Journal of Geo Research

ISSN: 3139-2539 (Online)

journal homepage: https://jogr.in

OPEN ACCESS

2026 (October)
Vol. 1 No. 4

Militarised Naga landscape and gendered ecological experience: a de-essentialised re-reading of Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*

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Article Info

Received: 29 September 2026
Accepted: 06 October 2026

Citation: Baruah, A., & Anish, S. (2026). Militarised Naga landscape and gendered ecological experience: A de-essentialised re-reading of Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*. *Journal of Geo Research, 1*(4), 118–129.

doi: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23338156

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Abstract

In Northeast Indian women's literature, existing scholarship has largely employed classic ecofeminist frameworks to foreground the aspects of ecological consciousness, indigenous cosmologies, and women's ecological agency, in order to claim women as natural custodians of ecological knowledge. Much of this scholarship moves towards interpreting ecological relationships through frameworks that romanticise women as natural protectors, custodians, and preservers of the environment. This leads towards a reading of women's closeness to the land, forest and the natural landscape as an inheritance of their feminine being. In doing so, however, such studies have largely retained the women-nature relationship as a foundational assumption rather than studying it as an analytical problem, and thus, has devoted less attention to interrogating how this identity is materially, historically, culturally, and politically produced. The result is that women, in Northeast Indian landscape, are continually reinscribed and celebrated as guardians of ecological knowledge, or simply as figures of indigenous environmental equilibrium. While such approaches have undoubtedly foregrounded the ecological abundance and offered a critique of anthropocentrism, they however remain invested in affirming the gender-nature link instead of interrogating its assumptions. This tendency reveals a significant theoretical limitation because indigenous women's experiences cannot be adequately understood through universal ecofeminist paradigms alone. This study thus addresses this gap by undertaking a de-essentialised ecofeminist re-reading of selected stories from Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006). This collection offers a relevantly demanding case as it represents Nagaland as a regional landscape, as shaped by the nuances of militarisation, displacement, gendered labour and violence, subsistence agriculture, and cultural memory, which are all conditions under which any presumed communion between women and nature is difficult to sustain. It draws on the anti-essentialist ecofeminism of Val Plumwood, Bina Agarwal, Greta Gaard, Carolyn Merchant and Patrice DiQuinzio, and bringing it into dialogue with the feminist geopolitics of Jennifer Hyndman and Lorraine Dowler, the relational account of landscape developed by Tim Ingold and Jonathan Clapperton's critique of indigenous ecological knowledge. Through this intersectional framework, this critical study argues, through Ao's fiction, that women are not biologically closer to nature. By thus bringing literary analysis into dialogue with feminist geopolitics, cultural geography, and environmental humanities, this study repositions the Naga landscape as a site of philosophical inquiry into the relation between nature, gender, and power.

Keywords*:* militarised landscape, de-essentialisation, feminist geopolitics, gender and nature

1. Introduction

Temsula Ao is one of the most renowned Naga women writers from Northeast India. Nagaland, one of the longest running armed conflict zones in South Asia, emerges as the central landscape in her fiction. Accordingly, her short story collection, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), returns repeatedly to the decades of the Naga nationalist movement, when the region's natural landscape including the hills, forests, villages, towns and houses were caught between the Indian armed forces and the underground Naga rebel army. Her narrative moves beyond the battlefield to showcase the intimate life of the ordinary people, above all the women, who lived through the burning of villages and granaries, the curfews, the searches, the rape trauma, and the everyday terror of a society reorganised by conflict. In doing so, this collection transforms the Naga landscape from a mere geographical setting to a cultural and political archive that paves the way for the interrogation of women's material reality.

The study undertakes four stories from the collection, namely: "The Last Song", "A New Chapter", "The Jungle Major", and "The Curfew Man". This selection is deliberately done in order to represent the fullest range of women's relations with land, home and livelihood under militarisation. It then reads these selected stories through a de-essentialised ecofeminist framework by drawing upon contemporary anti-essentialist ecofeminist critique, feminist environmentalism, feminist geopolitics, and a relational account of landscape through a critique of indigenous ecological knowledge.

The aim of this study is thus twofold. Firstly, it seeks to deconstruct the conventional belief that women's ecological status is an expression of an inherent biological essence, thereby demonstrating that it is instead a product of materially specific relations of gender, land, labour, and militarisation. Secondly, it offers a model for reading conflict-zone Northeast Indian literature through a tripartite arrangement of philosophical, regional and environmental aspects: philosophical in interrogating the conceptual link between women and nature, regional in understanding the specific historical and cultural heritage of Nagaland, and environmental in examining how violence and displacement reshape the sustainability of land and community in regards to women's experiences.

2. Statement of the problem

Existing ecofeminist criticism of *These Hills Called Home* has studied the collection through militarisation, insurgency, gendered violence, trauma, identity, and memory, while ecological scholarship on Northeast Indian women's writing has celebrated women as natural custodians of land and nature at large. However, neither of these scholarships examine how the women-nature relationship itself is produced within a militarised cultural landscape. Such a lack risks essentialising indigenous women as biologically closer to nature, thereby reinforcing the very binary ecofeminism seeks to dismantle. This study thus addresses this gap by re-reading four selected stories through a de-essentialised ecofeminist framework and a lens of feminist geopolitics to interrogate how women's ecological experience is constituted through the material realities of militarisation, gendered labour, land relations, and survival rather than the feminine self.

3. Objectives

1. To critically examine how women's ecological experiences are produced through an intersection of gendered labour, widowhood, resource management, conditioned survival, and militarisation.

2. To analyse whether Ao's narratives reinforce, negotiate, or destabilise the classic essentialist affinity between women and nature.
3. To demonstrate the contribution of a de-essentialised ecofeminist and feminist geopolitical reading to cultural geography and the environmental humanities.

4. Methodology

The present study adopts a network of qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary research methodology as grounded in literary, textual analysis. It undertakes four selected stories from Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, namely: "The Last Song", "A New Chapter", "The Jungle Major", and "The Curfew Man". Throughout the study, the analytical method employed is close textual reading as informed by a de-essentialised ecofeminist and cultural geographical framework. It also employs feminist geopolitics and the geography of militarised landscapes as the spatial-analytical lens, so as to read the landscape as a lived and politically produced space. In doing so, it situates the selected stories and the theoretical frameworks into a continuous dialogue, rather than applying conventional ecofeminist theory as a predetermined interpretative model. Consequently, the theoretical perspectives are made to function as analytical lenses rather than as an imposed prescriptive framework, so as to allow the selected stories to extend and challenge the existing ecofeminist configurations. It then adopts a contextual reading strategy to interpret how the broader socio-cultural realities of Nagaland are situated alongside the interplay of indigenous ecological knowledge, gendered labour, land relations, materialisation, and the lived experiences of women. Such an approach allows the study to move beyond the symbolic readings of nature and instead to examine how these ecological relationships are materially produced. The research methodology is, however, literary and theory based and it does not claim to provide any empirical data about all Naga communities. The claims of this research will be limited to the narrative representations in Ao's selected stories and their implications for ecofeminist and cultural-geographical theory.

5. Literature Review

The emergence of ecofeminism signalled a significant intervention in feminist as well as environmental studies by drawing attention to the shared structures of oppression that simultaneously subordinate both women and nature. Early ecofeminist critics argued that both these oppressions are rooted within the same configurations of patriarchal power (Shiva & Mies). This theoretical connection, however, continues to generate a debate regarding the extent to which this women-nature relationship is essentially rooted. Val Plumwood identifies the domination of nature as "an essential but difficult further frontier for feminist theory" to thereby argue that ecological oppression must be understood alongside the intersecting structures of gender, race, caste, class, and species (p. 1). She thus proposes nature as the "missing piece" within feminist critique, insisting that the gender-nature nexus is a product shaped by Western dualistic frameworks rather than an essential biological fact (p. 2). She then rejects essentialist assumptions, stressing that a woman's supposed "closeness to nature has hardly been a compliment" (p. 19). Plumwood here warns that the belief that women contain an innate ecological consciousness only merely replaces one stereotype with another.

Later interventions have further destabilised this women-nature association by situating it within material, historical, cultural, and socio-political frameworks. Bina Agarwal critiques cultural ecofeminism for reducing the women-nature connection in terms of ideology. She then proposes "feminist

environmentalism" to largely locate women's ecological experiences through a gendered stream of production, reproduction, labour and resource distribution (Agarwal, 1996, p. 119). Her theoretical insistence that ecological relations are consistently shaped by gender, race, caste, class, and economic organisation, therefore, broadens ecofeminist analyses beyond essentialism. Carolyn Merchant similarly extends Plumwood's feminist critique by positing that environmental history must incorporate a "fourth analytical level" by including a "gender analysis", thereby emphasising that women's relationship with the natural resources significantly differs from that of men's in historical contexts (p. 1117). Greta Gaard, too, builds on such a critique that ecofeminism needs to move beyond mapping parallel oppressions to adopting an intersectional ecofeminist framework. According to Gaard, the basic understanding of ecofeminism as a theory that equates women to nature on grounds of natural affinity, should rather contribute to exposing "the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species and nation" (p. 28). Patrice DiQuinzio likewise challenges the universalist notions of 'woman', thereby arguing that gender must be theorised in relation to "race, class, and sexual orientation". She then proposes a replacement of such universal narratives with "particularized, localized accounts" in order to emphasise that womanhood as a category constitutes an unstable and historically situated position (p. 8). This intervention provides a pivotal methodological foundation through which Indigenous women's writing can be read without imposing essentialist feminist assumptions.

This materialist foundation is furthered by the geography of militarised landscapes and feminist geopolitics. Chris Pearson states how "it is no longer possible to treat war and landscape as separate realms" thereby arguing "how war and landscapes reciprocally reproduce each other across time and space" (p. 115). Jennifer Hyndman's feminist geopolitics rescales this analysis to the body and the spaces of everyday life, whereas Lorraine Dowler reformulates militarisation as a banal process present in everyday spaces, including the home and the body. Parallel developments in environmental humanities and Indigenous studies further complicate the fixed ideas of ecology by stressing upon localised contexts, relationships, and lived material realities. Tim Ingold's understanding of landscape as "an enduring record of— and testimony to—the lives... who have dwelt within it", de-stabilises the popular notion of the landscape as a fixed setting (p. 152). Such an understanding significantly forwards ecofeminist inquiry by highlighting that ecological relationships are produced through material realities rather than inherited through biology. Deborah Bird Rose argues similarly that a "Country is a living entity" to show how the ecological self is materially grounded in place (p. 111). Trevor Marchand highlights that knowledge emerges through the interplay of minds, bodies, and environments, whereas Jonathan Clapperton adds to the view by demonstrating that indigenous knowledge should be understood as a living and evolving force. These viewpoints prevent indigenous ecological consciousness from being romanticised as a mode of cultural inheritance.

The theoretical interventions of ecofeminism have profoundly influenced the literary scholarship of Northeast India as well. Much of this scholarship moves towards interpreting ecological relationships through frameworks that privilege women as natural custodians of the environment. This movement occurs without sufficiently interrogating the material, historical, cultural, and political background through which these essentialist identities are produced. In the writings of Temsula Ao, too, such essentialist claims are consistently repeated. Sanjoy Das argues that the writings of Ao, tends to reveal the "de-humanised and devalued condition of women and nature" under patriarchal setups, thereby repeatedly describing women as naturally closer to nature without any interrogation (p. 75). For Subrata Barman, Northeast Indian literature adopts the lens of ecofeminism to prioritise community-land relationships, as in the works of Ao.

These positions tend to reproduce the very assumptions, regarding women's association with nature, that contemporary ecofeminism itself seeks to complicate. Scholarship on Ao continues to interpret her fiction through an ecofeminist lens, thereby reiterating the parallel victimhood of women and nature, without inquiring as to how that association itself has been historically constituted (Gogoi).

Ao's fiction tends to be analysed by ecofeminist scholarship through the aspects of militarisation, gendered violence, trauma, identity, and resistance. Bharti Arora reads the collection against the gendered nation-state and AFSPA thereby interpreting "Ao's text within the various socio-political processes which have affected Nagamese people's everyday negotiations with the state" (p. 3). Although Brar and Khanna "shows how her narratives move beyond ethnographic description to theorise women's agency as an act of cultural resistance", their focus still dominantly hovers over the examination of Naga women as witnesses and survivors alone (p. 107). Veio Pou's analysis, on the other hand, focuses on sexual violence against women in conflict, arguing that women in patriarchal Naga society are doubly marginalised and their narratives silenced with no interrogation on how this narrative actually works to highlight this marginalisation. The collection is also read through the transgenerational transmission of chosen trauma, especially by Suganya and Padmanabhan, who argues that micro-experiences of insurgency in Ao's stories carry collective traumatic memory across generations. Longkumer further examines the collection in the context of Nagaland's contentious history, arguing that Ao's fiction represents terror and insurgency while using shared communal memory and everyday life to move beyond the bondage of terror, thereby sidelining the material fact that this everyday routine exercise to forget is also conditioned. Rai and Tripathi argue that Ao rises above the stereotypical reading of Northeastern literature as preoccupied with violence and terror by drawing on Naga historical consciousness, myth, and storytelling to redeem the Naga identity from turmoil. These approaches tend to treat the landscape as a backdrop to human violence, and the Naga women as the survivors who win the trauma through a routine life of intimacy with nature. Even ecological scholarship, such as Brahma's ecocritical study of nature and identity, and Sangita Patil's argument which moves towards eco-humanism leaves behind a gap to be fulfilled as they do not interrogate women's ecological relationship through a material lens. These studies have not brought the trauma-centred and the ecological readings of the collection together to ask how gendered ecological experience is produced within a militarised landscape.

Although these critical studies have largely enriched the understanding of Northeast Indian women's fiction, several limitations remain apparent. These scholarships largely retain the women-nature relationship as a foundational assumption made by classic ecofeminism, rather than studying it as an analytical problem. Women, in such a landscape, are consistently described as custodians, preservers, or nurturers of the ecological world, while relatively less attention is devoted to interrogating as to how this woman-nature identity is materially, historically, culturally, and politically produced. As a consequence, Plumwood's question, as to how women and nature came to be allied in the first place, remains sufficiently underexplored within the discourse of Northeast Indian literary criticism.

6. Theoretical Framework

The present study is situated within the premises of contemporary ecofeminist discourse while simultaneously seeking to depart from its very essentialist assumptions. Ecofeminism has undoubtedly contributed to the exposure of the interconnected domination of women and nature, but in doing so, it leaves behind a general assumption that women's relationship with nature is innate, universal and biologically

predetermined. This study steps into view with a de-essentialised ecofeminist framework by bringing anti-essentialist ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist geopolitics, and indigenous ecological epistemologies into critical dialogue. It then proceeds from the premise that the women-nature relationship is neither a biologically determined role nor an innate feminine quality. It, however, does not reject the ecological relations in its process, but rather reconceptualises the nexus as a historically, relationally and contextually produced formation, instead of attributing it as a biological condition. Consequently, the study assumes the relationship between women and nature as the very object of critical inquiry, rather than assuming it as a point of departure. Similarly, the study does not reject ecofeminism, but instead adopts its critique of domination to further investigate how the conceptual foundations of the women-nature relationship has often been constructed. In doing so, the study is primarily informed by Val Plumwood's critique of dualism and essentialism, Carolyn Merchant's historical understanding of gender and environment, and Greta Gaard's anti-essentialist reformulation of ecofeminism. These theoretical perspectives in a combined manner allows the study to decipher that the often-appeared natural relationship is in fact produced through historically and materially influenced structures. This analytical concern therefore shifts the romanticised notion of feminine affinity to the lived processes through which women become associated with nature. This study, however, understands that Northeast Indian women's fiction is a diverse archive of ecological experiences which cannot be analysed sufficiently with questioning essentialism alone. It therefore addresses the question that a woman's relationship with nature is driven by a force beyond her biology. It is addressed by adopting the framework of feminist environmentalism as its second conceptual foundation. Following the footsteps of Bina Agarwal, it understands that women's ecological relationships emerge from their material engagements with land, labour, property and survival. Such a theoretical approach enables the study to interrogate how the indigenous ecological consciousness emerges from the lived material realities, while simultaneously acknowledging that these realities are shared by an intersection of gender, class, caste, race, ethnicity and community. This study also acknowledges as to how material conditions alone are insufficient to fully account for the ecological worlds as represented in the selected corpus. The ecological landscape including the forests, rivers, hills, ancestral lands and villages, which consistently form the narratives of Northeast Indian women's fiction, function as more than mere physical backdrops and as living spaces that shape their identity, memory and ecological knowledge. The study therefore adopts a framework of relational understanding of ecology through Tim Ingold. His perspective allows the study to approach ecological subjectivities as continually constituted through relationships with ecological landscape. Ingold's understanding of dwelling helps in shaping the idea that ecological identities are indebted to lived intersections rather than biological essence. This relational understanding of ecology is furthered by a reconsideration of indigenous ecological knowledge, as a response to the selected texts. It also follows the feminist geopolitics of Jennifer Hyndman and Lorraine Dowler, which locates militarisation in the body and everyday space. The study then moves beyond the notion of approaching indigenous communities as fixed archives of ancient ecological wisdom. It rather seeks to recognise that indigenous ecological knowledge is a process which is constantly negotiated through historical, cultural and political dynamics. Jonathan Clappertons's critique of static ecological representations of indigenous ecological knowledge provides an important conceptual basis for this position. It allows to understand that such indigenous ecological knowledge needs to be examined through the intertwined concerns of land ownership, gendered authority, and political resistance. The framework also recognises that women's ecological experiences, particularly those of the Northeast India in this study, cannot be examined through gender alone. It thus rejects the universalisation of women's ecological experiences for recognising that gender cannot exist in isolation as an analytical category. Here, it

undertakes Patrice DiQuinzio's argument that gender needs to be understood through multiple intersecting structures of identity and power. Together, these perspectives allow the study to decipher that the assumed natural relationship is in fact produced through historically and materially influenced structures, shifting attention from a romanticised notion of feminine affinity to the lived processes through which women become associated with nature. As taken together, these theoretical positions act as interconnected analytical tools. Within this framework, the selected stories are given a space to be investigated as distinct historical, political and cultural sites. By thus shifting the analytical attention from a presumed existence of the women-nature relationship to the broader processes through which their identities are produced, negotiated and transformed, this present study aims to develop a de-essentialised understanding of ecological relations itself.

7. Analysis

Temsula Ao, in her narratives, challenges the classic ecofeminist assumption that a woman's relationship with the land emerges from an innate biological affinity with nature. As opposed to this understanding, her story "The Last Song" appears to be a concrete example. Ao's character called Libeni, a widow, and her attachment to her field is shown to be emerging out of material circumstances, such as her widowhood and a mode of survival, instead of being a product of her biological sex. Following her husband's death the narrator describes her life as "a lonely struggle for the mother, trying to cultivate a field and bring up a small child on her own" (Ao, 2006, p. 30). It is also important to note that her daughter Apenyo was "only nine months" when her father died (p. 30). The field, therefore, becomes their source of survival as well as their ground of protection because they did not have a "man to protect and look after them" (p. 30). In no way this affinity between the two women and their field can be romanticised as a site of instinctive feminine communion with nature. Letting herself out into the natural environment becomes, for Libeni, a necessity. This distinction becomes particularly relevant when read alongside Val Plumwood's warning against the blind assimilation of women with nature that it merely replaces one stereotype with another (Plumwood, 1993, p. 19). Moreover, Libeni's condition can be read through Bina Agarwal's materialist "feminist environmentalism" more concretely because Agarwal here locates women's ecological experiences through a gendered stream of production, reproduction, labour, and resource distribution (Agarwal, 1996, p. 119). It is thereby depicted that Libeni's closeness to nature is the condition of her survival, and never an expression of feminine essence. As Agarwal quotes, "An intensifying struggle for survival…highlights the material basis for this link" (p. 119).

Ecofeminist scholarship has time and again interpreted the natural landscape as a passive background that agrees with the women it bears. Ao's representation of this landscape, however, unsettles any such conception of nature as an apolitical backdrop to the existence of women. Tim Ingold's understanding of landscape becomes especially relevant here. He describes the landscape as "an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives of past generations who have dwelt within it" (Ingold, 1993, p. 152). In "The Last Song", this very landscape bears the marks of history with its material traces of violence against women. Militarisation becomes a solid context here as the earth holds the bodies of women killed by soldiers. The graves of Apenyo and her mother Libeni, victims of rape, are buried in that land without headstones at the edge of the graveyard. Their graves are described by the narrator as "grassy knolls" that the "earth may one day swallow them up or rip them open to reveal the charred bones" (Ao, 2006, p. 36). The landscape then acquires a testimonial function as it refuses to allow the violence inscribed upon the women to disappear entirely. Here, reading this context alongside Jennifer Hyndman's "feminist geopolitics" which brings

geopolitical violence into relation with bodies, everyday spaces, and lived experiences, Ao's landscape can be understood as a site where the effects of militarisation becomes materially and spatially visible (Hyndman, 2001, p. 1). The graves of Apenyo and her mother thus identifies the large-scale political violence within the intimate geography of the Naga village. However, Ao's evocation of a 'living' earth cannot be mistaken for a return to the essentialist ecofeminist assumption that merely links women with nature. This can be evidently identified in another story called "A New Chapter", where the narrator describes how "the core of the earth had changed forever in the last decade and they had no choice but to turn to her ravaged body, to hurt her some more and extract whatever she could yield to them from her depleted resources" (Ao, 2006, p. 112). The feminised earth therefore is a wounded body subjected to violence.

Furthermore, Ao depicts a militarisation of the landscape too in order to complicate the woman-nature relationship by showing how militarised violence not only affects women and their bodies but also that it affects the material infrastructures through which a community sustains its relationship with the land. In "The Last Song" again, the soldiers attack the granaries and the houses. This destruction of the granaries highlights how militarisation can disrupt the ecological as well as economic infrastructure of the village community. The narrator describes how "Elsewhere in the village, the granaries were the first to go up in flames. The wind carried burning chunks from these structures and scattered them amidst the clusters of houses, which too burnt to the ground" (Ao, 2006, p. 34). This highly resonates with the framework's understanding of indigenous ecological knowledge as tied to land, livelihood, and survival. Jonathan Clapperton's caution against treating indigenous ecological relations as detached from structures of power becomes especially relevant here. Even further, the wind becomes an agent of destruction instead of a romanticised natural force. Here, it can be seen how Ao refuses an encouraging image of nature as a feminised refuge. She instead produces a politically vulnerable landscape because the ecological and economic life sustained within it are vulnerable. As Plumwood reminds, "nature must be seen as a political rather than a descriptive category" (p. 3). With this, Ao further demonstrates how the gender-nature nexus must be first read through histories of labour, livelihood, power and violence without assuming a natural affinity.

In "A New Chapter", Ao further unsettles this assumption through the figure of Merenla, another widow. Here, Merenla's relationship with the land is situated in a twin material demand of livelihood and survival again. As Ao writes, "This woman was a widow with two small children" and since "there was no man in the family", Merenla came to have her "field of vegetables which became her sole means of earning a livelihood" (p. 114). Ao further mentions how she came to "rear pigs as well" (p. 114). Merenla here develops an interdependent relationship in which agricultural and animal production sustains one another. This relationship with the land is entirely material as the vegetables feed the pigs and the pigs manure the vegetables, which in turn helps Merenla in sustaining her household. This reciprocity is an outcome of Merenla's practical management of limited resources and in no way depicts a spiritual or biological communion between women and nature. This material dimension is again central to Bina Agarwal's "feminist environmentalism" as she stresses on how women's conditioned day-to-day intimacy with natural resources and productive labour fosters ecological knowledge rather than being a product of essential feminist consciousness (p. 119). Similarly, Merenla's ecological knowledge is a result of her daily labour and her need to support her sons, instead of being a feminine quality stemming from an innate feminine closeness to nature.

Merenla's relationship with the land is further complicated by Ao by placing her ecological labour within an economy as shaped by militarisation. Her vegetable field and piggery provide her with a degree of self-reliance but this autonomy is disrupted by forces beyond her control. The narrator notes how "one day a gang of armed men had entered their village and taken away large quantities of rice and other foodstuff from several houses in the village including livestock like goats and pigs, her prize sow being the biggest among them" (Ao, 2006, p. 120). Greta Gaard's ecofeminist framework here offers an understanding of how the exploitation of ecological resources should be questioned alongside an intersection of gendered and political domination, thereby exposing the "linked oppressions of gender, ecology, and nature" (p. 28). Her vulnerability is further intensified by her dependence on a "distant cousin" named Nungsang, whose contractor network abuses her agricultural produce into "fraudulent" army supply schemes (Ao, 2006, p. 114). By doing so, Nungsang incorporates her labour into the very structures of militarised commerce that destabilise her livelihood. Clapperton's argument that indigenous ecological knowledge should be read alongside the aspects of land ownership, gendered authority, and political resistance becomes especially relevant here. It is because, Merenla's practical knowledge of land and production does not automatically translate into a control over the resources her labour produces. This can therefore be understood as an evidence of how women's ecological experience in this narrative is constrained by militarisation, thereby making the women-land relationship a sight of dispossession.

In another story, "The Jungle Major", Ao introduces the character of Khatila, the wife of Punaba. Here, Ao locates militarisation within the ordinary spaces through which Khatila's day-to-day life revolves around. The narrator quotes: "Khatila cultivated a small field on the outskirts of the village and grew some vegetables in her kitchen garden" (Ao, 2006, p. 11). However, this very field and the kitchen garden exist within a geopolitical landscape marked by conflict. This becomes particularly relevant through Lorraine Dowler's banality of militarisation which, according to her, is "furtively present in our everyday spaces" (p. 490). Dowler argues how the process of militarisation, like in Khatila's case, transcends the larger political landscape into the intimate spaces of the home as well as the body. Because Punaba joins the underground rebel army, Khatila's house becomes a vulnerable viewpoint where the distinction between the 'military' and the 'domestic' begins to collapse.

This is furthered when Khatila uses her household as an instrument of resistance to protect her husband from the soldiers. She tactfully mobilises the material resources in her house to manipulate the soldiers' perception: "she smeared his face, hands and feet with ash from the hearth, hid his sandals, ruffled his hair" subsequently making him look like a servant (Ao, 2006, p. 14). She then begins "loading the water-carrying basket with empty containers and showering more abuses at the hapless servant" (p. 14). The significance of this scene lies in Khatila's presence of mind in transforming the ordinary domestic materials into resources that could help in negotiating the militarised authority and in her husband's escape. This re-iterates Hyndman's feminist geopolitics again as it culminates the questions of mobility, embodiment, and geopolitical power with the intimate spaces of everyday life. Here, Khatila's resistance emerges from the very gendered practices that envelops her day-to-day life, thereby highlighting that a woman's ecological stance is situated, embodied, and politically driven.

Patrice DiQuinzio argues that gender must be theorised through "particularized, localized accounts" instead of assuming universal narratives (p. 11). Such an approach is relevant in reading the story of Jemtila, the wife of Satemba, in "The Curfew Man". Being the family's sole earner, Jemtila's experience of gender is situated within the specific socio-political as well as material conditions of her household. She worked as

a maid in the household of a "Sub-Divisional Officer" who was "expecting their first baby" (Ao, 2006, p. 40); while her husband, an injured former constable is appointed as an informer to the S.D.O. The narrator here explicitly locates Satemba's decision within the gendered economy of the household, of what he identifies as his "male pride": "it was the first offer of a job that he had got…he was already beginning to feel uneasy about the fact that it was Jemtila who was the earning member of the family" (Ao, 2006, p. 41). Carolyn Merchant identifies that "Women's access to resources to fulfil basic needs may come into direct conflict with male roles in the market economy" (p. 1118). This can be situated alongside the narrative of Jemtila and Satemba too. In fear of losing his foothold as the 'man' in the society and his family, Satemba agrees to a job that might hamper with his family's safety. Since it is through Jemtila again that Satemba receives this employment, therefore, it can be understood that her employment too is consequently not separate from the structures of surveillance and coercion. Jemtila's subjectivity then is weighed in relation to the concrete economic relations of the household rather than through an abstract category of being a 'woman'. Her experience narrates how gender is lived through specific material arrangements like who earns, who depends upon whom, and whose material labour is accepted within the household. Beena Agarwal then rightfully claims that a woman's experience cannot be separated from her material reality. Her framework that a woman's position is organised through her gender, labour, production, reproduction and access to resources, rightfully aligns to illuminate Jemtila's position.

Val Plumwood cautions that "if we think that the fact of being female guarantees that we are automatically provided with an ecological consciousness and can do no wrong to nature or to one another, we are going to be badly disappointed" (p. 10). This becomes significant in understanding the subject position and complexity of Jemtila, particularly because she refuses to assume that women's resistance stems from their being female. Jemtila's reaction to Satemba's second knee injury, which effectively removes him from his job as an informer, becomes particularly relevant. The narrator notes how she feels "unusually light-hearted and free" because she recognises that the injury has released her husband from what the narrative describes as "a sinister bondage" (Ao, 2006, p. 45). Since her relief is directly connected to her husband's physical incapacitation, Jemtila's response may initially appear to be morally unsettling. However, it is important to understand that Jemtila's agency is situated as it emerges from her material knowledge of her family's economic condition, her husband's wounded masculinity, and the coercive structure within which he has been employed. Jemtila's response, therefore, cannot be understood through a universalised conception of women as biologically nurturing or caring. Ao thus offers a de-essentialised representation of women's agency where Jemtila's position is a product of lived conditions rather than a manifestation of an essential feminine disposition.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Ao's *These Hills Called Home* does not celebrate women as biologically closer to nature. Through the selected stories, it shows how women's ecological experiences are produced through an intersection of widowhood, gendered labour, resource management, restricted mobility, political violence, and cultural memory. By bringing anti-essentialist ecofeminism into dialogue with feminist geopolitics and relational theories of landscape, the study concludes that ecological knowledge is materially acquired and politically constrained, thereby challenging both trauma-centred readings that overlook the environmental dimensions of conflict and essentialist readings that romanticise indigenous women as natural ecological custodians.

Conflict of Interest: *The author declares no conflict of interest.*

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