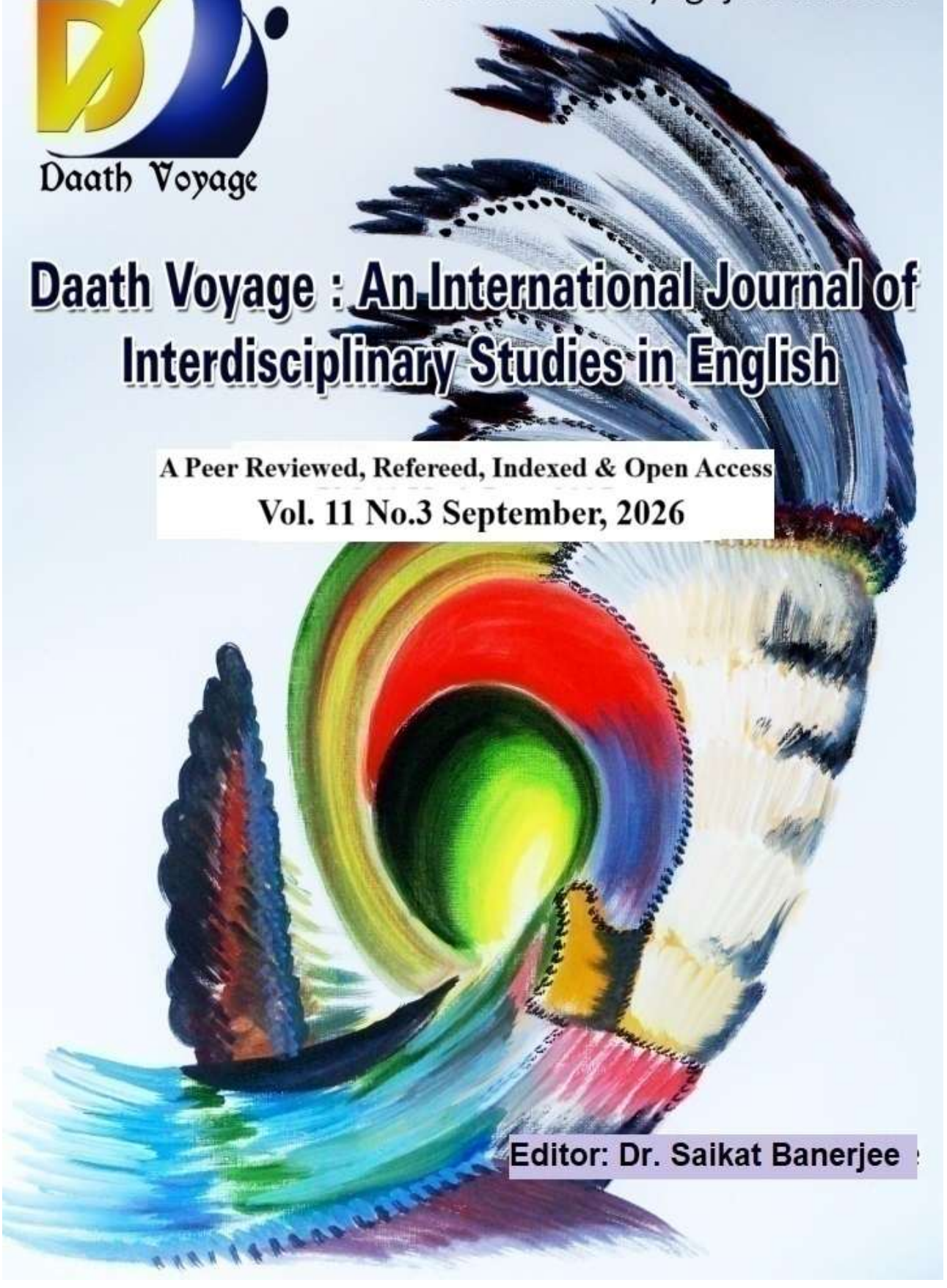
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"Negotiating Identity and Modernity in the Works of Temsula Ao"

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Abstract: Temsula Ao, a pioneering Naga writer from Northeast India, masterfully navigates the intricate tensions between indigenous identity and the encroaching forces of modernity in her literary oeuvre. Through her short story collections: *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), and *Songs That Tell* (2017)—Ao dissects the socio-political upheavals of Nagaland, a region scarred by insurgency, militarization, and cultural erosion. Her narratives illuminate how traditional Naga worldviews, rooted in oral histories, animistic beliefs, and communal harmony, clash with modern impositions like state violence, globalization, and urban migration. In *These Hills Called Home*, Ao portrays the human cost of the Indo-Naga conflict, where identity is forged in the crucible of violence, yet resilience emerges through storytelling. *Laburnum for My Head* shifts to personal reckonings, exploring women's roles in preserving cultural memory amid patriarchal and colonial disruptions. *Songs That Tell* weaves folk songs into prose, revitalizing indigenous epistemologies against the homogenizing tide of modernity. Ao's negotiation of identity is not mere lament; it is a subversive act of reclamation, blending myth, history, and autobiography to assert Naga agency. This paper argues that Ao's works exemplify a decolonial aesthetic, challenging binary oppositions of tradition versus modernity. By humanizing the "peripheral" voices of Northeast India, she critiques nationalist narratives and advocates for a pluralistic modernity that honors indigenous sovereignty. Drawing on postcolonial theory (Spivak, Bhabha) and ecofeminist perspectives, the analysis reveals Ao's strategic use of hybrid forms to foster cultural survival. Ultimately, her literature becomes a site of resistance, urging readers to reimagine identity in a globalized world.

Keywords: Temsula Ao, Naga identity, modernity, Northeast India, insurgency, oral traditions, decolonial literature, cultural hybridity, gender, ecofeminism.

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Introduction

Temsula Ao, who passed away in 2022, left behind a literary legacy that captures the raw pulse of Nagaland's hills, those mist-shrouded landscapes where ancient Naga traditions collide head-on with the relentless march of modernity. Born in 1945 in Jorhat, Assam, to Ao Naga parents, she grew up navigating the cultural crossroads of Northeast India. As a professor of English at North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Ao was not just an academic. She was a storyteller who wove the threads of her people's history into English prose, making the Naga voice resonate far beyond the region's borders. Her short story collections, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), and *Songs That Tell* (2017), serve as intimate chronicles of a land defined by insurgency, cultural erosion, and quiet defiance.

Nagaland's story is one of unyielding resistance. Since the Naga National Council's declaration of independence in 1947, the region has been a flashpoint of conflict with the Indian state. *The imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act* in 1958 turned everyday life into a theater of suspicion and violence, with villages raided, innocents disappeared, and hills echoing with gunfire. Ao's writing emerges from this cauldron, not as dry reportage, but as deeply felt narratives that humanize the statistics. She once remarked in an interview with The Hindu, *"My stories are born from the silences of my people,"* highlighting her role as a bridge between lived trauma and literary expression.

At the heart of Ao's oeuvre lies the negotiation of identity in a modern world that threatens to flatten Naga distinctiveness. Traditional Naga life, rooted in animistic beliefs, morung communal dormitories, jhum cultivation, and oral song-cycles, clashes with modernity's imports: missionary Christianity, urban migration, state bureaucracy, and global media. Her protagonists, often women or elders, embody this tension, their lives a delicate dance between ancestral lore and contemporary upheaval. In These Hills Called Home, the war zone becomes a metaphor for fractured belonging. Laburnum for My Head delves into personal grief and gendered memory. Songs That Tell revives folk melodies to counter cultural amnesia.

This paper contends that Ao crafts a decolonial poetics, where identity is not static but dynamically negotiated through hybrid forms. English laced with Ao dialect blends seamlessly with myth intertwined with history. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's *"third space"* of cultural hybridity and Gayatri Spivak's insights into subaltern agency, alongside ecofeminist views of land as kin, the analysis uncovers Ao's subversive

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strategies. She challenges India's unitary nationalism, portraying Nagas not as insurgents or victims, but as sovereign storytellers reclaiming narrative control. The paper proceeds with sections on violence and resilience in These Hills Called Home, gendered identities in Laburnum for My Head, oral revitalization in Songs That Tell, a thematic synthesis, and concluding reflections on Ao's enduring impact. Through her lens, modernity need not erase identity. It can be reshaped into something plural and alive.

Scholarship on Northeast Indian literature has blossomed in recent years, spotlighting voices long sidelined by mainland narratives. Easterine Kire's novels, like *When the River Sleeps* (2014), evoke Naga spirituality through myth, much like Ao's folk infusions, but Kire leans more toward fantasy. Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005) probes Assamese identity amid militancy, paralleling Ao's insurgency tales yet lacking her gendered depth. Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* (2006) shares Ao's ecofeminist bent, tying Adi tribal women to Arunachal's rivers, though Dai's lyricism contrasts Ao's stark realism.

Critics have dissected Ao's works insightfully. Patricia Mukhim's essays in *The Sentinel* praise *These Hills Called Home* for demystifying Naga violence, arguing it fosters empathy over exoticism. In *Indian Literature* (2010), Robin S. Ngangom lauds Ao's hybrid English as *"Naga pidgin,"* a linguistic rebellion against colonial tongues. Anjali Chaube's book *Literary Cultures of India's Northeast* (2015) positions Ao within a *"peripheral modernism,"* where oral traditions subvert print hegemony. Recent studies, such as Kasturi Ray's 2021 article in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, apply trauma theory to *Laburnum for My Head*, viewing flowers as metaphors for repressed memory.

This paper builds on these by centering identity-modernity negotiations across Ao's trilogy, filling a gap in comparative analyses.

Theoretically, Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) anchors the framework. His *"third space"* illuminates Ao's hybrid narratives, where Naga myths mimic yet mock modern state power, birthing ambivalent identities. Bhabha writes, "*The 'hybrid' is not a third term... but an interstitial passsage,"* fitting Ao's song-prose blends that negotiate cultural survival.

Gayatri Spivak's *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* (1988) probes Naga women's voices. Ao lets them narrate, countering elite ventriloquism, though Spivak warns of representational limits Ao navigates this via embodied, local idioms.

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Ecofeminism, via Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* (1988), links Naga hills to female resilience. Land violation mirrors gendered oppression, with stories like *"The Jungle Major"* portraying ecology as identity's bedrock. These lenses—hybridity, subalternity, ecofeminism are interweave to reveal Ao's decolonial aesthetic, framing her literature as active resistance.

Contextualizing Naga Identity and Modernity

To grasp Temsula Ao's literary world, one must first step into the rugged embrace of Nagaland, a land of over sixteen major tribes speaking distinct languages, nestled in Northeast India's mist-veiled hills. Naga identity pulses with a deep-rooted sense of autonomy, forged long before British boots or Indian tanks scarred the terrain. Pre-colonial Nagas thrived in self-governing villages, their lives synced to the rhythms of jhum shifting cultivation, where fields burned and regenerated in sacred cycles. Social structures revolved around the morung, those sturdy log dormitories where youths learned lore, warfare, and rituals under elders' watchful eyes. Animism wove through it all of spirits inhabited stones, rivers, and ancestors, demanding feasting songs and headhunting bravado to maintain cosmic balance. Christianity arrived with American Baptists in the late 19th century, converting nearly 90% of Nagas by independence. It reshaped rituals, banning headhunting yet preserving communal hymns that Ao later echoes. This early hybridity set the stage for deeper clashes.

Modernity crashed in forcefully post-1947. The Naga National Council (NNC), under Angami Zapu Phizo, declared independence on August 14, 1947, a day before India's tryst with destiny. By the 1950s, ceasefires deteriorated into open insurgency, leading to the emergence of groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSNC). In response, India implemented a harsh crackdown, which included Operation Polo in 1956, widwspread arrests, and the controversial Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) OF 1958, which allowed troops to kill with impunity. Reports from the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights detail horrors of the 1995 Oking massacre, where soldiers gang-raped and killed villagers, or daily *"cordon and search"* operations turning homes into interrogation cells. Economic modernity fared no better. Development schemes brought roads and schools, but also deforestation, opium trade, and youth exodus to Dimapur's slums or Delhi's underbelly. Globalization trickled in via mobiles and Bollywood, eroding dialects and weaving Naga shawls into tourist kitsch. State narratives branded Nagas as "extremists," sidelining their sovereignty claims in Delhi's corridors.

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Yet Naga identity endures, resilient as bamboo. Festivals like Hornbill showcase songs and dances, while women's kirams (market associations) wield economic clout. Ao's stories capture this liminality is not victimhood, but a fierce negotiation where modernity's blade hones, rather than severs, cultural roots.

Gendered Reckonings in *Laburnum for My Head*

Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*, recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2010, peels back the layers of Naga womanhood with a tenderness that belies its unflinching gaze on loss and endurance. This slim collection of three stories pivots on female protagonists whose inner worlds become battlegrounds for identity amid war's fallout and modern shifts. In a society where men chase insurgency's glory, Ao spotlights women as quiet custodians of memory. Their bodies and stories bear the weight of cultural continuity.

The title story, “Laburnum for My Head,″ unfolds through a mother's fevered haze after her daughter Lentina elopes with a lover. She meets a grim end. The laburnum tree, with its golden cascades, stands as a poignant intruder. It symbolizes an exotic bloom from colonial gardens. This represents modernity's seductive yet poisonous allure. As the mother thrashes in delirium, visions blur past and present. Village rituals mingle with urban temptations that lured Lentina away. Ao writes of the flowers *"dripping like molten gold."* The image evokes beauty's transience and the mother's unspoken rage at a world that devours her child. Here, identity negotiation is visceral. The woman's grief transmutes into a ritual weaving. She reclaims agency through craft. Modernity appears as the lover's city job and forbidden love. These fracture patriarchal norms. Yet Ao underscores the double bind. Women gain fleeting freedom only to face isolation.

In *"Soaba,"* named for a resilient wildflower, we meet a widow defying remarriage pressures. Her garden flourishes amid mined fields. It forms a defiant Eden where she communes with plants that *"whisper secrets of the soil."* Ecofeminist threads emerge strongly. Soaba's bond with earth mirrors suppressed female strength. War's explosions violate it much like bodily autonomy under siege. She rejects suitors. She chooses solitude over subjugation. Her flowers serve as a living archive of ancestral knowledge. Ao subtly critiques modern education's pull. Soaba's son studies afar. He sends remittances that feel like chains. Yet her rootedness asserts an indigenous femininity beyond urban progress.

"*The Great Gamini"* injects wry humor. It centers a village simpleton whose fabricated war tales inflate his ego. Women, the true witnesses, dismantle his bluster with knowing glances and chores. Through their

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peripheral narration, Ao exposes militancy's macho absurdities. Men's *"heroism"* masks vulnerability. Identity here is gendered satire. Modernity's guns empower the foolhardy. But women's labor and wit sustain the village.

Across these tales, Ao reimagines Naga women not as passive victims but as navigators of hybrid spaces. They embody Bhabha's ambivalence. They mimic modern independence while anchoring in oral memory. Spivak's subaltern finds voice in their unspoken songs and gardens. They resist erasure. Ao's prose, spare yet evocative, humanizes these reckonings. It urges readers to see gender as the fault line where tradition and modernity fracture and heal.

Oral Traditions and Hybrid Modernity in *Songs That Tell*

Temsula Ao's *Songs That Tell* (2017) marks a luminous evolution in her craft, where folk songs pulse like heartbeats through the prose, breathing life into Naga oral traditions against modernity's flattening grind. This collection of eleven stories fuses the cyclical cadence of village ballads with the sharp edges of contemporary strife, creating a hybrid form that defies literary silos. Ao, drawing from her Ao Naga roots, transliterates songs in dialect alongside English translations, inviting readers into a sonic world where words carry the weight of generations.

"The Song of the Caged Bird" opens with a myna's plaintive melody, caged in a Kohima home yet yearning for forest freedoms. The bird's tune allegorizes Naga entrapment under AFSPA's iron grip and urban assimilation. Modernity manifests as the cage's bars, forged from steel and state surveillance. But the song slips through, a subversive ripple that stirs the listener's soul. Ao notes the bird *"sang of skies it had never seen,"* blending Rumi-esque longing with indigenous motifs of flight and clan wanderings. This negotiation of identity thrives in hybridity. The oral song revives what print modernity threatens to silence.

In *"The Boy Who Drew Butterflies,"* a child's sketches bridge rural innocence and city alienation. Butterflies, ephemeral as oral tales, flit between myth and migration narratives. The boy, sent to study in Dimapur, captures winged spirits on paper, merging pencil modernity with ancestral dreamtime. Ao weaves in a lullaby epigraph, its rhythm underscoring resilience. Identity here fluidly adapts. Tradition's wings propel the boy through modern dislocations.

"Three Women" spans generations, each woman's story punctuated by songs that thread memory like beads on a necklace. The grandmother intones harvest dirges; the mother laments war widows; the daughter hums pop-infused folk from her hostel bed. Modernity intrudes via education and jobs, pulling them apart.

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

Yet songs suture the rifts, fostering a dialogic identity that honors rupture and repair. Ao's inclusion of actual Ao melodies, complete with musical notation hints, democratizes orality. It challenges English literature's dominance. Other tales, like *"The Old Man's Dream,"* revive ghost songs to haunt progress narratives. An elder's visions critique dam projects flooding sacred sites, pitting hydraulic modernity against river spirits.

Ao's genius lies in this oral-modern alchemy. Bhabha's third space materializes in song-prose interstices, where Naga epistemologies hybridize without dilution. Ecofeminist echoes resound, as songs invoke land's voice amid deforestation. Far from nostalgic revivalism, Ao forges a forward-looking hybridity. Her stories affirm that oral traditions, far from relics, equip Nagas to navigate globalization's tempests. In a world of fleeting TikToks and Reels, Ao's songs endure, telling truths that modernity cannot mute.

Interlacing Worlds: Hybridity, Resistance, and Temsula Ao's Legacy

Across Temsula Ao's evocative trilogy, *These Hills Called Home*, *Laburnum for My Head*, and *Songs That Tell*, Naga identity reveals itself as a living mosaic. It forms from shards of tradition and modernity's gleam. Recurring images anchor this vision. Mist-cloaked hills whisper home to the wandering. Folk songs carry ghosts of feasts past. Women spin continuity from chaos with their hands. In the war-ravaged vignettes of These Hills, a mother's pot of rice becomes communion with the lost. Laburnum's grieving figures nurture flowers amid rubble. They turn sorrow into subtle rebellion. Songs That Tell lifts melodies from oral shadows into printed light. The melodies dance with contemporary woes. Hybridity forms the warp and weft. It vividly embodies Homi Bhabha's *"third space"* of cultural negotiation. Ao's prose marries King's English to Naga cadences. Her stories hum with untranslated refrains that demand insider ears. A rebel's uniform in *"The Jungle Major"* parodies state authority. It twists imitation into insurrection. Generational songs in "Three Women" blend harvest chants with radio hits. They craft identities that roam freely between soil and skyline. These fusions acknowledge modernity's incursions. Schools empty villages. Roads scar ridges. Yet they forge resilience from the friction.

Resistance simmers beneath. It proves multifaceted and fierce. Ao blurs enemy lines. She grants humanity to soldiers and militants alike. This erodes simplistic divides. Her women wield looms over rifles. Their tales echo Gayatri Spivak's subaltern speech. They wrest it from silence. Ecofeminist pulses

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

link bodies to beleaguered earth. Desecrated groves in *"The Last Song"* mourn like widowed hearts. Ao skewers modernity's excesses. The AFSPA's chokehold tightens. Market forces peddle Naga scarves as curios. Yet she eyes tradition's cracks. Clan rivalries fester. Dialects fade. Literature emerges as her weapon of choice. It serves as a sovereign chronicle outpacing official histories.

Ao's legacy radiates beyond Nagaland's folds. She mentored a wave of Northeast writers. Easterine Kire explores mythic realms. Mamang Dai evokes riverine lyrics. She proved marginal tales merit center stage. In ongoing peace parleys, her narratives advocate a modernity woven with tribal voices. They push for gender justice and land reverence. As Robin Ngangom observed, she masters "the art of the unsaid." Yet her words reshape silences into symphonies.

Today, amid climate upheavals and digital deluges, Ao's interlacing endures. Her hills beckon us to value hybrid lives. Resistance blooms not in isolation but in bold, boundary-crossing embrace. She does not just chronicle survival. She scripts its next verse.

Conclusion

Temsula Ao's stories linger like the echo of a hill song, long after the final page turns. In *These Hills Called Home*, *Laburnum for My Head*, and *Songs That Tell*, she maps the intricate dance of Naga identity against modernity's whirlwind. Her hills stand firm. They call the displaced back to roots even as roads and rifles carve them apart. Women emerge as quiet revolutionaries. Their gardens and melodies stitch wounds that guns widen. Ao refuses easy laments. She crafts narratives of negotiation. Hybrid voices blend English with Ao rhythms. These assert sovereignty in a world bent on uniformity.

This study illuminates her decolonial craft. Bhabha's hybrid spaces come alive in song-infused prose. Spivak's subalterns speak through embodied memories. Ecofeminist ties bind people to ravaged lands. Ao humanizes the Northeast's "troubled periphery." She challenges Delhi's gaze and global indifference. Her work whispers a vital truth. Identity bends but rarely breaks when rooted in story. Ao's passing in 2022 sharpens her relevance. Nagaland's peace process stumbles on. Youth grapple with smartphones and jobless futures. Climate shifts threaten jhum fields. Yet her legacy endures. She inspires writers like Easterine Kire to carry the torch. Classrooms now buzz with her tales. They foster empathy over stereotypes.

Ultimately, Ao envisions a modernity remade. It honors plural paths. It mends gender rifts and listens to earth's murmurs. Her literature urges us beyond pity. It calls for solidarity with voices from the

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Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

margins. In a fractured age, these hills still call home. They remind us that stories, sung or scrawled, hold the power to heal and reclaim.

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