



Women in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*

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Abstract

Women are often exploited and suppressed in the normative hierarchy of a male-dominated society. However, they have not always accepted suppression and marginalization without any protest. Subverting patriarchal male dominance, women have successfully competed against men for equal status, rights, and pay. They have altered the stereotype of women as docile and the 'weaker' or 'other' sex. There are many instances that show women solidarity, women resistance, and women superiority in society. Therefore, it is seen that women are engaged in the twin processes of complacency and resistance, submission and rebellion, silence and speech. Reflecting Simone de Beauvoir's dictum, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301), women have fought on different grounds both consciously and obliviously. This paper is an attempt to analyse the stories of different women and their struggles in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*.

Keywords: women, resistance, suppression, society, patriarchal

Women writers from North-East India like Easterine Kire Iralu, Mitra Phukan, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao and Jahnabi Barua have projected the unique struggles and identity crises of men and women hailing from the region. As one of the major literary voices in English to emerge from North East India, Temsula Ao has presented a realistic account of the Naga people in her powerful short story collections- *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone (2006)* and *Laburnum for My Head (2009)*. Further, women writers from the region have chronicled the journey of women from suppression to resistance, powerlessness to empowerment. Ao expresses that "the image of women is generally projected as the weaker sex in the normative hierarchy of any particular system. This is however often belied by certain figures from myths, legends, and history the world over, wherein she is depicted as the embodiment of power of a different kind. The association of some

extra-ordinary or extra-human power with women has been a curious but integral aspect of narratives of human history and civilization." In her short story collection, *Laburnum for my Head*, Ao brilliantly depicts the perpetual fight and resistance of women against gender discrimination. In her stories, Ao has illustrated different women characters who speak about their spiritual urges, physical impulses and confrontation with the sociopolitical environment. An analysis of the women characters of her stories foregrounds how women have broken the shackles of subordination and demolished their identities as 'other'. Ao has presented a set of events and sequences which highlight women as an entity with a voice and self-identity. She has projected how a woman can overcome the norms imposed by society. Ao's female understanding, her focus on the collective and identical problems of female, moves the reader to look at the 'female' and female body from a

different perspective. This paper aims to analyse how the female body- symbolic and physical- is a battle-place for gender and sexual identity.

In the very first story "Laburnum for My Head", the protagonist Lentina admires the laburnum tree for its femininity. She is attracted to how the laburnum flowers hang their heads earthward unlike other flowers like the gulmohar. To be earthward and not to affect the growth and health of other plants are seen as feminine qualities of the laburnum by the protagonist Lentina. Being the second wing or the 'other' in the patriarchal society, women are taught not to interfere in men's domain and support them passively. The laburnum tree is significant due to these female traits in the male-oriented society. Lentina is so enchanted and possessed by the laburnum flower that she wishes to plant a laburnum tree in her garden which will flourish with magnificent yellow blossoms. Lentina's longing to have a laburnum tree in her garden shows her humble wish to be docile, inconsequential and supportive as a woman, but this indication takes a reverse turn when she dismantles the governing norms of the society. It is seen that she is not docile, feeble or overpowered; on the other hand, she is very strong, determined and powerful. The determination and constancy of her dream to grow a laburnum tree in her cemetery have such an enduring and impulsive power that even after having failed for three consecutive years she does not give up. She is not the one who easily gives up; she is one who becomes stronger and more determined after failure. The most important trait in her character is that she has subverted the traditional notion of femininity by not suppressing her deep urges unlike many other women in society. Rather, when her husband dies a sudden death in sleep, she announces that she would join her husband's hearse. Thus, she deconstructs the social norms in the patriarchal society- 'norms' which are imposed by men and internalized by women.

Women have been dominated and oppressed and they have accepted it as their fate, but there are also instances where they have not repressed their yearnings and natural urges.

Although such instances are rare, yet their uniqueness and versatility seem to be very strong. Lentina's determination exemplifies such versatility. Lentina had an epiphanic sensation that she would not like to have a headstone on her grave, rather she would like to plant a laburnum tree that would flourish into full blossom and spread liveliness after her death instead of showing a concrete inert stone. The intensity of her wish can be understood in the following lines:

She wanted to plant a laburnum tree on her gravesite while she was still alive to ensure that all this trouble of securing the plot and keeping everything quiet had the desired results. She had to see the tree bloom before she breathed her last. (Ao 6-7)

This not only dismantles the norms and constraints imposed by the authoritative male power but also shows a revolutionary spirit in a female who questions the male-oriented social systems of behaviour and construction. Lentina's meticulous decision to confide and entrust the responsibility of executing her dream of planting a laburnum to her old widowed driver shows her unusual feminine trait of defying one's family members and relying on others. The authoritative voice, in which she deals with the driver Babu and gets him to promise to keep her agenda of choosing a spot for her burial extremely confidential. The way she buys a plot of land in an inflated price without letting her sons and daughters-in-law know about it. How she puts a full stop to the questionings of her daughter-in-law in a strong voice. The way she puts forward the terms and conditions of donating the plot of land to the town committee; all these actions show a very strong and persuasive character in Lentina. Lentina's character is a blend of women empowerment and ardently wishful mind. After she has completed the legal formalities she started waiting eagerly to see the laburnum tree grow and blossom. When she was sick and stopped going out of home in the days of fatigue and exhaustion, like a child she insisted her sons to take her in the car for an outing. Later, when the tree bloomed into full blossom, Babu went to inform her about this great news. But

before he could reveal it, she anticipated it and made haste to see them. This is a very instinctive and passionate feature in her. On seeing the 'yellow magic' in the cemetery she was very thankful to Babu, and thereafter she imposed self-isolation and kept herself busy in arranging her room. This was surprising because it seemed to the other members as if she was preparing herself to embrace death as blossoming of the laburnum had a close association with her death. It is quite uncommon to welcome death in this manner. For her, death is not a subject to fear and avoid, for her death is a festival to cherish. Her dressing up in a beautiful outfit and then dying in sleep the next morning, give no sense of grievance and sorrow, rather the reader gets relieved at the fact that Lentina's passionate and unflinching dream is fulfilled and now she can get the desired peace in her afterlife with the freshness of the mellow laburnum flowers.

Thus one can see how an ordinary lady, for a seemingly trivial wish, although in her vision a great task, questioned the existing norms of the society. Moreover, she accomplished it with a very strong and authoritative command. This is how a very ordinary lady goes beyond the normative terrain to fulfill her passionate dream to have a laburnum with full blossom as her headstone in her grave. Lentina's character symbolizes women empowerment and establishes gender equality.

"The Three Women" is a very fascinating story that speaks of three women from three generations. This is a very well-knit story which focuses on unfolding the consequences of their life and on how these consequences led their life to particular turns. The first character Martha's story has a very heart-rending effect on the reader. The death of her mother just after her birth made her father furious, who cursed her as she was a girl and deserted her at the hospital. Medemla, who was working as a nurse in the hospital, kept her loving and watchful eyes upon her and then decided to adopt her as she was unmarried and wanted to live alone for her entire life. She was rejected by the hospital authority as she wanted to adopt Martha and consequently, she resigned from her job at the hospital. This is a very strong human trait in

Medemla. Martha's story is two-folded because she was not only treated as an 'inferior other' but also a victim of racial discrimination for her skin colour and belonging to tea-tribe. But the love, care and shelter she received in Medemla's home were so pure that even after being an outsider she did not feel any difference at heart. Even after knowing the real identity, she feels the same emotional connection with Medemla and her mother whom she thought to be her grandmother. This compassion for a fellow female has such an invigorating effect that they kept on feeling the deep love for each other as before.

The story of Medemla is very pathetic. She had to sacrifice her love because the father of her beloved once raped her mother and she was the outcome of the incident. She was an unfortunate sufferer. Her marriage was broken by her own mother because she did not want her daughter to be involved in a heinous scheme of incest and sin. Medemla's story shows how women have to sacrifice for other's mistakes, how they have to continue a life without liveliness and happiness. Lipoktula, Medemla's mother makes a very touching confession about the female sexual behavior of "participatory submission" (Ao 79). A peculiar but natural kind of sexual behavior is seen in Lipoktula who kept the incident of her rape a secret and gave birth to Medemla. Such frankness about the female body and female sexual behaviour is rare and therefore very crucial in Ao's story. Again, Martha's narration also speaks of the urges of a female body and shows that it is not always submissive or a slavish participant. Again the ever exclusive privilege of motherhood is depicted in an extremely vivid way. The description of childbirth and the sublime feeling of being a mother are very unique and beautifully portrayed by Tamsula Ao. Martha's motherhood is glorified and enhanced by her compassion for her mother as she has not experienced the same. However, although by adoption, Medemla has experienced it. Therefore, the bond of three different kinds of mothers has a very firm and divine connection in the story.

In "A Simple Question" Ao portrays the story of a barely literate but worldly-wise woman named Imdongla. She was aware of the history and politics of the village as she was a daughter of a 'gaonbura' (village headman) and married to a 'gaonbura'. "A Simple Question" delineates a story of the hostilities between the Nagas and the Indian State. Imdongla's presence of mind and ability to tackle circumstances saved her husband and other villagers from getting beaten by the underground forces. Once when a collector of grains from the underground forces was berating a villager for bringing less rice than he was supposed to, the petrified villager could not say anything in his defense and was fearfully waiting to be beaten. Then this lady- Imdongla came to assist him suddenly by bringing a basket of husked rice and in a firm voice addressed the villager: "Hey, Toshi why don't you tell this man that I could not return this rice to you this morning as promised. Remember you lent it to my son for the age-set feast? Here it is." (Ao 83) Thus she appeared from nowhere to help her co-villager and her husband as well who too was going to be beaten severely. Her presence of mind and boldness thus left all dumbstruck. Being the better half of the 'gaonbura' Tebeka, Imdongla prevented her husband from resigning from his 'gaonbura'ship when he was fed up with the increasing taxes and simultaneous torture from the underground rebels and the army regime. She showed reason that if he did so then he would be misunderstood and misinterpreted as being a sympathizer of the rebels and might get arrested. Above all, she did not want to see her husband called a coward. This story shows that institutional education is not necessary all the time, sometimes experience makes a better fighter out of life. Imdongla was not educated but her experience in real-life situations made her bold, clever and self-confident. When she came to know that her husband along with other villagers were taken to the army camp and her husband's jacket and blanket are left at home, she immediately went to the camp without sparing a minute because she was a very caring wife. Imdongla bore such a strength in her voice that the army officer was taken aback by her repeatedly asked question-

"What do you want from us?" and forced him to set free her husband and other captive villagers. Being a strong feminine figure she proved to be very responsible and protective of her village people. She is not a docile, timid and home-stuck woman as normally women are looked down to be.

The next story "Sonny" narrates how a lady had to sacrifice her love to support her beloved in fulfilling his ideal agenda of setting his state free. This story shows how this lady kept going without her love by embracing the vibrant memories of the past they spent together. Her beloved, named Sonny became a rebel. Being away from her beloved she tried to be strong so that she did not falter, which is reflected in her words: "As long as I know that you are alive and well, I shall try to live with your absence" (Ao 89). This is a very unique character of her mental set-up. Remembering her past she describes how she met Sonny last time and experienced intense and ardent love-making with him. The next morning when they were to part with each other, Sonny left a note for her before he left the cottage. The paper read-"Sweetheart, this is not a goodbye because you will forever be the love of my life" (Ao 91). This frustrated her and out of bitterness, she tore the paper into many pieces. She suffered from a deep realization that it was she who was going to leave her beloved. There is an underlying complexity in her character because later, she started to realize that the person for whom she welcomed a 'big zero' in her life "regarded his own national passion more important than the love of a woman" (Ao 92). Unable to bear the deep pain of loneliness she moved to a big city and got busy as a journalist. Later, Sonny's disillusionment and fatigue due to his fruitless attempts to get a 'Free State' made her very desperate because all her goodwill, effort and sacrifice to inspire a nationalist 'hero' ended up in naught. Again her examinations of the nuances of her relationship with Sonny show a very peculiar trait in her character. She introspects:

When I embarked on the journey home, I believed that I finally overcome the 'Sonny phase' of my life and that I had emerged a totally new person from that 'ordeal'

through love. But his death had demolished that façade and exposed the truth of my love...I have never really accepted his absence from my life as final; but his death, this horrible death finally obliterated all hope of ever seeing him again.(Ao 96)

Thus, Temsula Ao has depicted women characters in her stories in different hues and attires. In all her stories, one can easily acknowledge the strength and voice in her women characters. They are vibrant, empowered and determined to be unique individual characters. Her stories foreground one of the often overlooked but remarkable features of the northeastern region, that is, the wonderfully open presence of women in almost every facet of life.

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