



# A Review on Temsula Ao's "Laburnum for My Head"

By Aakarsh

Student, M.A. English

School of Letters, Ambedkar University Delhi

**Abstract:** Naga poet, writer, and ethnographer Temsula Ao has crafted strokes of her ecofeminism within the collection "Laburnum For My Head". The short story of the same title embodies the narrative of Lentina, as she fights for a space separate from one reserved for destined final resting place - conventionally beside her husband, because she is determined to have laburnum sprouting around her grave. The review attempts to appreciate and acknowledge the significance of community, spaces, ecofeminism, class difference, among other things, planted by Ao, as they come to germinate beautifully into the story. The reading also endeavours to commemorate Temsula Ao's significance in light of her recent passing.

## **Introduction:**

Temsula Ao, in the titular story from her short story collection *Laburnum for My Head*, gives a marvelous fictional account of the life of the protagonist Lentina, and that of the laburnum spread that graces the cemetery she chooses for her burial. Temsula Ao is one of the most prominent women writers of Northeast India, with her prose and poetry built in the atmospheres and vivid temporal and topical locales of the North East. Nature and landscapes form a huge part of Ao's writings, and are given a commanding narratorial and literary weightage, as one can say from the title of *Laburnum for My Head*.

The first story, "Laburnum for My Head" opens and closes with the narrator talking about something extraordinary that takes place every May, more specifically in the new cemetery of the "sleepy little town". This statement opens an avenue of grand possibilities of something larger than life taking shape in the story – the eruption of the glorious laburnum bush. Temsula Ao, with her simple, crisp, and poetic words roots her

fiction in realism, yet it achieves a larger-than-life telling of the story that births from the “individual experiences made universal by imagination” as she writes in the opening note in the book. The morbidity that would usually surround the ideas of death, graveyards, and mortality is lessened considerably by Ao’s tender and poetic language that advocates for nature, themes of transgression, and the very idea of hope. The narration, and the subject of the story, which is the growth of the laburnum, follow a flashback narrative, taking a folkloric essence – of a story being told and passed along long after the climactic incident occurred. Ao thus creates a sense of community that can be found seeped in the narrative, where Lentina’s life is synthesized within her community, the sites, the communities, and the committees that Ao mentions: the “sleepy little town” in North East India, the neighbours, the family members, the servants, the Town Committee, the Church, the graveyard. These are the passing mentions in the story, or sites, spaces, and units of the society that we find woven into the fabric of these stories.

We find Temsula Ao’s ecofeminism in the very built of the story. The ideas are gendered in Ao’s highlighting of patriarchal discourses. The exploitative, crudely entrepreneurial, mechanized mankind is referred to as “He”, while nature and the vibrance it carries is referred to as “She”. The laburnum acquires metaphors through personification, being reasons for Lentina to fancy it, as it is said to carry humility in its gesture, a sense of femininity, “not brazen like the goldmohurs”. Lentina identifying her spirit with that of the laburnum becomes the key point for the ecofeminist discourse, where Ao does not restrict the narrator from glorifying the laburnum in docile, delicate, submissive patriarchal notions of a woman, but in the spiritual ideas that transcend gender politics, such as humility. The cemetery, to Lentina, looks overwhelming with huge tombstones erected as loud reminders of “man’s puny attempts to defy death”, a practice of human vanity that continues even after death. The idea of a laburnum tree sprouting around her grave is very imaginative, a liberating and subversive plan, to move beyond the concretization of an individual, beyond man’s obsession with colonizing nature, the indigenous, and the Earth. It is important to take note of how Lentina’s ideas germinated freely after the passing of her husband. While she previously was faced with several unsuccessful attempts of growing a laburnum in her yard, with her passion being dismissed as impractical and ridiculed as a “laburnum fetish”, we saw the birth of an idea at the site of her husband’s funeral itself. Her account of keeping her excitement about the plan to herself is humorously put, as she plans on defying the customary and expected idea of wanting to be buried next to her husband whenever the time comes. Her several acts of subversion take wings with the newfound space and agency she gains after her husband’s death. However,

Lentina is aware of the unconventionality of her ideas, of choosing a spot for her grave far from her husband's, her fixation with laburnum and the idea of it sprouting around her final resting place. Such ideas sprout a touching and inspiring account of an "ordinary woman and her undramatic life" and her simple but passionate dream fulfilled, as it challenges the patriarchal structures such as the family, the Town Committee, the business dealings of securing the land adjacent to the cemetery. We come to know that the family, her sons begin to ask Lentina for business advice as they come to know of her sharp acumen after the demise of their father, and thus we have her subversive attempt at defying man's rigidity in conquering nature's and women's spaces through her laburnum also give her the righteous space and agency in the territorially male-centric spaces. As her dreams begin to materialize, like a metaphor for Lentina's individualism and feminism, we find it also works as a catalyst to the mental and emotional healing of her whole family, the "easing of tension", along with Lentina herself. Lentina's freedom through her passion for nature not only lets the subversion of gender roles in patriarchy to happen, but also enables the transgression of the servant class to some extent. Lentina, who can be assumed to belong to a relatively upper-class society, is shown to trust her driver Babu as a confidant more than she could trust her own family. Ao destabilizes the master-servant dynamic by showing the "odd" friendship between Lentina and Babu, and Babu's active role in materializing Lentina's dream through his labour and emotional investment, something she could not expect anyone in her family to do. We also get a glimpse at her relationship with her maid, the physical affinity between them, when Lentina, Babu, and the maid share biscuits and tea at the picnic spot. With the newfound agency, we also find Lentina writing her own rules in terms of the burials that would take place in her land. She demands graves to be marked by numbers and not by names on the towering, vain and cold tombstones.

Ao, through the character of Lentina, fights for the righteous place of nature in practice and her discourses through her activism and writings. Her stories throw light on the clarity in her feminism, the hope in the spirit of activism, with something as simple as a wish to grow laburnum also reading as a metaphor for those very activisms she and countless other activists fight for. The story becomes a stellar account of nature acting as an empowering catalyst that argues for more women-centric narratives, dreams, and realities being realized, to heal differences and damage created by dominant discourses through our history and contemporary.

## Works Cited

Ao, Temsula. *Laburnum for My Head*. Penguin. 2015. (PDF)