

An Ecofeminist Reading of Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*

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Throughout the ages Nature and literature have shared a close relationship in the works of poets and writers across cultures. Literature is enriched with the depiction of natural sights and imagery, which not only illustrate human emotions and feelings for the environment, but also illustrate human attitude and concern towards it. Nature, much like women, have been idolized at times and also exploited profusely. And in both of these instances the idolizer as well as the exploiter is the patriarch! Surprisingly enough, the patriarch takes it as his prerogative to subjugated both nature and women so as to make his ends meet, and to justify his patriarchal ideology. Temsula Ao's touching description of human life and human condition are set in the backdrop of the lush green forest of North-east India. This paper is an attempt to unveil the hidden but intricate relationship between nature and women in her short story collection, *Laburnum For My Head*.

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society. (*New Woman/New Earth*, Rosemary Ruether, 1975, 204)

Ecofeminism is the social movement that regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected. Just as there is not one feminism, there is not one ecofeminism. The basic point that all ecological feminists defend is that environment is a feminist issue, that there is an important connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature, and the understanding of which is crucial to feminism, environmentalism, and environmental philosophy. More recently, ecofeminist theorists have extended their analyses to consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature (including animals), and also racism and social inequalities. Consequently it is now better understood as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature.

All ecofeminist critics try to make visible the connections between women and nature, and dismantle them where they are harmful to women and nature. Many kind of connections between nature and women have been identified by ecofeminists, and so we have different schools of ecofeminist thought. Some ecofeminist are of the view that the connection between women and nature are historical or casual. Critics like Riane Eisler describes the time before nomadic invasions as a "matrifocal, matrilineal, peaceful agrarian era." Still some others argue that the scientific development of the sixteenth and the seventeenth century were guided by a reductionist worldview which sanctioned the exploitation of nature, unchecked commercial and industrial expansion, and the subordination of women. Ecofeminist also identify conceptual connections between women and nature subordination. In the male-biased world woman and nature are often constructed through value dualism in disjunctive pair of words – reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, human/nature, and man/woman – where the two words of each pair are seen as oppositional rather than complementary. And in this dichotomy, reason, mind, culture, human (i.e. male), and man are considered superior to

emotion, body, nature, woman. Some other ecofeminists have even explored the symbolic devaluation of women and nature that appears in religion, theology, art and literature. Some theorist focus on language, particularly the symbolic connections between sexist and naturalist language, i.e., language that inferiorizes women and nonhuman nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature. As for instance, animal terms (bitch, cow, serpent, bird-brain, etc.) for woman; and female and sexual terms (rapped, mastered, conquered, mined, etc) for nature. There are many more theoretical, ethical, political connections between woman and nature on which various ecofeminists positions stand. No matter whatever the differences are, all ecofeminist theorists delve on the connections between women and nature, claiming that their understanding is necessary for adequate feminism and environmental criticism.

As a literary approach, ecocriticism provides a reliable frame or mechanism to analyze cultural or literary texts which are directly or indirectly concerned with ecological concerns and contexts. It also looks at the depiction of natural sights and landscapes along with people's attitudes and attention towards nature, whether favourable or unfavourable. It negotiates between literature and ecology. Ecocriticism as a literary theory is growing since 1990's in America and Europe chiefly. However, its seeds can be found as early as Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) and Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975). Cheryll Glotfelty simply defines 'ecocriticism' as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment ... takes an earth centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty, 1996 : xviii). The birth of the term 'ecocriticism' is however attributed to US critic William Rueckrt's essay "Literature and Ecology : An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). By 'ecocriticism', he means the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.

Temsula Ao is one of the rising women writers of Northeast India. Her poems, short stories and fictions are set in the lush green forest and hills of the north-east India. She writes about her own people, their emotions and her own traditions and belief (Naga tradition). Her short story collection, *Laburnum for My Head*, beautifully depicts a deep understanding of the human condition and illustrates different facets of ordinary men and women's life. Ao successfully presents women as they are engaged in complex and difficult social and psychological problems. An analysis of the women characters of her stories reveals the strength of women in different human situations. She delineates them with their variegated swings of mood, the ebb and flow of joy and despair. We also get an insight into their feelings perceived and desires suppressed. The analysis of her women characters would remain incomplete if we fail to realize how intimately they are integrated with nature. If in some story nature/ecology is a co-sufferer with women in the patriarchal order, then at other instance it is an objectification of her untold joys and sorrows or even in some other it is something capable of giving a woman a sense of immortality.

The first story of this collection, "Laburnum for My Head" at the first reading may seem as a strange obsession of a woman, called Lentina, for laburnum flowers. Unable to successfully grow a laburnum plant on her garden during her lifetime, she wants to have one over her grave!

Standing beyond the southernmost corner of the vast expanse of the old cemetery – dotted with concrete vanities, both ornate and simple – the humble Indian laburnum bush erupts in glory; with its blossoms of yellow mellow beauty. (*Laburnum for my Head*, Temsula Ao, pg. 1)

Lentina's longing for this beauty of nature can be read as her defiance of the patriarchal set up of the society. Her husband was a respected and prominent member of the society and so his funeral services were long and elaborate. She could envisage that he would surely be

given a 'grandiose headstone' over his 'fresh grave'. Standing amidst the innumerable tombstones surrounding her husband's grave, she pondered on "man's puny attempts to defy death; as if erecting these memorials would bring the dead back to life." But these concrete structures, bearing the name of the dead, instead of being the 'permanent' embodiment of spent life, are forgotten and recalled occasionally; the names inscribed on them sometimes read only as "incidental pastime".

Each tombstone in the cemetery proudly possesses the name of the deceased human. But the woman, Lentina, wants the "plots ...designated by Numbers only", and no names. As if trying to assert that names are only social constructs imposed on human after birth, and therefore should be removed with death. Lentina frees herself from this social construct by having just a laburnum over her grave. By choosing her grave-site herself before death and denying the 'already embarked [space] beside my master [her husband]', she gets free from the patriarchal hold. Very interestingly, she is even out of the male-controlled economic setup of the society; as she is heard retorting her sons and daughter-in-laws "I have not spent anyone else's money...you need not worry about any headstone for me." With her liberation she also wants to liberate nature from the cruelties of man – "This consecrated ground has thus become choked with the specimens of human conceit" – and so the new cemetery only has "flowering trees and not headstones ... erected on the gravesites", which bestow "an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality."

The laburnum flowers appealed to Lentina because of their beauty and also because she 'attributed humility' to their gesture of hanging their heads earthward; and was what she called the 'femininity' of these flowers. So, at last women and humble nature are seen to integrate themselves into some extraordinary permanence, 'something extraordinary', which displays its glory of buttery-yellow splendor every May!

The second story of this collection, "Death of a Hunter", gives yet another different dimension to the woman-nature relationship. Here, the woman, Tangchetla, is a responsible wife – understanding, caring and supportive. Her husband, Imchanok, is a famous hunter. He has to his credit many dangerous hunting expeditions. His latest target was a "vicious boar which had been devastating the rich paddies of the village". Before it, he had killed a rogue elephant, which had destroyed several acres of farmland, which was an order from the government. After killing the elephant, he had felt some remorse in his heart looking at the "unblinking, unseeing eye of his adversary" as if "the dying animal were trying to convey some message to his destroyer which remained frozen in time...". Least did he realized that he and his fellow friends could have been responsible for the crazy activities of the elephant. Clearing off new areas for harvest each year had affected the forest cover, which had served as ecological home of the elephants for centuries. This is very evident from the fact that he had to forage into the 'deep jungle' to find and kill the elephant. Also when he last saw the elephant alive in the deep forest, he was 'calm and serene'. Here, men's selfishness in securing his materialistic interests by means of perpetuating false alibis, and thereby justifying his cruel measures/deeds against nature is strongly suggested. Even though the man-elephant conflict has become a major cause of concern for those communities inhabiting the fringe areas, the blame rests with men and men alone. But despite such a realization, exterminations of this mammoth species are still undertaken with the government's consent. The fact that 'culture' (man-made) ought to be prioritized over 'nature' (both flora and fauna) has been the dominant narrative from the Enlightenment era. The coming of modernity with its attendant (empiricist and after that capitalist) ideology has widened the gulf even more. In such a fraught scenario, the drive to possess more and more material things is projected to be the most 'logical' and 'natural' end. This would, of course, be at the cost of undermining nature, and alibis of threat perceptions from wild, untamed, powerful creatures dwelling

within it that needs to be controlled/tamed/exterminated, are part of the grand narrative of the empiricist discourse.

The above idea is clearly illustrated in another instance when he had killed the leader of a group of monkeys feasting on his harvested paddy. Imchanok, by killing the monkey had killed the protector of the monkey group; and the patriarch in him could only shout to the dead monkey thus:

So, you wanted to destroy me by stealing my paddy, did you?
Look at you now. You scared and bullied my womenfolk;
where are yours now? Another male will take them over while I
cut up and feed my people with your flesh. (*Laburnum for my
Head*, Temsula Ao, pg. 32)

In the above encounters Imchanok imagined he was at “the centre of the eternal contest between man and animal for domination over land”. Here, he felt his role as the provider for and the protector of his family was threatened and so he unhesitatingly killed his opponent, thinking the least about the opponent—that he too might be responsible for his own family. The ‘will to power’ over nature, dominating/subjugating it with force and then justifying such acts through specious arguments, happens to be the *modus operandi* of how patriarchy, and in turn anthropocentrism, functions. It is by such means that it has been able to dominate over women over centuries, and also over nature. But the hollow claims of such a power-driven discourse is laid bare in certain vulnerable moments when the ‘subject/s’ begin to realize the ideological (patriarchal) ‘subjection’ they have been ‘subjected’ to. In such vulnerable moments, the mask/s (of masculinity) slips off, and the reality exposed.

In this story, this element is starkly evident in Imchanok’s last expedition of killing a boar. This time too he had ventured into the deep haunted forest to kill the boar. He had accomplished his job of protecting his people. But he trembled with the realization that “it looked like a boar but no earthly boar could be this big or so black”. The shock was strong enough to make him recoil from the very world where he was the patriarch! He whimpered in his wife’s arms, “I am afraid, woman ...”. It seems that only in the man/woman dichotomy created by man himself does he always stand superior and noble. At last it was Tangchetla only who supported and encouraged him to admit to his guilt and even repent for it. Women are not the weaker or lesser self who always needs to be cared to and provided for. However, patriarchy tries to attribute the ‘weaker’ side of human nature to women alone, dismissing women as the inferior, second sex. The fact that men might also display symptoms of ‘weakness’ is never acknowledged. Imchanok’s fear and contrition at the end signifies his awareness of the constructed notions (of patriarchy) he was interpellated into, on account of which he had tried to tame both woman (his wife) and nature (elephant, monkey, boar) in the most unethical terms.

“Three Women” is the story of Martha, her mother Medemla and her grandmother, Lipoktula. A single truth about Lipoktula’s past affects the life and story of all these three women who represent three different generations. Medemla falls in love with a boy called Imsutemjen, son of Merensashi. And when she lets her mother know these details through a letter, the mother’s world is turned upside down. This is because she cannot let this relationship materialize into marriage. It is because of her hidden past – that Medemla was her and Merensashi’s daughter out of wedlock. The impending marriage would imply an incestuous relationship and Lipoktula somehow succeeds to break it up without the outer world knowing the real cause. Medemla boldly accepts the rejection of her lover but remains unmarried. Martha is her daughter by adoption.

By using the first person narrative in this story, Temsula Ao has in fact thrown open before us the thoughts and feelings of women. In our society a man can be sexually aggressive, he can desire for a woman’s body whenever he wants; but women’s sexual

desires needs to be submissive and entertained only when the male wants! Nobody realizes that sexual desire and its pleasure are a part of men and women's very nature. Lipoktula as an old woman recounts "the inevitable force that draws a woman towards another man". Lipoktula's husband was away on a job and it was that force of nature which made her submit to Merensashi. And this submission was possible only in nature's lap (in the crop field) not in the social construct made by men (i.e. at home). She does not regret that moment, 'the demanding power of such love', throughout her life except that because of her hidden past, Medemla had to remain deprived of true love (in the sense that she had 'never felt **that way** to Imsu' because nature would not permit them), and the pleasurable pains of motherhood which she and Martha experienced. Lipoktula thus dismantles the patriarchal subjugation of women imposed by men on women in sex specific ways, and steps forward to lose herself in the mystifying experience of nature.

In "A Simple Question", Imdongla – an illiterate village woman – rattles an army officer by her simple question and forces him to set her husband free. It is the story of a village torn between the demands of the underground and those of the government. Imdongla's husband was the gaonburah, and so there was much pressure on him from both sides. He and his fellows have always submitted to the demands of the underground and kept them secret from the government.

But as the years went by, the demands grew, and reluctance or protest was met with by, the severe beatings, not only of the person involved but of the gaonburahs and the elders as well. **Several times it was Imdongla's presence of mind which had saved Tekaba from being beaten.** (*Laburnum for my Head*, Temsula Ao, pg. 82) [bold emphasis mine]

Imdongla had always realized the pressure on her husband and had always supported him in the best possible way. There was a double demand from the underground in a very bad year, and Tekaba and the village elders got panicked. When Imdongla tried to interrupt with her wise counsel, Tekaba tried to hush her, "Keep quiet, woman, you know nothing". But later we find this woman, who knows nothing (except household chores and field work), is found to rescue her husband from the punishment of the military for his cooperation to the underworld. She could jerk the conscience of the military officer with the simple question, "What do you want from us?" Thus we find a simple woman acting bravely in situations where male failed. She was able to negotiate the gap between the male world of underground hiding themselves in nature's lap and the socially constructed male world with settlements like village and military camps!

Another epitome of woman is the young girl in "Sonny", who loses her lover in his fight for the motherland. The young girl's lover Sonny had abandoned her in order to join a batch of recruits being trained in China. This mission of freedom was somehow a mirage, as she recounts later:

What neither of us had understood at that time was that Sonny was entering a twilight zone in the struggle for freedom where one could not identify the real enemy anymore because the conflict was no longer only of armed resistance against an identifiable adversary. It had now also become an ideological battlefield within the resistance movement itself, posing new dangers from fellow national workers supposedly pursuing a common goal. (*Laburnum for my Head*, Temsula Ao, pg. 91)

So in the name of the 'motherland', the men were fighting in an ideological battlefield, constructed out of men's ideologies itself. The girl was not allowed to interfere in his thoughts or his decisions in this regard. The absence that she felt for her lover can be realized

in the beautiful nature simile: “A void settled in my heart as vast as the wide expanse of the woods I had just left out there.” Sonny’s death too could not materialize his dream because he was caught in a sinister web made by men like him, where in the name of free motherland – where families wouldn’t be separated, women wouldn’t be raped and killed, or men humiliated – they were actually destroying the earth, the Mother Nature and leaving behind women with lifeless hearts. It is worth noting that cartographical demarcations between states/nations are man-made, and are nothing more than (imagined) constructs devised to serve men’s vested interests. Even though certain utopian notions are generated and sustained in order to use/abuse certain vulnerable sections (like Sonny), the truth, ironically, is that motherland or mother nature is most often defiled as well as devastated in the name of protecting or preserving it. It is man’s arrogant zeal to advance notions that are most often ideologically constructed and patriarchally generated that poses severe threats to the Other/s, that includes women as well as nature. Patriarchy enables agency to man alone, and in that sense, both women and nature are either abandoned (like the young girl) or defiled in the name of espousal of ‘greater’ (albeit illusory) causes.

To conclude with, from the above analysis of the different short stories by Temsula Ao we come to realize that with the stereotypes of violence, backwardness and poverty that the Northeastern states and its people face all over India, what is often overlooked are some of the remarkable features of the region, one of the foremost being the wonderfully open presence of women in almost every facet of life and the richness of ecodiversity.

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