

## THE READING RESPONSE: A TRANSACTIONAL HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF THE POET AND THE READER AS INTERPRETERS IN SELECT POEMS OF TEMSULA AO

**Pankaj Gogoi**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Royal School of Languages

The Assam Royal Global University

Assam

### Abstract

Reader response as a method of research to explore and understand the nuances of interpretative projects on poetry can be traced to the original ideas of Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, and Roland Barthes. Later writers like I. A. Richards and Louise Rosenblatt contributed significantly to strengthening the ideas associated with reader-response criticism. This paper makes a humble effort to explore the poetic interpretative experience of select poems of Temsula Ao taking into consideration Rosenblatt's core ideas from her Transactional reader-response theory. The method adopted for the purpose is analytical, and involves reading and re-reading Ao's poems in the light of Rosenblatt's reader-response framework, that leads to observations on continued refinement in the expression of form, tone and meaning from initial stages of her poetical creative endeavour to her later works. In the process, it also attempts to unearth the congruence and complementarity that exists between the efferent and aesthetic stances of a reader participant. Further, this paper attempts to establish the manner in which both the poet and the reader experience the creative interpretative engagement of art.

**Keywords:** Interpretation, Reader-response, Author, Reader, Text, Efferent, Aesthetic

### INTRODUCTION

Louise Rosenblatt in her book *Literature as Exploration* contends that "we must first of all avoid imposing a set of preconceived notions as to the proper way to react to any work" (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 80). In the light of the reader-response theory, therefore, the reader assumes significance as an active agent who imparts 'real existence' to the work and amplifies its meaning through interpretation. In her 1978 book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, she analyses the transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978) that takes place between the

text and the reader. During the reading process, a text acts as a stimulus that leads to personal responses influencing the way one makes sense of the text. While reading, the text acts as a design that the reader may use to correct an interpretation. This process of correcting interpretation as one moves through the text usually results in re-reading. As such, the text guides one's self-corrective attempts and continues to develop the interpretation. Therefore, the entire creative-interpretative process is a transaction between the text and the reader (in which both play equally important roles). While reading, the reader may apply different directions of transaction toward the text. The direction, further, depends on the purpose or stance of reading. Rosenblatt categorises these stances as efferent and aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1988). In an efferent reading of a text, the reader participant absorbs 'specific' information (character names, places, things etc.) – an activity that relates to the memory component in an individual. On the other hand, in an aesthetic stance, the reader tries to connect with the reading on an emotional level. In other words, "the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25). These two stances coordinate to form a continuum in the reading process, wherein the stance may fall in the aesthetic or in the efferent category.

### THE EFFERENT AND AESTHETIC STANCES OF READING IN AO'S POETRY

In reading Tamsula Ao's poetry, the reader may adopt one of the two stances (efferent or aesthetic) relatively more emphasized than the other, or ascribe simultaneous significance to both. As such, the first frame of reader-response reference ideates exploring the reader interpreter's efferent and aesthetic stances during a 'hermeneutic' engagement. Two instances of contrast are hereby presented to elucidate the same, with respect to ascertaining the conspicuous poetic diction and figurative language on one hand, and the esoteric discourse of existence and universality on the other. The poems engaged in this contrast are "In the Small Hours" and "The Garden" from her collections *Songs that Tell* and *Songs that Try to Say* respectively.

In an efferent stance reading of Ao's poem "In the Small Hours" from the collection *Songs that Tell*, the primary observations begin with the poet's use of paradox and oxymoron in the opening stanza:

In the small hours  
When the soul creeps back  
Into the self  
How small becomes the vastness  
How silent the music  
How cold the warmth  
Of the remembered earth. (p. 11)

The articulation that hours would become small, influences the reader to consider the idea more critically – just what paradox does. The poet indicates that such a contradiction occurs when the soul makes a creeping, backward movement into one's own self. This self-contradictory quality of the first part of the statement displays illogic on the superficial level, and yet upon addition of the secondary part (about the soul) brings the idea to a stature that it almost starts to make sense – about something that may actually be true. The small and the vastness, the silent and the music, the cold and the warmth – all display a unification of paradoxical state of affairs brought about by the significant backward movement of the soul. The paradoxical context is more

conspicuously apprehended as a result of the aid from the oxymoron in the opening lines of the stanza. It arrests the primary attention of the reader and promptly provokes fresh thought. Further, during the efferent stance, the reader would observe and capture components of the structure and diction. The paradoxical condition being discussed as an example here also serves the purpose of creating a temporary confusion, the remedy to which is found only by entering into the aesthetic stance of reading and further interpretation. The efferent reading, therefore, helps to create new conceptions and/or validate existing information. Moreover, the poet personifies dreams as “once conceived” and “born” (Ao, 2013, p. 11), but they have now passed away – a symbolic gesture to enhance the melancholic tone of the poem. With the use of free verse, the poet appears more focussed on artistic expression while creating the auditory, the tactile, and visual imagery in the poem through references of music, the earth, and the stars. The poem acquires an elegiac yet introspective theme, one that emanates from a memory of some tug-of-war between present and past.

An aesthetic reading of the poem helps to identify and explore the hermeneutic circle of completion by one idea against the other in the paradoxical representation of the universe. To understand such a circular completion, the reader comes to a repetition of the idea of time in the last stanza:

The stars recede  
The songs bemoan  
The passing away  
Of dreams that were  
Once conceived  
And born  
In the small hours. (p. 11)

The conceptualizations processed through the efferent readings expand their horizons during the aesthetic endeavour. The paradoxical circumstance depicted in the opening lines of the poem is reflective of the tumultuous imaginative conflicts of an early poet. It also displays a semi-autobiographical gesture, a subtle impact of the personal in the use of the “self” (pp. 11). It indicates how the speaker (poet) attempts to pacify the conflict between the paradoxes of time, sound, feeling and memory by making an intrapersonal communicative endeavour. The short sentences used to replicate ideas of a greater interpretative significance also are indicative of the explicative efforts of an amateur poet. Despite all limitations, the poem achieves an interpretative or hermeneutic wholeness – a pacific unification of the paradoxical elements of the physical world that contributes to the completeness of the universe; and an amalgamation of time and memory brings one’s soul into a harmonious self – a self that is symbolic of an intrinsic universe of one’s own.

In a parallel framework, an efferent reading of “The Garden” displays a unique sequel of information. To the efferent reader, the primary observations are regarding the form, the tone and the depiction of the transformative power of nature to become a vessel for life to flourish in. The process for a new life to emerge, however, resides in the enterprises of planting and nurturing. The lines depict the beauty and simplicity of growing something from the earth:

A slice of the earth  
On the ground,  
Or farmed in pots

Of any imaginable  
Size, shape and colour  
Becomes the receptacle  
For new life. (p. 71)

The poet uses simple and straightforward language to create a romantic frame of reference that mirrors the ideas associated with planting or cultivating. The imagery of the “slice of earth” and its transformation is both vivid and evocative, creating a visual experience of planting and nurturing. Further, the poet’s use of words like “farmed” and “sapling” add to the underlying idea of growth and creation. Apart from imagery, the poem employs personification and metaphor to convey its message. The earth is personified as a receptacle and the plants are described as beauties. The syllabic patterns and stresses in the poem are consistent and possess a natural flow, and the short lines create a quick pace, indicating towards the idea of growth and emergence of new life. The poem doesn’t have specific rhyme patterns, and the repetition of the word “earth” creates a sense of unity and continuity, and the free verse provides the poem the liberty to accommodate prosaic language with words like “hormone” and “fertilizer” (pp. 71). The lines vary in length, creating a sense of naturalness and organic growth, and the use of enjambment/line breaks allow the ideas to unfold gradually. The perhaps intentional lack of punctuation also contributes to the sense of continuity an connection between different elements of the poem. Overall, the poem celebrates the beauty of nature, conveying a sense of hope and optimism for the future.

For the aesthetic reader, the poem becomes a representation of the universal law of birth and sustenance, which is reflected in the celebration the beauty of nature and the art of gardening, emphasizing the connection between the gardener and the plants. There is also an expected idea of filial gratitude, revealed through the transformative power of care and attention, highlighting the rewards that come as a result of tending to the earth. The poem is therefore seen as a tribute to the beauty that emerges from the harmonious relationship between the humans and the natural world. The spiritual essence of such a relationship is brought to the reader’s attention through a deeper connotation in the last stanza:

The slice of earth  
Thus nurtured  
Brings forth  
Beauties  
In praise  
Of the GARDENER  
Of all gardens.

The poem therefore becomes a phenomenological portrayal of praise to a higher power – a gesture that is symbolically represented through an act of gardening. The aesthetics of the poem lie in its postulation of the correspondence between recreation and revival – between nurture and praise.

### THE POET-INTERPRETER IN AO’S POETICS

In the first frame of Rosenblatt’s reader-response framework, the author/poet as an interpreter is ‘distanced’ from the participant reader. For the participant reader, the aspects that influence the interpretative process are the hermeneutic circle (Martin, 1972, pp. 99-108), preconceived

notions (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 435-438), personal experience like biases (assumptions), culture, correlation (establishing connection between two or more things), interdependence of variables like symbolism, imagery, and diction, ideas of causation (Finnegan, 1982, pp. 12-13), historical background, coincidence, interpreter's mastery of working languages, expectations, the concept of the self (Ao and non-Ao) etc. However, in considering the inherent interpretative component in the reading involvement, both the positionalities of the poet and the reader as interpreters hold significance. In reading Temsula Ao's poetry, in the poet's stance as reader of her own text, the sublime areas of interpretative amplification are observed as repetition, self-contradiction, assertion, reiteration, re-telling, restatement, and echoing (reverberation).

**Repetition:** In Ao's poetry, repetition occurs as a part of poetic diction, symbolically represented as a mark of urgency, to emphasize the significance of age old customary ideas. The indication is toward a state of diminishing values, a hint to listen to the word(s) and work towards a rejuvenated state of affairs. It creates a domain that is indicative of a language of need (and of desire). Repetitions almost assume the stature of 'refrain' in their impact (ref. Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven"), symbolic of a continued effort to remind the reader of the urgency of revival of a disappearing culture. Ao, the poet is conscious of this need and fearful of the disaster wrought by a discourse without any rejuvenating quality. These efforts are directed in the domains of culture, language and identity. In her poem "Why Do Songs Live?" from *Songs that Try to Say*, such repetition is revealed:

Why do songs live  
Long after songsters  
Are gone and forgotten?

Why do songs speak  
Though sung in alien tongues  
And unfamiliar tunes? (p. 63)

The "why" in the above lines pose the rhetorical question on the significance of the "songs" that were profound and popular in the ancient Ao Naga oral culture. The interrogation ideates the stress on the need to rebuild a generation that would practice reverence to the age-old customary values. The first stanza of the poem reflects upon the idea that the speaker poet recognizes and reveres the aesthetic attributes of the age-old oral cultural stories that the Ao-Naga forefathers would narrate to the younger generations. The narrative techniques adopted by the forefathers were more direct and intelligible, and yet in the modern Ao Naga society they seem to gradually lose significance, and hence the speaker's appeal to the people to bring back to life the profundity of the Ao Naga oral tradition by contributing toward a transformation of the "alien tongues" to a familiar one. The assertion is phenomenological, as the poet speaker finds herself capable of living and experiencing the ways in which those age-old songs continue to "live" and "speak" in a world that awaits its rebirth.

**Self-contradiction:** As a reader Ao is constantly engaged in an interpretative endeavour during the creative process. In her poems like "Woman", "A Strange Place", and "Cubic Women" she re-establishes meanings of gender, culture, and woman by renouncing her previously stated opinion, thereby signifying a renewed understanding about the idea, an understanding that in



most instances negates or contradicts the pre-stated idea – symbolic of invalidating a world of the pre-established order (e.g. “Forgive us Lord”, “Blood of Other Days”). Such a contradiction is also symbolic of the poet’s development as a participant in the creative process. Simultaneously, it opens up new paradigms of meaning in the overall hermeneutic process. On the superficial level, it demonstrates the process of the poet’s initial and direct outburst driven by emotion; and a later and gradual subsiding of the poetic self to a broader understanding of the ideas involved, exposing the nuances in the process. Two primary categories of self-contradiction are observed in Ao’s poetry: the immediate and the delayed. The immediate self-contradiction is symbolic of an excited poetic self, continuously eager to engage in finding new and immediate meanings and a constant desire to refute the pre-established order of interpretation. The immediate self-contradiction is more conspicuously observed in the first two volumes of her poetical collections (e.g. “In the Morning”, “Lament for Earth”). In her poem “In the Morning”, the poet ascribes a circular hermeneutic to the temporality of the existence of the morning in the diurnal cycle. The morning represents an awakening of musicality— one that had been asleep for long:

In the morning  
 The Morning  
 Is the song  
 That lay asleep  
 All night long. (p. 5)

The morning that becomes synonymous to the “Song” that symbolizes “Freshness” (Ao, 2013, pp. 5) in the opening stanza of the poem brings a self-actualization of a retreat in the fifth stanza, leaving the realm devoid of the music and the dazzle:

But the morning retreats  
 At the advent  
 Of the life-giving sun  
 Taking with it  
 The sparkle  
 The tingle (p. 5-6)

These immediate and paradoxical representations of the morning imply the poet’s recognition of a contradictory stance during the creative interpretative process itself. This binarity poses itself as a reflection of the poet’s lived experience of such a morning or mornings. In a similar trance, the poem “Lament for Earth” reflects upon a forest (once) “verdant, virgin, vibrant” now stands “ravaged” and “stripped of her lushness” (Ao, 2013, pp. 42). The luscious beauty of the forest in the opening stanza of the poem is contradicted by “the rape” in the final stanza:

Grieve for the rape of an earth  
 That was once verdant, vibrant  
 Virgin. (p. 44)

The delayed self-contradiction is observed more clearly in the last two volumes of her poetical works. It signifies Ao’s engagement with time and memory, and establishes her also as a participant observer in the overall hermeneutic process. The delayed self-contradiction is representative of a gradual, calm, and composed self-analytical discourse (one that is established between Ao the poetic observer and her poetic self). It is a gradual hermeneutic activity that leads to the deposition of firmer meanings in her poetry (e.g. “Night-watch”, 1992; “Evening

Upon Me”, 2017). For instance, the poem “Night-watch” from *Songs that Try to Say* begins with a struggle to attain a peaceful sleep:

While within  
I fight to fend off  
Uncertain specters  
With elusive sleep  
In the wee hours  
Of unending nights. (p. 80)

Inherent in the poem is the poet’s establishment of a framework of diurnal eventuality, from night-sounds through wakefulness to some all elusive sleep. Within this diurnal framework, the poet creates the binaries of outside security and security within. These securities contribute to some defense mechanism that the poet adopts in her struggle against the “night fears”. Her struggles against such insomnia occur both externally and (more) internally. However, the poet is deficient in devising an established strategy to overcome her difficulties, and as such, the fears continue to remain ambiguous to her. The night of the poem is a symbolic representation of a battlefield of thoughts, fears and imagination. It becomes a chaotic realm into which the poet finds herself transgressing – reflective of an inescapable migration into chaos and restlessness. The poet, in this arrangement, can only dream of experiencing an “all elusive sleep”, that is “peaceful and still” – an ambiguous reference to death.

On the other hand, the poem “Evening-Spectres”, from her 2017 collection *Songs Along the Way Home*, portrays an evaluative and introspective stance. The poem depicts the movement from inquisition through rhetoric and observation to assertion. The opening stanza is reflective of inquiry and a continued search for knowledge:

What are these spectres?  
these dark apparitions  
that prance about and mock,  
playing hide and seek  
with my faculties? (Ao, 2017, p. 82)

The second stanza, however, possesses a rhetorical content:

Are these the remnants  
of a fecund mind  
that once exuded  
the vigour of love, friendship  
and at times  
even of bitter passions? (p. 82)

The succeeding lines portray the poet’s observations on the evening specters that she encounters. The poem therefore is a careful observation of the aimless and disarrayed movements of the evening specters:

As they  
diminish,  
dissipate,  
dis-integrate  
and disappear (p. 82)

At the end of the poem, the poet is not dumbfounded but rather assertive of her position:

only with a certainty  
long ordained  
for all humanity. (p. 83)

Although she is burdened with the weight of numerous spectered evenings, she stands rigid in her assertion about herself in the last stanza, and it is an assertion reflective of her membership in all humanity. The emphasis is therefore on the attainment of a personal sublimity, one that makes the speaker poet complete in her expression of an existential experience. Overall, the poem celebrates certainty as an outcome of observation and introspection – symbolic representation of a poet interpreter's delayed and meaningful self-contradiction.

**Assertion:** In general, assertions are made to share information, coordinate actions, defend arguments, and communicate beliefs and desires. Ao does that through poetic (personal) observations and lived experience. However, assertions in her poetry do not fulfil the task of coordinating actions, as a result of the overshadowing influence of self-contradiction. Ao defends her arguments regarding the importance of oral culture, the Naga identity and the influence of Christianity and modernization – ideas that Ao as a Naga poet has always maintained in her works – fictional, non-fictional, and others. Further she communicates with the readers her beliefs about the Ao Naga people, the society and women. She expresses her desire to bring back the cultural ethos through engagement in discourse and comments on her successes and failures in her attempts – an endeavour to estimate herself as a poet, and more importantly, as an Ao Naga. In her poem “Stone-People from Lungterok” from her collection *Songs that Try to Say*, the poet embarks upon a journey into the mythical historical realm of the origin of the Ao Naga. The poem begins with a description of Lungterok, literally translated as Six Stones that possess ethnographic significance:

LUNGTEROK,  
The six Stones  
Where the progenitors  
And forebears  
Of the stone-people  
Were born  
Out of the womb  
Of the earth. (p. 109)

The poem starts with the reference to the mythical and gradually transcends to the ethnographic, with the use of the term “STONE-PEOPLE” – a technical repetition or a refrain to establish the progenitors as the idealized Ao Naga. The stone-people are born out of the womb of the earth and are in communion with nature (Ao, 2012, p. 82-83). The poem delineates a series of contrasting characteristics that contribute to widening their dynamism, both inwardly and outwardly. Overall, it is a recollected narration of the ways of life of a people who possessed knowledge of the natural and the supernatural:

STONE-PEOPLE,  
The worshippers  
Of unknown, unseen spirits (p. 110)

The poem is also apprehended as an assertion of an identity closely associated with the ideas of origin and originality. The poet can be observed defending an argument about the necessity of



the presence of stone-people in the contemporary Ao Naga society. In the final stanza of the poem, the poet wonders if the birth of the progenitors at Lungterok was adult – since the stone-people displayed impeccable maturity in their dealings on knowledge, creativity, courage and humility:

Was the birth adult when the stone broke?

Or are the STONE-PEOPLE yet to come of age? (p. 111)

The poet makes a passing reference to the absence of some of such qualities in the contemporary Ao Naga society. The poet's wonderment at a possible adult birth runs parallel to an assertion of the missing values and an emphasis upon a requisite rebirth of the same, and hence the interrogative frame. The last line of the poem too is structured as a query, and yet it becomes an assertion of hopefulness. The poet's query is indicative of her assertion of the Ao Naga identity with the 'original' stone-people that permeates to the idea that the Ao Naga hopefully would retain such brilliance of contrasting qualities in the days to come. The poet is therefore hopeful of a revival of the Ao Naga and its eventual recognition because the true identity of the Ao Naga, the poet affirms, derives its essence from being associated with the 'mythical-historical' stone-people.

**Reiteration:** Ao uses myths, tells stories, and narrates experiences to debunk the imposed cultural alienation of North East India or to mention an idea again, but differently. In her poem "Musings During a Sermon" from *Songs that Tell*, the poet explores an imaginative stance to the propagated idea of a religious heaven:

Heaven must be a peculiar place

Where there is no day, no night

No need of the sun.

Where, they say, there will be no crying

But only perpetual singing. (pp. 19)

For the imaginative poet reader, the primary characteristic associated to a place like heaven must be its peculiar monotony – one that the poet comes to discard for a life of ecstasy. The idea represented is the need for emancipation of the individual self through the development of an attitude that adheres to scientific discourse. The poet acknowledges the phenomenological significance of the addendum of past and future to a present, symbolic of the nostalgia associated to memory and the thrill of expectation and desire. The poem reflects upon an ideation that supposedly takes place during a sermon, in the interpretative mind of the poet observer. The phrase "they say" indicates to the propagation of a preconceived notion about heaven derived primarily from religious scriptures. While the sermon continues, the speaker poet appears to make certain personal observations. For the poet observer, the peculiar monotony of heaven must be the resultant of a continuum of the present and also equally important, absence of a past and a future. Ao's engagement with time throughout her poetry is reflective of a phenomenological approach – one that derives its essence from lived experience. In such a dull framework of time with only continued presence throughout, the idea of heaven itself seems to lose significant attributes like variety and variability. Heaven no longer possess that curiosity or wonder and therefore is likely to be discarded. The prevalent stature of heaven derived from religious scriptures seems to dwindle under the overpowering influence of critical observation of the poet observer. The poem therefore looks at the idea of heaven from a phenomenological perspective –

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a musing as a lived experience that takes place during an event – the sermon. In the last lines of the poem the poet reiterates the rejection of the supernatural heaven for a natural earthly life:

Ah, for me, a life of diversity!  
Deliver me from an eternity  
Of uncurious monotony. (p. 20)

**Retelling:** In Ao's poetry, retelling follows idea of associating the same characters, same basic storyline and plot, however just transposed to a new genre and a new setting. She also maintains the emotional arc of the original and mirrors that in her narration. The poet doesn't copy beat for beat everything in the original, but replicates the emotional arcs of not only the characters and themes, but also the emotional reading arc of the reader. Some characteristics: they are more concerned toward goals than accuracy. The primary areas of observation are purpose of retelling, the areas of fidelity in retelling, and the presence or absence of distortions like exaggeration, minimisation, omission and addition. E.g. myth of the origin of the Ao Nagas, past stories of embracing Christianity, stories of headhunting, stories from the oral tradition etc. In the poem "Prayer of a Monolith" from *Songs from the Other Life*, the protagonist is a personified monolith lamenting its present condition. The poem is a lamentation, transposed into a narrative of descent from pride to ignominy. It is a story of travesty, and yet it is also a re-telling of the story of the Ao Naga. When the story begins, two monoliths stand by one another as one:

Once I stood in a deep forest  
Proud and content  
My beloved of the laughing dimple  
Standing by my side.

In an eventuality, while one is extracted out of the natural world to witness the 'development' of a civilization, the other– the 'dimpled' monolith is left incomplete in the absence of the lover monolith who now stands at the village gate, ashamed of its misery. The story of the monolith becomes the story of the Ao Naga, depicting a journey from stone-people to the contemporary Ao Naga society. The two monoliths at the beginning symbolize the unified traditional, customary, and cultural values of the 'original' stone-people – the progenitors of the Ao Naga and the forefathers who embraced the oral tradition. The disintegration that takes place in the third stanza of the poem with the influx of "some strangers" is indicative of the time when the Ao Naga embraced Christianity and the affiliated tenets of a foreign (Western) culture (Ao, 2014, pp. 4-5). The dimpled beloved stands for the age-old customary values and the Ao Naga oral tradition that are left ignored by the wave of modernization in the Ao Naga society. The contemporary Ao Naga, just like the monolith devoid of its beloved, continues live in self-acknowledgement of false glory.

**Restatement:** Restatement implies to expressing the same idea with different wording, in order to clarify and/or emphasise an idea or ideas. The poems "Man to Woman" and "Woman to Man" from *Songs from the Other Life* are apt examples that illustrate the customary requisite of the Ao Naga man to build a new house before his marriage to which he would take his newly wedded wife to begin a new family. In "Man to Woman" the speaker is an Ao Naga man proposing his beloved to marriage while mentioning the reasons why he has been courting for many seasons. The lover professes his love by promising to build a new house of thatch and bamboo:

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After the harvest is over  
I shall build a new house

It will only be of thatch and bamboo  
But built with love for you (p. 288)

He further asserts his honesty and hardworking nature to convince her to accept his marriage proposal. In the poem “Woman to Man” the speaker is an Ao woman responding to the man’s proposal. Her response is one of acceptance, and she substantiates it with reasons of her own. Her preferences are lucid — a bamboo and thatch house over one made of timber and tin, farming skills over a “sleek tongue”, physical strength and storytelling abilities over external beauty. As such, both poems reflect upon the significance of customary values of the Ao Naga. While the former presents those values as assertions to a claim, the latter presents them as predilections towards an acceptance. The parallel statements in the two poems arguably illustrate the application of restatement more vividly than any other poem in the gamut of Ao’s poetical works. While the superficial image portrays a conversation between a man and a woman, the underlying idea validates a ‘valuation’ of tradition and custom in the Ao Naga society. The exemplified contrasts direct the reader to interpret the native rustic values as items of utmost importance to the Ao Naga. Further, Ao makes extensive use of symbols like the thatch house, the dao, the traps, the fields, *Moatsu* and the *Arju* to heighten the portrayal of romantic values associated with the Ao Naga society (Ao, 2012, pp. 46).

**Echoing (reverberation):** The act of echoing relates to a repetition of a sound after the original sound has stopped. In the ancient and pre-literate world of tribal societies, oral tradition played the significant role as chronicles of history and source of knowledge and wisdom. It guided and influenced the people in all aspects of their lives (Ao, 2012, pp. 1-2). The Naga culture and its oral history flourished without a written script of their own. Yet the people possessed an effective medium of communication and records and they have been preserved for many centuries through the oral tradition which is based on deep-rooted foundations. Any oral narrative of traditional history, origin and migration of a people (individual, clan, tribe etc.), formation of a village, events of festivals, war or peace are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another through poetry, songs, ballads, stories, prayers, tales or as public oration. In many of Ao’s poems, she attempts to bring to the reader’s attention the significance of the once predominant oral tradition of the Nagas. The recurrent tone of the narrative voices in her latest book of poems *Songs Along the Way Home* appears to be markedly more introspective than in the earlier ones. Her poem “Song-Bird” is studied here as a reverberation of the lost oral tradition in the light of the Naga context.

In the poem “Song-bird” from her sixth book, *Songs Along the Way Home*, Ao distinctly expresses the realisation of a lost tradition. The protagonist is a little song bird who has woken up to “an eerie void” – a kind of lifelessness created by towering heights of modernization and development (Ao, 2017, pp. 25). The poet almost becomes the Song-bird herself, being alarmed by the pervading “great silence” of the morning. This silence becomes suggestive of the attitude towards oral tradition in societies with a long history of literacy and written tradition.

Ao reflects upon the contemporary Naga society, with “no song-birds” melodies to “greet the morning” – indicating the loss of vital aspects of their tribal ancestry. Ao states how the

indigenous peoples themselves appear to be in an unseemly hurry to disregard their age old cultural practices and ape their new 'masters'. In her poem, the little Song-bird 'wonders' as she is unable to find any of her "song-mates" and encounters "a vast aloneness". The bird's many attempts to find her companions in order to re-sing an old tribal song and her continued failures simplify the poet's disillusionment amidst inexorable urbanisation. She is 'frantic' as "the growing fear" keeps choking her every time she makes an attempt to sing the old refrain that she believes every other nostalgic would know. The poet's heart too is 'stricken' just as the heart of the song-bird; the bird is no longer a song-bird, just as the 'proud' and self-respecting Naga has now become an Indian citizen. The old refrain remains suggestive of the strong "rootedness"; an attachment to the land, culture and times which the poet finds missing in the new songs:

But there is no soul in the new songs  
no harmony trilled in the voices,  
no joy glinted in the eyes  
and no rhythm frolicked on the feathers. (Ao, 2017, p. 26)

These new songs are nothing more than 'pathetic travesties' and symbolise the diminished splendour of a bygone era. The poem thus becomes an outburst on conflict of dual identities-- the rooted tribal and the modern Indian, as 'the former song-mates turned to total strangers'.

The loss of history, territory and intrinsic identity can begin simply by forgetting. Perhaps Ao is responding to this clarion call as she writes at the beginning of the poem how the bird, the poet and the reader get 'instantly alarmed'. This self-confessed story teller and songwriter exhorts her listeners not to discard one's essential identity by re-awakening olden songs and stories, and articulating it to a new discourse. For the poet, the most important contribution of orality towards such studies is in the sphere of political insights to traditional village politics, which is providing room for synthesis of modern political concepts within the traditional framework. Ao brings forth the Naga context, in which the prescient past was erased and replaced by a dominant alien worldview. The poem reflects upon this state of being removed from their history and the need for restoration of the past. In the poems of Ao, one finds these expressions, echoing the oral narratives, songs, myths, culture, history and tradition of the Nagas. The picture of the contemporary society devoid of the native ethos is bemoaned by the poet:

In the surreal surroundings,  
she spies her former mates  
strutting on glittering bars inside gilded cages  
trying to sing their old songs! (p. 26)

The society that exists now is symbolic of a new literate tradition which set aside the oral tradition preceding it. The song-bird, in search of a long lost tradition, arrives to encounter a dismal situation:

Her old world has vanished;  
Free-songs forsaken, song-birds' abandoned,  
and former song-mates turned to total strangers  
strutting and screeching in bonded splendours. (p. 26)

Through the image of the song-bird, the poet expresses her deep concern for a present that appears confused, owing to a heterogeneous clutter of identity, ethnicity and nationalism. In a society where man is often governed by creed, greed, region and religion, the poet in Ao is hurt when things seem to go astray; and some of the resultant poetry becomes an echo of a wounded

heart. Nevertheless, her poetry reiterates that the strategy of love is still relevant and powerful in the battle against hate, irrespective of the medium one uses to convey it. Temsula Ao is a poet of the marginalized – a poet who sings because she cannot stop singing of the untold miseries of a great culture.

## CONCLUSION

Through social, scientific and literary researches into varied aspects of English literature from North East India, researchers, writers and critics continue to explore the relative lack of empirical insight into the experiences of interpretation of English poetry from North East India. For instance, the impression that Temsula Ao's poetry has gone underappreciated relates to the idea that the potential problem lies in the technicalities of 'interpretation' and 'experience'. This does not, however, repudiate or encounter the predominance of Ao's fiction and non-fiction. Ao's engagement with an understanding of 'herself' and its influence in her poetry can be detected through careful and critical observation and analysis; and therefore a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is indispensable for such an endeavour – the foundational ideas of which can be found in reader-response criticism of researchers like Louise Rosenblatt. In using such an approach, it becomes necessary to bring forth the stance of both the participant reader and the poet on a somewhat parallel framework as creative interpreters. By using parallel hermeneutic planes for both participants, one can understand the subtleties connected to the formation of "attitudes and self-understandings" (Rosenblatt, 1988, pp. 14). Ao's poetry provides one with the opportunity to explore the roles played by both the participant reader and the poet interpreter in the hermeneutic process by introducing such subtleties.

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