

ECOLOGIES OF MEMORY AND GENDER: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF TEMSÜLA AO'S *LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD*

Ragini Sarmah* and Dikshita Bhuyan

Department of English, Madhabdev University, Narayanpur, Assam

*Corresponding author: *ragini.sarmah1312@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the portrayals of nature, gender and cultural memory in Temsüla Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) using an ecofeminist perspective. Situated within the socio-cultural landscape of Nagaland, the collection reflects indigenous ecological consciousness and oral traditions that perceive nature as a living, animistic presence imbued with spiritual meaning and ancestral memory. The stories feature natural features such as laburnum trees, rivers and forests not simply as scenes, but as protagonists that influence the human experience and collective identity. Ao's stories bring into focus the significance of Northeast Indian women's lives in maintaining ecological equilibrium and cultural heritage by foregrounding their close bond with the environment. This study takes into consideration the ecofeminist theories presented by Françoise d'Eaubonne and Vandana Shiva, to show how the text creates a parallel between the domination of women in the society and the exploitation of nature. The research focuses on Ao's critique of patriarchal structures and anthropocentric attitudes, symbolized in landscape, burial and experiences of intergenerational women. In the title story, Lentina refuses to place a tombstone over her grave, and has instead decided to be buried under a laburnum tree. Similarly, "Three Women" is a metaphoric representation of Lipoktula, Medemla and Martha, representing seed, seedling, and soil, respectively, and the ecological balance, continuity, and renewal of womanhood. This paper explores Ao's narratives through close textual analysis as a means of imagining nature as a place for cultural memory, a place of female agency, a place to experience an ecofeminist vision of reimagining the relationship between women, community, and nature.

Key Words: *Ecofeminism, Indigenous Ecology, Female Agency, Cultural Memory, Northeast Literature, Nature and Gender.*

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is a critical approach that sees the corruption of nature and environment and the domination of women as interrelated. Ecofeminism, which came into being in the late 20th century, believes that patriarchal power systems have historically justified the oppression of women and nature. This subject has highlighted by scholars the parallel between ecological degradation and gender oppression, both rooted in structures of domination within social, political and economic systems. Karen J. Warren states, "Ecofeminism is the idea that there are important connections between the two forms of domination, women and nature" (Warren 3). Therefore, ecofeminist thinking aims to dispute these hierarchies and bring to the foreground other ways of living together that are based on care, interdependence and ecological balance. As Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist scholar, points out, "The violence to nature, which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model, is also associated with violence to women..." (xvi). From this point of view, women's ecological knowledge and experiences put them at a crucial place in maintaining environmental balance.

In the Indian literary context, especially for the literature of the Northeast region, ecofeminism has become a valuable lens to view literary perceptions of landscape, culture, and gender. The Northeast has a rich diversity of flora and fauna, traditional practices and customs, and a rich oral

tradition. The landscape is often depicted as an active character, influencing social interactions, cultural heritage and identity, as is common for writers from the region. Meanwhile, the area has been subjected to political strife, modernization and environmental changes that have affected the literary imagination of a number of writers. In the Northeast Indian literature, such a strong sense of ecological awareness is often present, emphasising the close relationship between people and their land and the traditional knowledge of the local population. One of the most renowned writers from this area is Temsula Ao, whose literary works delve into the intricacies of Nagas' lifestyle, culture, and history. Her works are frequently inspired by the traditions and oral histories of Indigenous people, and examines issues of memory, violence, identity and environmental consciousness. What makes the short story collection *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award, so remarkable is its eight short stories on the daily lives, tribulations and emotions of people living in Nagaland. Through the stories the reader gets insight into the interweaving of earthy life and earthy culture of the area.

In many of the stories, nature is not only a context, but also a symbol and an emotional point where characters wrestle with their memory, identity and home. Nature, trees and forests are symbolic and cultural and could be a reflection of the inner world of the characters. As noted by the ecofeminist thinker Vandana Shiva "Women in India are an intimate part of nature... nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance" (Shiva 38). This view aligns well with Ao's storytelling, which often portrays women as beings intimately tied to the natural cycles and cultural traditions. This paper analyses *Laburnum for My Head* in an ecofeminist way, looking at how the collection establishes connections between women, nature, and memory. The study proposes that Ao's stories undermine male power and reinterpret nature as a space of the feminine, cultural heritage, and ecological balance.

Ecofeminist Critique Of Patriarchal Modernity

The movement of ecofeminism was developed by Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1974) as a combination of the feminist and environmental movement. As she famously argues, "the struggles of environmentalism and feminism are not so different," (Ranc), and she makes the point that patriarchal domination is responsible for both ecological devastation and women's subordination. Her work seems to indicate that "parallels exist between the patriarchal suppression of women and the suppression of nature," (Ranc), and that this double oppression leads to "environmental destruction." This became the basis for a systematic critique of hierarchical thinking and patriarchal ideology, as developed by subsequent ecofeminist scholars. Karen J. Warren defines ecofeminism as "the position that there are important connections—historical, symbolic, theoretical—between the domination of women and the domination of nonhuman nature" (Warren 125). Warren also asserts that these relationships are based on a "logic of domination", a structure which supports the control of one group over another via a hierarchical way of thinking and values dualisms like mind/body, culture/nature, man/woman. In this context, superiority is justified as a means to domination and exploitation.

Likewise, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva describe the modern science and capitalism as "sanctioned the domination of both nature and women," a domination that is "inherently violent" because it "subjugates and dispossesses them" of their life-giving integrity (Mies and Shiva). Their ecofeminist analysis is based on the concept of dualisms: human/nature, man/woman, reason/emotion, and the rigid polarization that presents domination as natural, inevitable and unquestionable. Ecofeminist theorists also challenge the western philosophical streams that establish hierarchical relations between culture and nature. This logic is a "network of dualisms" that underpins Western thinking, where reason is paired with masculinity, and where nature is written as an inferior and feminised Other (Plumwood 2–3). Val Plumwood also claims that

dominant culture has “systematically inferiorised, backgrounded and denied dependency” on both women and nature, revealing how patriarchal systems sustain ecological destruction through hierarchical thinking (21). Also, Rosemary Radford Ruether, who is another important ecofeminist theologian, contends that there can be no ecological liberation without breaking the cycle of male domination. Ruether argues that “there can be no liberation for women and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination” (Ruether 204). This suggests that feminist and ecological issues must be dealt with together if one is to question the structural causes of oppression.

The scholars from India have by far expanded the field by considering the gender–environment relationship as a historical and socio-economic phenomenon. Vandana Shiva asserts that modern development is what she terms as the “exploitative vision of progress” of patriarchy. Shiva terms Western development “maldevelopment... synonymous with women's underdevelopment... and nature's depletion (deepening ecological crises)” (Shiva 5). She also states that a patriarchal system creates a hierarchy of dominance whereby the domination and mastery of man over nature is correlated with the domination of women. (Shiva xvii).

Agriculture, preservation of seeds, and subsistence labour are areas of everyday involvement of women, which places them as central agents of ecological sustainability, and Shiva emphasises their ecological knowledge in this regard (Shiva xvii – xviii). She also claims that the eco-practices and opposition to destructive development of women is essential to solve environmental problems and sustain their lives (Shiva xviii). Her work focuses on highlighting grassroot environmental movements like the Chipko movement in which the rural women physically stood up against deforestation. On the other hand, feminist researchers in India have challenged the universalized nature of ecofeminist assertions of women's “natural” relationship to nature. Bina Agarwal critiques purely symbolic ecofeminist interpretations by grounding women–nature relations in material conditions, noting that “women... are victims of environmental degradation in quite gender-specific ways,” while also functioning as “active agents in movements of environmental protection and regeneration” (119). In view of this, Agarwal suggests the idea of “feminist environmentalism” that emphasises gendered division of labour, land rights and access to natural resources in women's environment.

Scholarship on the Northeast literature written in recent years has highlighted the strong ties between ecological issues in the region and the region's indigenous oral and cosmological practices. It has been suggested that literature from Northeast India is an ecological discourse that depicts the landscape and features “images of rivers, trees, hills, tradition, culture, myth, and legends” (Dumenil 1296). Ecology is also used in such texts to claim identity, to challenge dominant cultural discourses (Dumenil 1297).

Indigenous Ecologies And Environment Consciousness

The role of vegetation is very noticeable in the title story, *Laburnum for My Head*, because of the constant reoccurrence of the laburnum tree. The protagonist's attachment to the tree originates in a deeply affective perception of its physical form: she “yearned for some laburnum bushes in her garden” because “the way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture” (Ao 2). The laburnum is more than a decorative plant; its drooping flowers remind the protagonist of humility and quiet dignity. The tree slowly becomes a living symbol that represents personal emotion, ecological consciousness, and cultural symbolism. In *Laburnum for My Head*, Tamsüla Ao builds an ecological mosaic that gives life and memory to nature. Ao immediately connects Lentina with the laburnum tree: its “striking yellow flowers” remind her of “womanliness and humility” and she

perceives the blossoms to be so significant that the “way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture” (Ao 2). Lentina's family don't know what to make of her love for the tree, she is “inwardly hurt by [their] seeming insensitivity to beauty around them” (Ao 3), and her love of the laburnum is a different value system. From an ecological point of view, the laburnum is a substitute for Lentina's freedom and rootedness: caring for it, caring its continuity is opposed to the utilitarian perception of nature of other people who surround her.

The story is also a testament to the way human attempts to fix memories often go against ecological rhythms. Confronted with the imposing gravestones that dominate the cemetery landscape, Lentina observes that “This consecrated ground has thus become choked with the specimens of human conceit” (Ao 1). These are gigantic stones, symbolizing humanity's struggle against death by physical endurance. Ao takes this up, offering an alternative to this thinking, one that is based on ecological continuity. She refuses to have a stone monument set up, saying instead that “all she wanted was a place where a laburnum tree would flower every May; a place to be buried with it” (Ao 7, 11). The laburnum tree thus makes the cemetery into a space of death, but also of renewal. The regular bloom turns into a non-ambiguous and social manner of recalling, which is perceptible for everybody who watches it. Environmental care becomes a cultural practice, in that the care of plants, trees and landscape is a way to mark life on the land.

Following her husband's death Lentina refuses to accept the traditional male burial practices openly. The ground is also “choked with the specimens of human conceit” (Ao 1) again in the cemetery. She will not compete for monuments with others, but instead will plant a living memorial. “And I have not spent anyone else's money...you need not worry about any headstone for me” (Ao 11); she will be buried where only a laburnum tree will grow: “all she had craved for was a spot to be buried where a laburnum tree would bloom every May” (Ao 14). In this decision, the emphasis is on the observer's action, turning the memorial practices upside down. No longer is granite the key to permanence; this time it's about seasonal blooms. The end of the story is that the laburnum isn't pulled up, a silent victory for ecological ethics. To perpetuate her memory not as a stone monument but as a living tree, Lentina chose to plant a tree. Nature will be her ally and witness. The cemetery turns into a grove: “flowering trees and not headstones... erected on the gravesites” (Ao 12), a community which is not held together by human pretension but by the force of nature, Lentina's bond with the earth.

In this story Ao asks the reader to adopt a more holistic ecological perspective within a larger web of meaning that connects humans, plants, and spirits. The laburnum flowers are not only for the beauty, but also for the message of ancestral wisdom and cultural continuity. Lentina's memory is to be symbolized by a living tree, making her metaphorically a part of the earth's cycles.

Water and rivers are also places of collective memory and culture in the collection. In the story “Three Women,” water becomes intimately connected with experiences of shame, trauma, and survival. The protagonist is brutally beaten and then remembers that he “sits in the water for a long time, as if to wash away the sense of shame and guilt now overtaking me” (Ao 57). The river here is a witness and a part of the emotional experience of the character. The water is a reminder of the healing and cleansing power of the elements of water, but it also indicates that trauma is not something that can be completely erased. The river, as if to wash away the memory, recalls the event. The scene places Lipoktula's trauma right in the middle of nature. The river becomes a confidant that absorbs her suffering. In “Three Women,” nature becomes more than a setting, it becomes a place to experience emotional memory, to heal. The river does not take away Lipoktula's pain but is part of her emotional process and helps to keep her story alive.

The story exemplifies a larger indigenous ecological frame of mind in which people are not removed from the environment in which they live. Rivers, forests and animals may have spiritual meaning and moral agency in Naga culture. The world is seen as a dynamic network of living organisms that can influence human experience. These serve as Ao's stories of the world, in which nature responds and communicates. Trees are symbols of remembrance, rivers of human grief and forests of punishment. The metaphorical construction in "Three Women" is also related to the ecological dimension. Ao explicitly associates women with natural cycles, metaphorically. "Woman is involved in the cycle of life as seed, seedling, and then part of the soil," (Zeleny) writes Beth Zeleny. This metaphor is in the middle of the story. Lipoktula is the "seed" which gives birth to Medemla, despite the adverse conditions of her pregnancy. Later, Medemla takes Martha, a child orphaned by her natural father, and is a "seedling" growing in Lipoktula's line of strength. Then Martha is a symbol of the next generation in this generational cycle.

This ecological sense of belonging is reinforced with the story's end. Ultimately, Martha does not want to return to the village where she grew up stating, "I belonged with them and that I was not in any way different from them" (Ao 51). This moment is an ecocritical sense of place-based identity. Belonging is a feeling that extends beyond bloodlines, to belonging to the land, culture, and community. By this connection, Ao proposes that ecological and cultural continuity are not distinct.

Women, Ecology, And The Inclusion Of Ecological Worlds

Through Ao's story, it becomes easier to appreciate the connection between women's experience and the environmental work that helps care for the environment and challenges patriarchy, which is well connected to the ecofeminist theory. *Laburnum for My Head* is a story about the vulnerability of women and nature, and the ecofeminist concept that the deterioration of the environment is inextricably linked to the oppression of women. This laburnum not only serves as a natural symbol, but also as a symbol of female agency. Lentina's love for the Laburnum tree is an incognito gesture of rebellion. Her family reacts to her desire as a "strange unhealthy fetish," but she is "inwardly hurt by their seeming insensitivity to beauty around them" (Ao 3) and also has "never given up her hope of having a full-grown laburnum tree in her garden someday." Her tenacity is a different way of life, one that places the emphasis on beauty, humility and environmental stewardship rather than social recognition. This visualisation is very close to ecofeminist thinking. Vandana Shiva argues that women's ecological knowledge and practices are important for environmental sustainability; those rural women "embedded in nature... have conceived and initiated processes to arrest the destruction of nature and begin its regeneration" (Shiva xvii-xviii). A care for the laburnum tree is just such an ethic of reciprocity with nature, as Lentina's does.

Cultural ecofeminism also highlights the link between women and caring for the environment. Cultural ecofeminists, Carolyn Merchant points out in *Radical Ecology*, have a "higher appreciation for intuition, an ethic of caring, and human-nature interrelationships" (193). This is the way Lentina sees things, with the nurturing bond she shares with the laburnum tree. She is claiming agency in a Patriarchal society who is denying her desires by planting and nurturing the tree. Her botanical wish therefore is a symbolic challenge to the patriarchy. From a feminist perspective, her wish to be remembered by a blooming tree is a protest against patriarchal constructs and her resolve to be connected with nature. The ecological perspective conveyed in "Three Women" is also consistent with ecofeminist views of environmental ethics. *Three Women* examines the interdependencies of patriarchy and ecology through the lives of Lipoktula, Medemla and Martha. In the light of cultural ecofeminist theory, Lipoktula's submersion in the river could be understood as a symbolic return to the earth. As A. Savitha

Pressy explains, cultural ecofeminism “tends to value qualities identified in women and their reflection in action” (Pressy 10). particularly women’s intuitive relationship with nature. The quiet strength of Lipoktula is, thus, a feminine ethic of bearing and attending to.

The continuity and nurturing of ecofeminist ideas are also emphasized by the generational structure of the story. This is what Medemla demonstrates with Martha. The moment of connection is portrayed as if a “lone hand” is “forging a bond” between her lonely self and this “abandoned child” (Ao 53), emphasizing the strength of maternal love to hold life together even in “oppressive” social situations. When a man rejects his baby girl, as Martha’s biological father does, patriarchy’s image shines bright. [...] she who has killed my wife” (Ao 53). This dismissal is a manifestation of the dichotomy of masculine and feminine archetypes, where nurturing attributes are considered feminine and thus weaknesses. Ao turns this order on its head with Medemla’s reply. Her rescue of the cast-out child is a manifestation of compassion; it turns rejection into rescue. Ecocritics such as Janis Birkeland argue that patriarchal systems privilege rationality and domination while devaluing care and nurturing traits. As ecofeminist theory notes, dominant culture has historically “devalu[ed] whatever is associated with women, emotion... and nature,” while elevating masculine-coded values (Gaard 5). Medemla’s care for Martha reflects the ecofeminist belief that women are often the true “custodians of earth-health” (Shiva 128).

Lipoktula’s secret trauma is another example of the ecofeminist focus on the challenge and confrontation of violence. Lipoktula is concerned about the “terrifying spectre of an incestuous marriage” between Medemla (Ao 58) and himself. When she tells the truth she says, “I knew that my dark secret had at last surfaced...” (Ao 57). This is a symbolic act of purification in the form of a confession. Restoring ecosystems means recognizing or naming environmental harm, and social healing means naming invisible violence. In the end, “Three Women” is a film about the connections between women’s suffering, renewal and caring. In Ao’s narrative, women take on the role of cultural memory and ecological values through Lipoktula’s endurance, Medemla’s compassion, and Martha’s rooted identity.

CONCLUSION

Ao’s stories re-imagine landscapes, rivers, forests and trees as more than just stage-sets; as agents of human experience. They are the elements of the ecology as places of memory, affect, continuity, thus imbuing human life with a wider environmental awareness. Especially the laburnum tree, which appears as a pivotal ecological emblem that reframes memory and identity in a process of renewal, displacing the static and patriarchal forms of memory. The stories also describe the ways in which ecological spaces are the sites of trauma and survival. Nature is a repository of human and cultural and emotional histories, absorbing, reflecting and retaining suffering. These make possible Ao’s efforts to represent women’s experiences in a way that breaks down the boundaries between humans and nonhumans and situates them within an indigenous ecological worldview. This is a vision of interconnectedness which foregrounds the unavoidable connection between cultural memory and environmental belonging.

The ecofeminist perspective brings to light the critique of systems of domination that at the same time oppress women and exploit nature. Vandana Shiva makes an argument, that “the violence to nature... is also linked to violence to women” (Shiva xvii). This formulation could be particularly relevant to Ao’s fiction, where patriarchy operates as an oppressive force for women and as the cultural drive of controlling, disciplining and monumentalising nature. Ao’s tales are then about the links between ecological destruction and gender subjugation in the same ideological frameworks. Ao’s female characters speak other moralities that are grounded in care, nurture and ecological interdependence, in contrast to this ethos of domination. They are

connected to nature and live in a continuity rather than permanence and reciprocity rather than control. The ethics of care is at the heart of these relationships and makes women and nature the protagonists who support life and community. Lastly, *Laburnum for my Head* is an ecological imagination that imagines nature as a living archive of memory, resistance and regeneration. The exhibition demonstrates indigenous knowledge and exposes the power dynamics of patriarchy, presenting another moral narrative, one that is more interdependent and sustainable.

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