



Research Paper

Harmonizing Nature and Gender: Exploring Ecofeminism in Temsula Ao's "Laburnum for My Head"

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Abstract:

This study explores Temsula Ao's short story "Laburnum for My Head" through an ecofeminist lens, highlighting the intricate relationship between gender and environmental issues in her work. Ecofeminism links the oppression of women with environmental degradation, attributing both to patriarchal dominance. Temsula Ao, a prominent writer from Northeast India, incorporates this ideology into her narratives, reflecting the region's rich biodiversity and cultural diversity. Through an analysis of the titular story of the collection, *Laburnum for My Head*, this study examines how Ao presents women as deeply connected with nature, challenging patriarchal constructs. The protagonist, Lentina, defies traditional norms by choosing a laburnum tree over a conventional headstone, symbolizing her rejection of societal expectations and her desire for a harmonious relationship with nature. By portraying Lentina's choice as a critique of patriarchal and colonial practices, Ao aligns with ecofeminist ideals of sustainability and gender equality. The study underscores the significance of recognizing women's contributions to environmental conservation and advocates for a reevaluation of human-nature interactions.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, gender equality, nature, patriarchy, women.

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I. Introduction:

Ecofeminism, a term coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, intertwines the struggles against gender inequality and environmental degradation, attributing both to the dominance of patriarchal systems. This ideology posits that the disenfranchisement and oppression of women are intrinsically linked to the degradation of the natural world. By challenging masculine dominance, ecofeminism advocates for a more harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, addressing climate change, gender equality and social justice as interconnected issues. The movement encompasses various sub-branches, including vegetarian ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism and materialist ecofeminism, all of which assert that patriarchal values have led to the disconnection between nature and culture, adversely affecting marginalized groups and the environment. Ecofeminism blames the androcentric doubleness between man and woman. It differentiates men from women on the basis of some supposed eminence for example larger brain size, and this characteristic makes men superior over women. Eco-feminists argue that a comprehensive feminist perspective must critically examine both femininity and masculinity, challenging traditional gender roles and their implications for both women and the environment.

In India, ecofeminism has found strong advocates, with Vandana Shiva being a prominent voice critiquing the patriarchal and colonial roots of modern science and technology. From the Northeast, Temsula Ao emerges as a significant ecofeminist writer. An eminent author from Nagaland, Ao has made substantial contributions to literature and women's rights. She served as a professor of English at North Eastern Hill University and chaired the Nagaland State Women's Commission. Her accolades include the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013. Ao's literary works, including five books of poetry and two collections of short stories, reflect her ecofeminist stance. Her 2009 collection, *Laburnum for My Head*, is a poignant exploration of the symbiotic relationship between nature and human life, and the vital role of women in fostering this balance. The title story, "Laburnum for My Head," delves into these themes through the character of Lentina, offering a narrative that underscores the necessity of environmental preservation and women's empowerment.

This paper provides an ecofeminist reading of "Laburnum for My Head," analyzing how Ao's narrative challenges patriarchal norms and advocates for a more equitable and sustainable world. By examining the interwoven themes of feminism and environmentalism in Ao's work, this study aims to highlight the critical importance of harmonizing human development with the natural world, recognizing the significant contributions of women in this endeavor.

Analysis:

For centuries, nature and literature have shared a close relationship in the works of poets and writers across cultures. Literature serves as a mirror of society, reflecting not only human emotions and feelings for the environment but also the broader attitudes and concerns towards it. Northeast India, renowned for its rich biodiversity and verdant landscapes, provides a vivid backdrop for many writers from this region. This area, with its unique flora and fauna, profoundly influences the literary works that emerge from it. Temsula Ao, among other writers from Northeast India, incorporates this natural richness into her stories, reflecting the intricate relationship between nature and human experiences.

Ecological feminism generally signifies the deprivation of females and the exploitation of Mother Nature by capitalist society, a concept rooted in patriarchal attitudes. Ao effectively presents women grappling with complex and difficult social and psychological issues. Her stories reveal the strength of women in various human situations, capturing their diverse moods, joys and sorrows. By depicting these characters' feelings, perceptions and suppressed desires, Ao highlights their deep connection with nature. This connection is integral to understanding how nature and women interact in her narratives, whether as co-sufferers in the patriarchal order, objects of untold joys and sorrows, or symbols of enduring immortality.

Laburnum for My Head is a short story collection by Temsula Ao, first published in 2009. The book includes eight stories, a diverse collection encompassing many themes and writing styles. The troubled political climate, the beautiful landscapes and the confluence of various ethnic groups set Northeast India apart from mainstream India. Ao's *Laburnum for my head* reflects the varied histories, languages, socio-cultural and religious practices of Northeast India, a region with rich cultural and ethnolinguistic diversity. The author begins the book with the lines, "Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard – stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination; stories that are jokes, and sometimes prayers; and those that are not always a figment of the mind but are, at times, confessions." The book reflects poignant stories on the lives of everyday people beyond the headlines. Ao presents a very sensible and authentic representation of the region as her stories emerge from her first-hand experiences in the region.

The titular story of the collection, "Laburnum for My Head" provides a poignant exploration of the themes discussed. The narrative centers on Lentina, a woman who yearns to grow laburnum bushes in her garden. The laburnum tree, known for its striking yellow flowers, symbolizes womanliness and humility to Lentina: "The way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture" (Ao 2). Despite her persistent efforts, Lentina fails to cultivate the trees due to various obstacles, which intensifies her desire for these flowers whenever she encounters them elsewhere. Her unyielding hope to have a laburnum tree in her garden reflects her deep-seated connection with nature.

When Lentina's husband dies, she defies societal norms by participating in the funeral rites, traditionally reserved for men. In the graveyard, she contemplates the futility of gravestones—symbols of human attempts to defy death and achieve immortality. Rejecting these symbols, Lentina decides that no headstone will mark her grave. Instead, she desires a laburnum tree: "...all she had craved for was a spot to be buried where a laburnum tree would bloom every May" (Ao 14). This decision signifies her rebellion against patriarchal constructs and her desire to remain intertwined with nature.

Lentina's desire for the laburnum tree can be interpreted as a challenge to the patriarchal norms of her society. Her husband, being a respected figure, had an elaborate funeral, and it was expected that he would receive a grand headstone. However, these monumental markers, intended to signify permanence, often become mere symbols of fleeting memory. They are eventually forgotten and their inscriptions reduced to insignificant remnants of human vanity. Lentina's choice to forgo a traditional headstone in favor of a laburnum tree represents her rejection of these social constructs. By pre-selecting her gravesite and opting out of the traditional arrangement beside her husband, she breaks free from societal constraints. Additionally, her declaration to her family, "I have not spent anyone else's money... you need not worry about any headstone for me," (Ao 11) underscores her detachment from patriarchal and economic expectations. Through this act, she aims not only to assert her independence but also to challenge the human tendency to impose vanity on nature. The new cemetery, with its emphasis on "flowering trees and not headstones ... erected on the gravesites," (Ao 12) embodies an environment freed from human pretensions and celebrates a more authentic connection with nature.

Lentina's choice to forgo a traditional headstone in favor of a laburnum tree can be seen as a critique of patriarchal and colonial practices, aligning with Vandana Shiva's vision of ecological balance and gender equality. Shiva argues that sustainable practices and women's empowerment are crucial for addressing environmental degradation. Lentina's preference for a natural marker over artificial headstones reflects a more sustainable and

meaningful relationship with the environment, resonating with Shiva's ecofeminist ideals. Shiva believes that women have a special link to biodiversity and are the best custodians of earth-health through their knowledge of the heterogeneity of life. She argues that "women's work and knowledge is central to biodiversity conservation and utilization both because they work between 'sectors' and because they perform multiple tasks" (Mies and Shiva 231).

The integration of nature and women in Ao's work challenges conventional perceptions. Her narratives underscore a call for reevaluating our relationship with nature, emphasizing the importance of harmonious coexistence. By rejecting the pretentiousness of traditional grave markers, Lentina advocates for a shift towards a more respectful and enduring interaction with nature. Thus, women and nature, as depicted in Ao's stories, achieve a form of extraordinary permanence, celebrated through the laburnum's vibrant display each May.

II. Conclusion:

This study of Temsula Ao's "Laburnum for My Head" through an ecofeminist lens underscores the profound interconnection between gender and environmental issues in her literature. Ao's portrayal of women and nature in Northeast India reveals a nuanced critique of patriarchal norms and their impact on both the natural world and women's lives. By highlighting Lentina's choice to forego traditional grave markers in favor of a laburnum tree, Ao challenges the conventional symbols of human conceit and advocates for a more harmonious relationship with nature.

The integration of nature and women in Ao's narratives serves as a powerful commentary on the exploitation and deprivation perpetuated by patriarchal and capitalist systems. Through her depiction of Lentina's enduring connection with the laburnum tree, Ao not only redefines the notion of permanence but also reflects the broader themes of ecological feminism. Her stories illustrate how women, through their intimate relationship with nature, can transcend societal constraints and advocate for a more sustainable and equitable world.

In examining Ao's work, this study highlights the significance of recognizing and valuing the contributions of women and nature in the face of systemic oppression. Ao's narrative offers a compelling vision of how ecofeminist principles can inform our understanding of gender and environmental issues, calling for a reevaluation of our interactions with both. Ultimately, "Laburnum for My Head" serves as a poignant reminder of the need to harmonize human development with the natural world, acknowledging the profound impact of women's experiences and aspirations in shaping a more just and sustainable future.

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