

“...for my Head”: (Re)reading Temsula Ao’s *Laburnum for My Head*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to read Temsula Ao’s “Laburnum for my Head” in terms of problematizing the connection between woman and nature and what it means for the city and society. The laburnum, a metaphor for women’s dreams, is a ‘natural’ dream that echoes across cultures and Lentina’s wish for the blossoms- for her ‘head’, drives the action of the story, highlighting its centrality. This strong desire to be a part of nature, in texts such as Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (2007, translated 2015) is a desire that has deep rooted implications not only for the female body but also for the patriarchal society which places women at the edge of the city, towards the forest making her, in Cixous’s terms a watch-bitch or a sphinx, who silently prowls the forest without any sound. It is also indicative of the entrenched patriarchy across cultures that stifles any attempt at individual change as opposed to societal expectations. Ao’s short story is mostly read and celebrated for its depiction of the close connection between woman and nature. This paper attempts to explore how beneath the feminist hailing of the text there is a critical perspective of the position of woman in society and her struggles to achieve what she wants, no matter how miniscule. The paper tries to reach beyond the stereotypes, subversions and resistance latent in the text, highlighting the question of whether this turn to nature works as a means of resistance or reproduces the same patriarchal patterns that it attempts to resist.

Keywords: women, nature, resistance, society.

It is often believed that defining and understanding a woman in terms of language has always been difficult as “woman is said to be ‘outside the Symbolic’: outside Symbolic, that is outside language, the place of the law, excluded from any possible relationship with culture and the cultural order” (Cixous 45-46) and hence more inclined towards the other part of the dialectic, i.e- nature. The correlation of women with nature is almost a cliché now and contemporary feminists resist this essentialism and gendering of ‘mother’ nature even as others keep harping on this ‘unique connection’.

Naga writer Temsula Ao’s 2009 collection of short stories *Laburnum for My Head* is a slender text that includes stories from the Naga hills and the Assam plains, mostly featuring a female in important, if not central roles. Ao’s stories are beautiful in their simplicity, only hint towards the unnamed society of the time and leave the readers to glean their understanding from the action. Critics have pointed out the feminist streak in these stories, with women who play an active role in the action, even as they are surrounded by or serve the needs of patriarchy. From Lentina in the first story to Imchanok’s wife Tangchetla, Martha, Medemla, Lipoktula and Imdongla, women often form a crucial part of the action in the stories. Tangchetla sees the torment of her husband and sets him off on the path of redemption; Medemla and Lipoktula manage to set up an independent life away from stifling patriarchy to bring up Martha and Imdongla raises the thoughtful question that makes the rebel leader not only reflect upon his actions but also free her husband. Further, Medemla is a single mother who dares to raise someone else’s child in a traditional, conservative society.

The first story of the collection is the eponymous - “Laburnum for my Head” which narrates a woman’s innocent wish for the yellow blossoms and the various trials and tribulations to bring about its fulfilment. Ao renders her characters some space to chart out their actions but it is also to be noticed that while Ao’s women try to be active agents of their lives, this agency is also sometimes facilitated by men and used in some stories for supporting/helping the men

around them. That this agency is exercised by Lentina for a plant makes the women-nature connection more glaring and the fact that she meets with so much resistance while trying to fulfill it makes us think beyond the epidermal layer of the story. Lentina does not wish to be a tree outright, at least not explicitly. However, she wishes for the tree to be near her always, even after her death, a fact that Northeastern people believe to be a symbol of reincarnation. This paper attempts to understand the implications of female longings for the natural, more specifically, plants and trees. The female, in wanting to unite with the natural world and turning away from civilisation expresses her repulsion for the same in an act of silent resistance, spelling numerous consequences not only for the female identity but also inherently patriarchal social structures where she survives with limited options.

Laburnum and liberation:

Janis Birkeland in her "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice" says how "women have historically been seen as a part of nature" (18). Lentina, the protagonist of the story, loves the "humble Indian laburnum bush" (Ao 1) and wants to have it in her garden. In relation to Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2015) and Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015), Alix Beeston remarks how "For Kang and Wood's natural women, to become a tree or a rabbit is to stop speaking, and hence to resist—in limited and fateful ways—the visual and verbal systems of signification that prop up androcentric and anthropocentric power" (19). As such, to have a leaning towards nature is to reject language, civilisation and power- all of which are androcentric and pervasive elements of human existence.

This resistance is not easy. In a world where women do not seem to fulfil their desires so easily, Lentina's tiny innocent wish will also face the same fate. She plants the laburnum saplings in her garden, but they are struck by disaster year after year. The first time, her gardener, perhaps a male, weeds them out; then cows eat up her saplings, and finally DDT is sprayed in the third

year. Despite these hindrances, "Lentina's longing for this beauty of nature can be read as her defiance of the patriarchal setup of the society" (Gogoi 2), and this makes her adamant to have them in her garden. People were convinced that she was developing "an unhealthy fetish for laburnum" (Ao 3), and she was openly talked about in the family gatherings, marking her as a senile old woman. Terms like 'fetish', connoting an unhealthy obsession highlight how even a slight deviance is analyzed and judged. Kim Yeong-Hye, in *The Vegetarian* faced similar remarks about going against nature and her father force-fed her meat to maintain the 'normal'. This rumor-mongering is a feature of any woman who dares to make a firm individual choice. Lentina's desire for the laburnum is an eerie reminder of Yeong-Hye, whose eventual fate landed her in the asylum.

However, Lentina is not to be subdued so easily and here lies the resistance of the character. The description of the plant throughout the text echoes the reinforcement of stereotypes that are often associated with women as well as flowers- "She had always admired these yellow flowers for what she thought was their femininity; they were not brazen like the gulmohars with their orange and dark pink blossoms. The way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture" (Ao 2). This attribution of conventional feminine qualities to the laburnum flowers is just a glimpse of the entrenched patriarchy that women internalise. Women, like the laburnum flowers, are applauded for their humility and called out for their brazenness. Lentina perhaps identifies herself with the flower, even as her spirit is unconventional. At the funeral ceremony of her husband, she insists on following the men to the graveyard- "some impulse urged her to join them" (Ao 4), defying the traditional ways. This "intense yearning" (Ao 3) is also mentioned earlier in the text, indicating a deep connection and feeling- not only towards nature but also towards her own inner desires. At her husband's funeral, she observes the headstones all around her and reflects on the vanity of human beings. It is here that the idea dawns upon her- to have

a laburnum bush over her grave instead of a gravestone. The thought of this delights her so much as to make her smile in the sombre surroundings. It is only when her smile is noticed by a relative that she goes back to looking "appropriately bereaved" (Ao 4), terms which are reminders of social codes and boundaries.

After her failed attempts at growing a laburnum plant and open derision by her family members, she has to give up her dream- until the death of her husband. This removal of immediate patriarchal authority seems to free Lentina as she blossoms into a new person. She then assumes the role of the head of her family and it is only then that she renews her desire for the blossoms, this time on her grave. It is to be noted that Lentina's husband was given a grand funeral as he was a "prominent member of society" (Ao 4)-indicating her influential position and yet her privilege could not get her the blossoms. It seems that "power, desire, speaking, pleasure, none of these is for woman" (Cixous 45).

Even after she makes up her mind, she has to carry out the plan secretly. She decides to buy a plot of land, but needs help as she cannot move freely on her own. She chooses Mapu, her old, male driver and on the pretext of visiting her husband's grave, picks out a corner spot for herself. The driver is befuddled and wonders about what the "young masters said about madam losing her mind" (Ao 6), providing another hint of the madwoman stereotype. He is confused when she picks up a spot for her grave and exclaims- "but madam, your place is already earmarked beside my master!" (Ao 6) to which Lentina pays no heed, hinting at the bold nature of her action as opposed to social expectations. This time however, fate seems to submit to her will and she acquires a piece of land, albeit mediated by traces of her late husband- tips about asset acquisition and his friend's son Khalong from whom she acquires the land. After buying the land, she is left to negotiate with the town authorities and the sons are made aware of their mother's "crazy plan" (Ao 10). They, however, do not put up much objection, and Lentina tactfully quells their wives. Left to deal with the town authority, we see a woman present her

conditions to the authoritative, perhaps all-male, self-important council. Through her wit and intelligence, Lentina manages to convince them and secures the desired lot for her grave, fulfilling her long-awaited dream. This important scene, where she talks to the town council, can be seen as representative of a woman's speech, not to mention one that holds power. Unlike Young-Hye in Kang's text, who chooses to go silent as a means of protest, Lentina chooses language and the power that comes with it.

After her success, Lentina feels a "fatigue that comes after a sustained effort and achieving a long-cherished dream" (Ao 14), showing how she invested all of her energy into the endeavour. Nonetheless, it is her desire to see the laburnums bloom that provides her with a will to live. This proves her tenacity in a world where individual expectations often come into conflict with societal ones. It is only when she sees her dear laburnum bushes bloom that she closes her eyes forever in peace. All this struggle for a plant may seem silly but it is sufficient to indicate what a woman has to undergo to fulfill her desires, even a simple one as having a plant. The title of the story "Laburnum for my Head" serves as a pause, a reflection on how the laburnum becomes a metaphor for will, choice, perhaps even desire and its fulfilment. Lentina desperately wants the little yellow blossoms for her 'head', signaling how the plant has become intertwined with her mental health and well-being and her tenacious struggle for the same showcase a courage that echoes with systemic patriarchal structure and resistance against it.

Freedom or extinction?

Lentina dies peacefully but lives on forever in the quiet cemetery where the laburnum bushes bloom with yellow blossoms every May. Further, by putting up a cemetery where flowers bloom instead of crude headstones, Lentina acts against ecological destruction, and this also immediately implies an awareness of the "connection between patriarchal violence against women" (Mies and Shiva14), putting women and nature on one side of the dyad as against

men/culture. As she says when they first bloom- “I felt it in my bones” (Ao 18), she is depicted as having a close relation with nature, which is what people most often recognise and celebrate in Ao’s writing. However, it is a claim that reinforces the “structural division of man and nature, which is seen as analogous to that of man and woman” (Mies and Shiva 5). Lentina closely relates to the ‘humble’ laburnum bush, and this puts a veil on the feminist streak of the story as it ultimately espouses humility for women, to always bend their heads, even in death. This humility does not display the struggle behind the blooming process. Lentina’s desire for a graveyard free of crude headstones and adorned with flowers is an ecofeminist stance- resistance against patriarchal and capitalist power structures and her ultimate success is a metaphorical victory against these structures which exploit the female. However, here arises a paradox that many feminist critics often highlight. By equating women with nature, we bestow them with the stereotypes of nurturer and caregivers of a mostly-male population. As we recognize the violence against both, this essentialism is problematic for its implications. In Kang’s novel, the protagonist has a burning desire to be a tree to get away from the violence of the patriarchal world and her desire is an implication of her ‘innocence’ and nature-consciousness. By drawing a connection between nature and themselves, women try to be “outside the city, at the edge of the city-the city is man, ruled by masculine law” (Cixous 49). She might be compared to what Cixous calls the ““Watch-bitch”, the sphinx” (49) who prowls the forest, sings out but does not speak and utters but little. One is either a silenced watchdog or a threatening, monster-like sphinx which is to be exiled back into nature, if not tamed.

It might inspire one to ask if this form of resistance is good enough- “Does a woman’s (re)turn to nature offer a meaningful route for defying the natural order of masculinist and anthropocentric society? Does evacuating the city mean resisting or recapitulating its law, discovering a utopic space of alterity and otherness or only throwing yourself, with the sphinx, off a cliff?” (Beeston 5) Is silence the only/better method of resistance against these structures?

Is it not an ironic return to the same roles relegated by the latter in the first place? In-hye, Young-Hye's sister in Kang's text reviles the silent woods at the end of the novel as if condemning it for its acceptance of the patriarchal violence. She says how she has "dreams too, you know" (Kang 182) but she does not let herself be pulled in because "surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we?" (Kang 182)- a question that might strike some people as realist and practical but which has undertones of long years of conditioning. It echoes how leaving the city, even if it means one's own extinction, is not a viable long-term solution against the patriarchal structures that have forever espoused and ingrained stereotypes of silence, docility, obedience etc. amongst women, making us wonder if this kind of resistance inevitably ends in reproducing the same patriarchal patterns that it attempts to resist.

The answer to such questions might vary from person to person but that should not blind us from the idea that the turn to nature is in fact, a form of resistance even if it is one of escapism. It is a choice of turning back from the city, towards its edge and the natural world, when one is overcome by the fatigue of it all. It is choosing to have some agency, even that of silence over none. Lentina's defiance, and her success depend on the fact that she manages to realise her dream of a 'natural' cemetery, the keyword being realise. She brings about its fulfillment despite numerous obstacles and her resistance lies in her intent and means- she speaks, plans and delivers. Unlike the implied silence of her former years, she speaks up for what she wants and persists in the means of fulfilling it until she succeeds. Unlike Kang and Wood's novels, Lentina in Ao's story triumphs over her fate and even as her extinction comes, it is only after she has watched her dear laburnums bloom and is assured of their permanence. The last scene in the story depicts a beautiful cemetery filled with flowers and not a bleak, hopeless landscape. It becomes a space free from human vanity and hubris and existing in harmony with nature. It

is a hopeful ending, one that dreams of change, no matter how minuscule and assures us that maybe everything is not lost, after all.

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