the others.
In every story that we tell, we validate lives,
When we share the stories of our people,
We add meaning to their action,
The choices they make and the values they live by
The need to tell one's story is a common need.

(Easterine Kire in *Barcelona Dreamtime*)

Her Views on Naga Culture

❑ Her Connection to Naga Culture

"…… I maintain that the Nagas are my first audience, because I write things that are familiar to them: we have shared memories, shared story-banks from the past, both from the natural world and the spiritual world."

❑ Her Views on Naga Movement

- "my people and I have been living with an invisible prison for many years, denied freedom of expression, freedom to nationhood and most painfully, freedom to life itself." (*Featured Writers)*
- "Very sadly, a cause that started so nobly was destroyed from within by factionalism, and it suffered the erosion of unity that factionalism always brings. We started well, no doubt about that. But we are not finishing well, that is what makes our story so sad. Disunity and the struggle for power has diminished the aspects that made the struggle noble and worthy."

Kire as a Poet

- Her works are the reflection of the conflict between the colonial regime vs. native people.
- She is a leading voice who has brought out the vibrant tradition and culture of Nagaland.
- Portrayal of tribal legacy, cultural aspect, and natural grandeur of Nagaland.
- Cultural mutation
- Political friction
- Suffering of Naga people
- Naga-consciousness at the core of her writing

Contd…

- Portrayal of Naga folk-culture and their oral tradition.
- Resistance against the ‘silencing’ of native voice
- Depiction of violence, unrest, and disturbance in her homeland
- Also shows her concern over women’s respectability and reputation.
- Eco-consciousness in her work

I look into the mirror
And see a face
which now parodies
The one that I once knew….
To counter lost landscape
And degenerated visage?
Is this compensation?
And my only consolation?
(“Mirror, Mirror”, Temsula Ao)

“We were proud and we were true

A race of men like you

We, too, were once, free

Children of those spaces

Of sky and mountain range and rock-bound river

Bequeathed us by the Great Spirit of these hills.

The white man came

And then the brown man came

And fifty years it has been now

That they have been telling us

We are not our own.” (*After reading “Wounded Knee”*)

Works Consulted

- Ao, Temsula. *Songs that Tell*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1988.
- _____ *Songs from the Other Life*. Pune: Grasswork Books, 2003

- Kire,Easterine. *Kelhoukevira*. Calcutta: J.B. Lama, 1982.
- _____, *Jazz Poetry and Other Poems.*

- Sdb Sebastian,A.J. *Quest for Identity in Contemporary Indian English Fiction and Poetry.* New Delhi: APD, 2011.