

Tracing Ecocritical Consciousness in Temsula Ao's

Laburnum for My Head

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Abstract

Nature is a perennial source of inspiration for creative imagination. Its entire ecosystem is so embedded in human mind that no literary or any other form of creative art can be produced without its semblance. However, in the wake of scientific and technological advancement with talks of environmental hazard, writers have started expressing more openly the need of conservation and existence of clean nature. Temsula Ao, a writer coming from the north-east of India, is a unique voice as a writer of nature. She is writer with immense ecocritical conscious and in her collection of short stories *Laburnum for My Head*, nature is present as a character. To her stories, nature is the same as Malgudi is to R.K. Narayan's writings. In her collection of short stories, she explores the geopolitical and social contexts of Nagaland to understand the interplay between environmental and human conflicts.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Temsula Ao, Literature and Environment, Green Literature, Biocentrism

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of *Laburnum for My Head*, guided by ecocritical frameworks. Key stories—"Laburnum for My Head," "Death of a Hunter," and "Three Women"—are analyzed to identify environmental themes and their connections to human experiences. The analysis draws on Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism and

William Rueckert's ecological approach to literature, supplemented by ecofeminist perspectives to explore gender-nature intersections. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and reviews, provide contextual support. The study also considers the socio-cultural and geopolitical contexts of Nagaland, as depicted in Ao's narratives, to understand the interplay between environmental and human conflicts.

Literature has always been eco-conscious. Writers from all around the world have expressed, though inadvertently in the pre-industrial era, their ecological feelings, their ideas about environment and how human race has been interacting with environment since ages. However, in the 1980s, a wave of conscious exploration and expression of environmental themes started being dealt with in the literary fields. Critics and researchers looked for the ecological themes in Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* and the Indian epic *The Ramayana*. Interestingly, this new and vehement eco-consciousness in literature coincided with talks of threats like environmental degradation, pollution, contamination of earth, and global warming. The debate around environmental hazard gave birth to ecocriticism, which, as Pramod K Nayar writes, "originates in a bio-social context of unrestrained capitalism, excessive exploitation of nature, worrying definitions and shapes of 'development' and environmental hazard" (Nayar 241).

Temsula Ao (1945-2022) was such a writer whose literary imagination was shaped by the contemporary ecocritical discourse. She was one of those writers whose language becomes more powerful when they come to write about nature. She was a distinguished Indian poet, short story writer, and ethnographer from Nagaland, celebrated for her evocative portrayal of Northeast India's culture, history, and human experiences. Born in Jorhat, Assam, she earned her B.A. with distinction from Fazl Ali College, Mokokchung, M.A. in English from Gauhati University, and Ph.D. from North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), where she served as a Professor of English and Dean of the School of Humanities and

Education until her retirement. Honored with the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi Award for English in 2013, Ao's works, including *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*, have been translated into multiple languages, reflecting her global resonance. Her writing blends lyrical simplicity with profound emotional depth, often exploring themes of identity, conflict, and the human condition against the backdrop of Nagaland's lush landscapes and turbulent socio-political history.

Laburnum for My Head: Stories (2009), Ao's second collection of short stories, comprises eight tales set in Nagaland, earning her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013. Published by Penguin Books, the collection captures the vibrant yet troubled lives of the Naga people through various stories. The titular story, "Laburnum for My Head," follows Lentina, a woman obsessed with laburnum flowers, who, unable to grow them in her garden, desires one to bloom over her grave, symbolizing her defiance of patriarchal norms and her bond with nature. Other stories, like "Death of a Hunter," depict a hunter, Imchanok, haunted by his prey's ghost, exploring guilt and redemption, while "The Boy Who Sold an Airfield" portrays Pokenmong's cunning sale of land to unsuspecting villagers, set during post-WWII. Stories such as "The Letter," "A Simple Question," and "Sonny" address the Naga insurgency, humanizing rebels and villagers caught between the Indian army and underground fighters, evoking parallels with conflict zones like Kashmir. "Three Women" weaves an interconnected tale of love and secrets across generations, and "Flight," narrated from a caterpillar's perspective, offers a unique, albeit abrupt, meditation on transformation.

Since we intend to study Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for my Head* from ecocritical perspective, therefore, at this juncture, it becomes important to briefly understand ecocriticism.

The basic definition of ecocriticism has been provided by Cheryll Glotfelty in her book *The Ecocriticism Reader Landmark in Literary Ecology* as "the study of relationship

between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xiv). Thus, according to Glotfelty, the main concern of ecocriticism is to explore and highlight the relationship between literature and our physical environment. It shows how the environment (nature) that includes the Earth, oceans, and world above us, has been mentioned, treated and how it has shaped life in literature. Since the earth is the main constituent of the physical environment, therefore Dr. Suresh Frederick highlights the importance of earth while defining ecocriticism. He writes, “Ecocriticism speaks for the voiceless earth. This approach is earth-centered and all other approaches are ego-centered” (Suresh 21).

The further attempt to define ecocriticism leads us to not only the representation of nature in literature but it also deals with our attitude towards nature and in what term the writers have mentioned it in their literature. In this regard, Pramod K. Nayar writes,

Ecocriticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards ‘nature’ and rhetoric employed when speaking about it (Nayar 242).

Ecocriticism is not only a mode inquiry that solely looks for the representation of nature in literature, it, moreover, motivates us to deal the natural world in soft terms. It pays more attention on ‘nature’ than ‘culture’. It teaches us that we need to shift our worldview, thinking, responses and action from anthropocentrism to eco or biocentrism. It contributes to ecological awareness by urging us to re-read canonical cultural texts. While going deep down to explore eco-consciousness in literary texts, it reads “subtexts of literary works that reveal anthropomorphic, patriarchal and capitalist attitudes towards the non-human, women, nature and landscape” (Nayar 243).

In his book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* Lawrence Buell proposes that a text has environmental

consciousness if “the non-human dimension is an actual presence in the text and not merely a facade — thus implying that human and non-human worlds are integrated ... The human interest is not privileged over everything else” (Buell 7).

The ecocritical framework, as mentioned above, is particularly relevant for analyzing Temsula Ao’s *Laburnum for my Head*, given its rootedness in the lush landscapes of Northeast India. Additionally, ecofeminism, which explores the parallels between the exploitation of nature and women under patriarchal systems, provides a lens to examine the gendered dimensions of Ao’s narratives. Ecofeminism posits that both nature and women are marginalized by anthropocentric and patriarchal structures, a theme resonant in Ao’s depiction of Naga women navigating conflict and tradition. It highlights the gradual, often invisible environmental and social degradation caused by systematic exploitation. These theoretical lenses frame the analysis of Ao’s stories, revealing how they challenge dominant narratives and advocate for ecological and cultural harmony.

Nature as Co-Inhabitant in “Laburnum for My Head”

In the introductory pages of Ao’s book *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007* (2013), the noted critic Prof. J.G.V. Prasad writes:

Northeast Indian literature is deeply rooted in its ecological and cultural landscapes, with writers like Ao highlighting the impact of modernization on nature. The region’s biodiversity, threatened by urbanization and industrialization, forms a critical backdrop to Ao’s stories (xvii).

The titular story, “Laburnum for My Head,” exemplifies Ao’s ecocritical consciousness through the protagonist Lentina’s desire to have laburnum trees planted on her grave instead of a traditional tombstone. Lentina’s fascination with the laburnum tree, described as embodying “femininity and humility” unlike the “garish gulmohars” (2), reflects

a rejection of anthropocentric symbols of human conceit, such as marble tombstones. Her decision to prioritize natural beauty over man-made structures challenges the human-centric tendency to dominate nature. As the narrative states, “This consecrated ground has thus become choked with the specimens of human conceit... But nature has a way of upstaging even the hardest rock and granite edifices fabricated by man” (1).

Lentina’s act of purchasing a burial plot to ensure laburnum blossoms cover her grave signifies a desire for posthumous unity with nature. This aligns with ecocritical principles that advocate for a symbiotic relationship between humans and the environment. Furthermore, Lentina’s defiance of patriarchal Naga customs, such as accompanying her husband’s funeral procession, underscores an ecofeminist perspective, linking environmental stewardship with female agency. The story concludes with this comment of the narrator:

And if you observe carefully, you will be amazed to see that in the entire terrain, there is so far, only one laburnum tree bedecked in its seasonal glory, standing tall over all the other plants, flourishing in perfect co-existence, in an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality (20).

For Lentina, laburnum flowers are the symbolic weapon endowed to her by nature which she can employ to resist man-made structure to be erected at her head after her death. Her actions challenge the anthropocentric and patriarchal will to power over nature, as seen in the story’s critique of human dominance.

Apart from thematic concern, Ao’s titular story “Laburnum for my Head” contains remarkable stylistic beauty of ecocritical consciousness. Ao is a writer of nature both thematically and stylistically. Her pen is at its best when she describes nature, specially gardens, plants, trees, flowers, leaves etc. She is a writer of green literature. One may notice a stark difference between her text which describes nature and the one which describes things

other than nature. For instance we quote lines from the concluding paragraph of the story “Laburnum for my Head”:

And every May, this extraordinary wish is fulfilled when the laburnum tree, planted on her gravesite in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town, burst forth in all its glory of buttery-yellow splendour ... Hibiscus, gardenia, bottle-brush, camellia, oleander and croton bushes of all hues comprise the variety of flowering plants, and at one or two spots you can see some jacaranda trees trying to keep up with the others (22).

Human-Nature Conflict in “Death of a Hunter”

In the next story “Death of a Hunter,” Ao explores the psychological and ecological consequences of human-nature conflicts through the character of Imchanok, a skilled hunter coerced by the government to kill a wild animal. Imchanok’s encounter with his prey, which he perceives as an intelligent being, leads to guilt and haunting visions, symbolizing the disruption of the human-animal bond. “Killing the elephant however was something else. Previously, he, the hunter had been in control all the time and chosen what and when to kill; but it was not so with the huge elephant lying dead before them” (29). His act of offering a tuft of his hair as a prayer for forgiveness reflects a traditional Naga reverence for nature, acknowledging the animal’s agency and the moral implications of its death. “He tore out a tuft of his hair and blew it towards the haunted forest, and without a backward glance retraced his steps towards the village” (39).

The story critiques anthropocentric ideologies that justify the exploitation of nature for human gain. Imchanok’s internal conflict, as he grapples with his role as a provider and protector threatened by the animal, mirrors the broader ecological imbalance caused by

human intervention. Through Imchanok's narrative, Ao advocates for a re-evaluation of human actions that disrupt ecological harmony.

Interconnectedness in "Three Women"

The story "Three Women" illustrates the interconnectedness of human lives and the natural environment through the stories of Lipoktula, Medemla, and Martha. The narrative highlights how environmental and social conditions shape personal and collective identities. The lush Naga landscapes serve as more than a setting; they influence the characters' emotional and psychological states, reflecting the ecocritical principle that physical environments impact human cognition and action. The story of Medemla, who is ostracized for her mixed heritage, parallels the exploitation of natural resources, as both are marginalized by societal structures.

The bond between the women, strengthened by shared experiences of motherhood and loss, mirrors the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. Ao's depiction of the natural world as a source of solace and continuity underscores the need for ecological preservation. The story's emphasis on resilience and recovery aligns with ecocritical calls for action to maintain nature's balance. The narrator states "The three of them just stood there for quite some time; a strange trio, as though enacting a ritualistic affirmation of the power of mother-love to mesh the insecurity of innocence in the magic of an emotionally enlarged truth" (72).

Socio-Political Context and Ecological Awareness

Ao's stories are set against Nagaland's complex socio-political landscape, marked by insurgency and ethnic conflicts. The exploitation of natural resources, such as forests and wildlife, parallels the socio-political marginalization of Naga communities. In stories like "A Simple Question" and "The Letter," Ao highlights how ordinary people, caught between rebels and the Indian army, suffer alongside their environment. The forced taxation for the

“freedom cause” and subsequent punishment by the army reflect a cycle of violence that extends to the natural world, as modernization and conflict disrupt ecological balance.

Ao’s ecological consciousness is thus inseparable from her critique of socio-political structures. By portraying nature as a victim of human conflict, she aligns with ecosocialist perspectives that view environmental and social exploitation as interconnected. Her narratives call for a collective responsibility to protect both cultural and natural heritage, fostering eco-literacy among readers. Thus, she aligns herself with the concluding remarks of Patricia Waugh’s chapter on “Environmentalism and ecocriticism”, “Ecologists set out to reveal the ways in which niches are created, and the chain of dependency that links even the creatures that seem most distant from each other ... so that nature will not be seen only as the space of leisure” (Waugh 541).

Discussion

Temsula Ao’s *Laburnum for My Head* transcends regional boundaries to address universal environmental concerns. The stories challenge anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies, advocating for a harmonious relationship with nature. Lentina’s desire for laburnum flowers, Imchanok’s remorse, and the women’s interconnected lives reflect a deep ecological sensibility rooted in Naga traditions and the broader environmental humanities. Ao’s work aligns with ecocritical goals of promoting ecological literacy and advocating for conservation.

The ecofeminist undertones in Ao’s narratives highlight the parallels between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature, reinforcing the need for inclusive environmental ethics. By situating her stories in Nagaland’s conflict-ridden context, Ao underscores the intersection of ecological and socio-political crises, urging readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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