

Ecological concerns in Select Short Stories of Temsula Ao

The theory 'ecocriticism' reflects on the relationship between environment and human life. Ecocriticism is a term derived from Greek language words - 'oikos' and 'kritis'. 'Oikos' means 'household' an abode of human being, other species, nature and the spirit of nature, too; and 'Kritis' means to judge. To the Greeks, oikos is a place where the sacred, the humans, natural and cultural phenomena are found in an integrated relationship. The eco-critical theory of oikos is also used to identify the Mother Earth concern in folktales from India. It also refers to planet Earth or Bhoomi. Hence, ecocriticism deals with the expression of judgment upon the writings which delineate relationship between nature and man or the effects of culture on nature. Ecocriticism has several sub-approaches, namely- Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Ecosphere, Ecocide, and Oikopoetics.

The phrase deep ecology was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973. It is an ecological and environmental philosophy promoting the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their instrumental utility to human needs. It emphasizes that one should see oneself not as an atomistic individual engaged in the world as a resource for consumption and self assertion but as a part of greater living identity. All human action should be guided by a sense of what is good for the biosphere as a whole.

Ecofeminism shows the pitiable condition and exploitation of both nature and women by men. It is known as androcentrism i.e. male centeredness which says that the force which is degrading or overpowering both the women and Nature is one and the same and that force is no one else but man. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppression. They argue that no effort to liberate women will be successful without an attempt to free nature. Ecofeminists divide the world into two groups- the privileged and the oppressed.

Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* says, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Ecocriticism focuses on the harmonious coexistence of human beings and Nature. Ecocriticism, a budding movement embarked around the 1980s in the USA and about the 1990s in the UK. Ecocriticism in the USA is attributed to three writers whose writings often revolved around Nature, namely Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau. Their works are also considered to be the foundational works of American 'ecocentred' writing reiterating 'return to nature' in their works. Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory* mentions that the term 'Ecocriticism' is preferred in America while the term 'Green Studies' is more prevalent in the UK.

Temsula Ao is an important part of this literature and at the same time she is one of the major eco-conscious voices from this region. This paper intends to trace out the presence of eco-consciousness in some selected short stories of Temsula Ao. In these stories Ao not only highlights ecological richness of their region, but also reveals ugliness of modernization that

is increasingly destroying human-nature harmonious inter-relation and at the same time she tries to generate eco-consciousness and eco-sensibility among her readers. Tamsula Ao's touching description of human life and human condition are set in the backdrop of the lush green forest of North-east India.

Ao is one of the important literary voices from the Northeast in general and from Nagaland in particular. This retired English professor from Northeast Hill University is a poet, short story writer and an ethnographer. As the former Director of North East Zone Cultural Centre, she tried to provide the cultural richness of this region a national level recognition. As an ethnographer she worked on the oral tradition of her own Ao Naga community. Her contribution is no less than of an environmentalist as she voices not only for the cultural transform Literature is enriched with the depiction of natural sights and imagery, which not only illustrate human emotions and feelings for the environment, but also illustrate human attitude and concern towards it.

The environment includes everything that makes up our surroundings, including air, water, land, plants, and animals, and its quality has an impact on our ability to live on the planet.

In his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* Pramod K Nayar writes what ecocriticism seeks to study

1. Nature writing in literary canon and cultural studies.
2. The role of non-human world in the literature.
3. Environmental awareness in canonical texts.
4. The portrayal of the human non-human relationship in literary text.
5. The subtext of literary works that reveal anthropocentric, patriarchal and capitalist attitude towards the non-human, women, nature and landscape,
6. The superiority of rationality over emotions worsening the environmental situation.
7. Environmental activism in literature (243).

I will analyse two of Tamsula Ao's stories from Ecocritical lens. As the Literature of the North East has contributed significantly to the emergent field of literature i.e Ecocriticism.

Ao, in *Laburnum for My Head*, beautifully depicts a deep understanding of the human condition and illustrates different facets of ordinary men and women's life. She unveils the hidden but intricate relationship between nature and humans. It also looks at the depiction of natural sights and landscapes along with people's attitudes and attention towards nature, whether favourable or unfavourable. It negotiates between literature and ecology.

The story is about a strange obsession of a woman, called Lentina, for laburnum flowers. Unable to successfully grow a laburnum plant on her garden during her lifetime, she wants to have one over her grave. Lentina's longing for this beauty of nature can be read as her defiance of the patriarchal set up of the society. She wants this tree to be planted on her grave

instead of having the customary tombstone of marble or granite. The writer says, "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." Lentina, the protagonist, is enchanted with this tree because she associates it with femininity and humility, unlike the garish gulmohars with their bright orange flowers. She goes to great lengths to fulfil her wish, antagonising her children and her kith and kin in the process. It is a beautiful story, narrated with a great deal of tenderness and compassion. The laburnum flowers appealed to Lentina because of their beauty and also because she 'attributed humility' to their gesture of hanging their heads earthward; and was what she called the 'femininity' of these flowers.

In her writings, Temsula Ao represents women who have the tendencies to protect nature, who encompass with individuality, who are brave enough to fight for their liberation and who have intelligence to secure their men and village by their instinctive knowledge. Thus, Temsula Ao rebuilds the role of women in Ao-Naga society through her writings. Temsula Ao emphasises the idea that nature and women should be liberated, for they face many failures, disappointments, losses, suppression, and struggle a lot to overcome that through their strong determination. Their determination and longings give strength to fight for their self-identity and recognition.

In Eco-feminist literature, environmentalism and feminism are interlinked. Lentina is presented not as parts of nature, but as nature itself. Ao beautifully writes how Lentina becomes one with nature in the form of laburnum flowers at the end of the story.

Through this, Lentina attains liberation from conventional patriarchal society. Though set in North-Eastern locales, they describe the universal human pursuits of joy and experiences of pain in a manner that will appeal to many. The Laburnum tree became the purpose of Lentina's life. She recovered even from her ailing health and looked forward to its bloom. Her wait for the flowers can be interpreted as liberation from family and mortal life. "With her liberation she also wants to liberate nature from the cruelties of man and so the new cemetery only has flowering trees not tombstones" The tombstone can be identified as a symbolic object of lifelessness and barrenness which also coincides with the attitude of modern day humans devoid of empathy and full of indifference. She feels greatly disturbed by men's futile attempts to defy death. She refers to the tombstones in the cemetery which only become dilapidated with passage of time as weeds and obstinate sprout from them.

So, at last women and humble nature are seen to integrate themselves into some extraordinary permanence, something extraordinary which displays its glory of buttery yellow splendour every may.

Lentina frees herself from this social construct by having just a laburnum over her grave. By choosing her grave-site herself before death and denying the 'already embarked [space] beside my master [her husband]', she gets free from the patriarchal hold. Very interestingly, she is even out of the male-controlled economic setup of the society.

In the male-biased world woman and nature are often constructed through value dualism in disjunctive pair of words – reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, human/nature, and man/woman – where the two words of each pair are seen as oppositional rather than complementary. And in this dichotomy, reason, mind, culture, human (i.e. male), and man are considered superior to emotion, body, nature, woman. Some other ecofeminists have even explored the symbolic devaluation of women and nature that appears in religion, theology, art and literature. Some theorist focus on language, particularly the symbolic connections between sexist and naturalist language, i.e., language that inferiorizes women and nonhuman nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature.

As a Naga woman, Ao has concern for her region and natural circumstances of land, forest, animals, hills, and mountains. She remembers the beauty of nature in the hands of women through her poems. In her short stories, she projects the locals / Natives/ Indigenous as protectors of nature safeguarding the whole human habitation by her knowledge. She represents its local inhabitants who have the tendencies to protect nature, who encompass individuality, who are brave enough to fight for their liberation and who have intelligence to secure themselves by their instinctive knowledge. Thus, she rebuilds the role of Nature and identity formation in women in Ao-Naga society through her writings. Everything Indigenous or tribals did was done in total awe of nature for everything that it had bestowed upon them. They were not ardent environmentalists, but their reactions to nature were varied enough to refresh their surroundings and needs.

Deep Ecology is based on the notion humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

The first line is the key to the story and delineates the character of Snow-Green as, “a lily that refuses to bloom on eseaon as she was dislodged from her accustomed position in the garden bed.” (Ao, 57). For this lily it was, “an act of violation of her natural rights” (Ao, 57). At the core the deep ecology advocates an equality of status to all beings. Lily had a lone for her natural habitat. This lily fails to understand why she was the chosed one to be uprooted.

The character of the lily is in contrast to the mistress of the household who was cold hearted and ambitious to the extent she does not bother about the mental status of the lily. After being planted in the ornate pot the lily feels as if, “condemned to a prison” (Ao, 57). She terribly misses her companions back in the garden. The mistress’s extreme inhuman behaviour is evident from her “callous” order for dislocation and constant obsession with the first prize.

Ao’s places lily at parity with a human being and discusses lily’s mental shock. Personification of lily comes to a full circle as the lily manifests her mood by constantly sulking and grieving. The lily takes up cudgels and when the buds were almost ready to bloom, “she exerted a tremendous effort and kept them shut as though she was holding her breath in protest just as small children do when they are denied what they crave for.” (Ao, 58) Lily and the mistress become equals as the mistress is “perplexed” (Ao, 58) as to why was the lily sulking and throwing tantrums. Equality of all kinds of life- flora, fauna, animal and the homosapiens is at the centre of deep ecology. Lily’s demenour was such that she was created

to stand out, “the pale green tinge around the serrated petals and the stardust of the same have that speckled the inside of the petals that made her unique.” (Ao, 58) The mistress of the household gives the lily a name i.e. Snow- Green. The lily was gregarious as, “each blooming was the celebration of a great event shared with all her friends around.” (Ao, 59)

The ambition of the mistress of showcasing the lily in an ornate pot, “amounted to a gross violation of her innate being and made her cringe in disgust.” (Ao, 59) The gardener Odi understood the lily so well that he somehow dissuaded the mistress from participating in the flower show for a couple of years. Thus she was saved from the pain of displacement. Odi in the local language means an elder brother. The heartless ambition of the stubborn mistress out-manoeuvred Odi’s effort to keep Snow- Green in her comfort zone. Snow- Green was forcibly transported in the ornate pot away from the garden and the mistress completed all formalities of participation in the flower show. She was anxiously waiting for the lily buds to bloom but something opposite happens to her expectations. Even Snow-Green has absconded and only her outer shell stood defiant in the showy pot.”(Ao, 60)

Back in the garden the fellow lilies were concerned about Snow-Green, they questioned, “Is she sick? Is she going to die?” (Ao, 61) All the lilies bloomed to their best capacity. An older lily who was jealous of Snow-Green addressed the rest not to worry as Snow-Green would return and bloom the next year but secretly wished Snow-Green was infected with a ‘canker’ and gradually decayed.

Odi felt he understood, “quirks and whims of all females, both human and natural, and said to himself that the cynosure of his garden would not yield her place that easily,” (Ao, 61) Odi was sure that if restored to the original place, Snow-Green would resume blooming to the previous standards and continue to reign as the queen lay the coming season. Odi didn’t worry as much as he presumed that Snow-Green would be sent back to her original place in the garden and would continue to bloom as always.

The mistress was ‘frustrated’ to the extent that she refused to replant Snow-Green to her erstwhile place. Instead Snow-Green was planted in a remote place of the garden. The coming year too Snow-Green did not bloom and the buds looked smaller. Odi, as per his profession was closer to Nature and in the story remained a confidante of the lily. He understood Snow-Green’s behaviour as a “show of protest”. (Ao, 61). He thought Snow Green was aware of the intentions of the mistress and it was only a temporary show from Snow-Green’s side. Mistress one day announced a heatless replacement of ‘languished’ Snow-Green to the potting shed. The lady had ordered an exotic flower from a nurset to be planted in Snow-Green’s original place.

Odi faces a dilemma as he was hurt by Snow-Green’s banishment and could not strongly oppose the mistress’s decision. Odi, “had raised and nurtured like his own daughter”. (Ao, 62) so he shuddered to think of Snow-Green’s future. He decides to convince Snow-Green, not to be adamant , bloom as before for her happy future. So throughout the day on the pretext of weeding, Odi would linger around Snow-Green and whisper to her to overcome stubbornness as it may affect her life. He couldn’t stop feeling emotional, “Just think of it, how will I continue if you are not there to greet me each morning.” (Ao, 63)

Flowers too have a way of talking though they lack the human tongue. Snow-Green at first remained silent but later swayed the leaves in a manner that meant dismissing Odi’s views. This left Odi disappointed. He did not give up on Snow- Green and tries to persuade her the

last time but before he could say a word he felt a mild breeze on his face. As he bends down to Snow- Green, he hears her speak, “ Odi... I am not doing anything against you. It is simply to show that silly womn that she cannot treat everyone and everything around her so callously. We too have feelings; we too know where we belong. I refuse to be put on display in some strange place for humans to gawk and gape at me. I feel constricted in this pot. I want to feel the fresh earth around me. I want to chat with my friends in the open garden, laugh with them and be myself. Here, where you have pit me, I almost feel dead. But one thing I’ll assure you... I’ll always be with you because it is you who gave me my life.” (Ao, 64)

There is no better way to have addressed one’s discomfort and Snow-Greens last speech makes it evident that the flowers too have feelings and understand the positive as well as the negative vibes of human beings. There is ample research to prove it. Hearing Snow-Green, Odi gets nostalgic and remembers how he nurtured the weekling with special care and attention till she began to, “reign as the undisputed queen of the lilies.” (Ao, 64) Beyond doubt Odi and Snow-Green shared a special bond and both were defeated by the mistress’s vanity, “they both booked disheartened and unwilling to go on as if the very spring of life had gone out of them.” (Ao, 65)

A fellow villager shows the picture of Odi’s coffin to the mistress as he wanted to inform of Odi’s death. She remained unmoved at his death and was intrigued by the flowers that bloomed on the coffin. The man casually replied, “Oh, those are the wild lilies which bloom around this time of year in our forests.” (Ao, 67) The mistress felt as if, “a huge bouquet of Snow-Greens was hugging old Odi’s coffin”. (Ao, 67) She realised that blooming of the out-of-season white lilies was linked to Snow Green episode in her house. She hurriedly visits the almost abandoned shed where Snow-Green was. And she was surprised to see it in full bloom after many years. She realised that the, “unseen but palpable force seemed to have revived the drooping plants in the other pots too.” (Ao,68)

The flower reciprocated the love of a human being towards them. Here more loyal than humans. In contrast to the mistress who is cruel and possesses negative ambition. Snow-Green and her fellow-flora defied, “both nature and human logic and had bloomed out of season as a last homage to the man who had so lovingly tended her.” (Ao, 68) But the furious mistress was angry to the extent of “getting rid” of this “troublesome flower” called Snow-Green.

Ao decorates Snow-Green with, “a mostly-eyed little girl, holding her breath in protest, had relented and was at last breathing easy and smiling. In paying this final tribute to a friend and mentor.” (Ao, 68)

CONCLUSION:

Vandana Shiva focuses on the concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* i.e the world is one family. In her talk titled, “Earth Democracy,” she suggested an alternative view in which humans are embedded in the Earth and termed it as “the Earth Family”. Family, where there is no separation between human beings and the rest of nature. She further elaborates that, the

“Earth Democracy” movement originated in reaction to the shift of our representative democratic systems towards being “of the corporations by the corporations for the corporations”, and advocates for restoring a democracy “of the people by the people for the people,” in which justice is made for humans as much as for nature.

To conclude in the words of Arne Naess in ‘The Deep Ecological Movement’ says that, ‘The well being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves’.

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