

Beyond Anthropocentrism: A Deep-Ecological Exploration of Temsula Ao's 'Laburnum for My Head'

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Abstract

Arne Dekke Eide Naess, the Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist, verbalised the intrinsic value of each environmental entity, setting forth the claim that the nonhuman world has an equal right to live and grow as the human world does. His coining of the term Deep Ecology strictly focused on the non-anthropocentric view of ecology. Nature, with all the nonhuman elements, is always seen from a much-favoured anthropocentric eye only to fulfil the demands of the human world, limiting humans from the self-realisation that they both share equal status and are to support each other in thriving and growing. This paper offers a deep-ecological exploration of Temsula Ao's short story 'Laburnum for My Head' through the environmental philosophy of Arne Naess. It studies the laburnum tree not as something that is used to beautify the garden or as something that serves human needs, but as a tree which is a living entity. The paper argues that the protagonist Lentina's relationship with the laburnum reflects Naess's principle of the inherent worth of nonhuman life, claiming the significance possessed by nonhuman life independent of human utility. It also divulges the interconnectedness of men, earth, and social worlds, thereby challenging the belief that human existence is separate from the larger ecological system. Naess's ecological self of human identification with the nonhuman world explores Lentina's desire to be buried beneath the laburnum as a counter to the socially determined self, thereby aligning with Naess's Deep Ecology questioning anthropocentric assumptions about human identity, death, and permanence. The paper thus claims 'Laburnum for My Head' is a deep-ecological analysis of human dominance, affirming human existence as a part of the greater ecological world.

Keywords: Arne Naess, Deep Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Intrinsic Value, Human–Nonhuman relationship.

Introduction

Temsula Ao born in 1945 in Jorhat, Assam, through her writing advocated for the identity of the tribes of Nagaland through her writing, especially considering the stepmotherly treatment accorded to the North-east counterpart of the Indian Nation. An Ao Naga poet, educator, writer, ethnographer, and government official, she started documenting the oral storytelling of the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland, aiming to protect and preserve the time-immemorial histories and cultural richness of the tribe, giving them a unique identity, all done in her writings. In an interview Ao, speaking about the importance of preserving Naga identity, stated,

There can be no such ‘prescription’ for preserving any culture. It is the people themselves who will have to decide how to adapt to the old ways to suit present circumstances without abandoning or compromising the values enshrined in the culture. It is here that the question of identity comes in, and I believe that one can retain one’s intrinsic identity and still be a world citizen. (Longkumer, 2024)

Temsula Ao was honoured with the Padma Shri for her contributions to literature and education. She has also been the recipient of the Nagaland Governor’s Award for Distinction in Literature and the Meghalaya Governor’s Gold Medal. Her book, "Laburnum for My Head," earned her the Sahitya Akademi Award in the English short story category. Her works have attracted international interest and have been translated into languages such as Assamese, Bengali, French, German, Hindi, and Kannada.

Her work includes *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2005), *Laburnum For My Head* (2009), *The Tombstone in My Garden* (2022), *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2014), *Aosenla's Story* (2017), and *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (2000). She also published several collections of poetry, including *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), *Songs from the Other Life* (2007), and *Songs Along the Way Home* (2019).

Laburnum for My Head, a short story in the book with the same title, is a story about a woman named Lentina. Lentina had deep affection for Laburnum, unlike the Gulmohar, because Laburnum showed femininity, and also the flowers that would hang earthwards gave her a deep feeling of humility. She goes to the nursery and, following the growing instructions, she plants the saplings at the boundary wall’s edge, hoping for them to bloom. The desire to have a laburnum bush in her garden made Lentina try to plant the saplings for three good years, but unfortunately, sometimes the gardener, sometimes the neighbourhood cows, and the DDT concoction killed the plant, leaving Lentina still hoping. Her obsession became the talk of the town, and so she did not speak but kept her desire to her heart. Due to a disease that hit the family, Lentina’s husband passed away. Against the laws of the society that a woman ought not take part in the gravesite’s final rites, Lentina accompanied the party. Seeing the headstones, she felt unhappy with man’s superiority that feels human by erecting the headstone has gained authority over the dead. However, what stuck Lentina in the graveyard was the thought of planting laburnum on her grave rather than a headstone. She, however, could not tell this to anyone; the only man who came to her mind who could be her confidant was her driver, Mapu (Babu). They drove to the cemetery the next day, which was still something so unexpected of a woman. Instead of moving to the husband's burial location, Lentina moved to the southernmost tip of the cemetery, and there she located the desired spot where she would want to be buried. She told Mapu (Babu) to keep this secret and arrange for the Town Committee’s written approval for her burial site to be the selected location. Her excitement made her plan her next move, for she desired to see the laburnum blooming before her death. However, situations arose about her signing the deal, and that would let everyone know of her plans, so she decided to buy a plot of land adjoining the cemetery, and just then her late husband’s friend’s son, Khalong, came to pay a condolence visit and shared his plan of selling the plot adjoining the cemetery. This plan somehow reached the ears of her sons, and they were in disapproval about her decision. The news spread, and objecting to her decision, the Town Committee members visited her, to which she promised of donating her land to the Town Committee for the extension of the gravesite but also gave certain conditions to be fulfilled. Considering the generous donation by Lentina, the deed of sale was signed, and the plot belonged to the Town Committee, but as the conditions read, she was given the first opportunity to choose her site of burial. With the help of Babu,

Lentina planted laburnum saplings, and he took the responsibility to see that the plant was thriving. Meanwhile, her health started to deteriorate, and as Babu would signal from the doorway that the plant was thriving well, she got the will to live again. A kind of rejuvenated healing took over her, surprising everyone. However, her health restricted her from moving out frequently, but for just two days a week. Babu had already seen small yellow blossoms, but he held back from telling her, lest her joy be deadly, and waited for the next season. As the next season approached, Babu was astonished to witness the miraculous bloom and headed home to tell Lentina, to which her reply was as if she knew of the same already and was already set to go to the new cemetery to view the bloom. Lentina saw the bloom with a satisfied, sombre mood, went back home and took a self-imposed isolation, but on the fifth day, taking the help of her maid, she was already neat and tidy with an early dinner, and she finally retired with her passionate wish of the witnessing the blooming laburnum.

Theoretical Framework

Arne Naess was the chief exponent of Deep Ecology, a philosophy that considers ecosystems with the tag of “life as a whole” (Barnhill and Gottlieb 7), which means the earth is one single unit and there is no single individual who possesses all the rights. This talks of a common existence without one dominating the other, and here domination is primarily done by humans. With the transformation of anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, Arne Dekke Eide Naess coined the term Deep Ecology in the 1933’s English language article, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.” In *Encyclopaedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, Keller wrote about Deep Ecology, stating it as

an egalitarian and holistic environmental philosophy founded on phenomenological methodology.

By way of direct experience of nonhuman nature, one recognizes the equal intrinsic worth of all biota as well as one’s own ecological interconnectedness with the lifeworld in all its plenitude.

(“Deep Ecology” 206)

Arne Naess, negating Shallow ecology, which was man-centric, gave prominence to Deep Ecology, stating, “deep ecology sees that ‘natural diversity has its own (intrinsic) value’ and he notes that ‘equating value with value for humans reveals a racial prejudice’, and adds that ‘plant species should be saved because of their intrinsic value’” (Weber, 2022). Deep Ecology, as a philosophical movement, advocates respect and adoration for all life forms, according to the living and the nonliving, the human and the nonhuman, equality to live and to thrive and to blossom and grow.

Objectives

1. To explore Ao’s *Laburnum for My Head* from the Deep Ecological perspective of Arne Naess.
2. To understand the ecological self-realization leading to the ecological continuity of the human and the nonhuman world considering the claim of inherent intrinsic value of all the entities.
3. To critique anthropocentrism, focusing on ideological transformation.

Analysis

The Laburnum and the Essential Worth of Existence

Talking about anthropocentrism, the human world has always considered the nonhuman world to be present because human beings have shaped the essential qualities of these elements, which means that man’s pride makes him believe that the nonhuman world has value only because humans have added value to it. This limits our understanding of knowing that every life on Earth which the “biologists classify as

“nonliving”; rivers (watersheds), landscapes, ecosystems” (Devall & Sessions 71) has its own value inherent in itself. As the first basic principle of Deep Ecology states, “The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes” (Devall & Sessions 70).

For Lentina, the Laburnum was not merely a tree of yellow blossoms blooming in the month of May every year. The urge to plant laburnum was not to adorn her garden with beauty. Lentina’s admiration was because these flowers dispelled the feminine beauty which was unlike the Gulmohars that were brazen with the dark warm tone of orange and pink. However, more than that, “the way the laburnum flowers hung their heads eastward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture” (Ao 2). This humility here talks about the inherent value independent of its use by humans for their own purpose. This value of the laburnum exceeded its usefulness to Lentina or the community, silently teaching the Anthropocene to humble their ways and look at each entity with humility, cultivating the same within. And this same humility is shown by Khalong, who unexpectedly sold his plot of land adjoining the cemetery to Lentina and also Babu, the confidant of Lentina, who was with her in all her desires of Laburnum, planting the saplings in secrecy as per her mistress’ wish and showing her soft humility by wanting her mistress not to “let everything slide and simply bow out of life, with a contented sigh” (Ao 16). He wanted her to live for long, and when he saw initial shy showing in the first May after planting, “He was both happy and afraid: happy because the long cherished desire of his mistress to see a laburnum bloom had been fulfilled; afraid, because he instinctively knew that as soon as Lentina laid eyes on the blossom next May, she would conclude that the right moment to leave the world has arrived” (Ao 16). This thus proves how a tree teaches morals through an abstract quality, something that is not forced by humans but something that is in its magnificent stature, thereby proving Deep Ecology’s argument that “the presence of inherent value in a natural object is independent of any awareness, interest, or appreciation of it by a conscious being” (Devall & Sessions 71).

Death, Interconnectedness and Ecological Flourishing

Human authority has taken over all the nonhuman entities and ideas not only during their lifetime on earth but has not spared to show their anthropocentrism even after their death. The gravesites are the perfect examples. The erecting of the concrete structures as a homage to the dead speaks of man’s trying “to cling to a make-believe permanence, wrenched from him by death...specimen of human conceit” (Ao 1) and the headstones “in the old cemetery bear the mute testimony to duties performed by willing and unwilling offspring and relatives” (Ao 2). What draws attention is whether the headstone actually talks of life’s continuity in comparison to something that leads to continued existence, describing the vivacity of life. As states Ao in her *Laburnum for My Head*

The laburnum tree on the other hand, is alive and ever unchanging in its seasonal cycles: it is resplendent in May; by summer's end the stalks holding its yellow blossoms turn into brown pods; by winter it begins to look scraggly and shorn. Springtime brings back pale green shoots and by May it is wearing its yellow wreaths again, to out-do all the vainglorious specimens erected in marble and granite. (2)

Lentina made her way to the graveyard for the final rites of her husband, and standing amongst the headstones, she “began ruminating on man’s puny attempts to defy death; as if erecting these memorials would bring the dead back to life” (Ao 4). Humans are not barred from modifying the earth, they have been and will still be modifying the earth continuously, so as Deep Ecology principles state that “the

slogan of “noninterference” does not imply that humans should not modify some ecosystem as do other species” (Devall & Sessions 72). What is the matter of concern is the extent of such interferences upon nature. Deep Ecology aims for extended areas of wilderness and near-wilderness which are to be preserved keeping in mind the flourishing of life forms. Lentina decided to “have a laburnum tree planted on her grave, one which would live on her remains instead of a silly headstone” (Ao 4). So, with this deep-seated desire in her heart, she bought the plot of land which she donated to the Town Committee for the extension of the old cemetery with certain conditions, the foremost being “...only flowering trees and not headstones would be erected on the gravesites” (Ao 12). After her death and her burial, every May laburnum blooms on her grave and this noninterference, which was backed by her desire, displays the entire plot with not a single monument made of human interference in the shape of a headstone, but in place of them “flowering bushes take root, blooming in their own seasons on the little mounds dotting the landscape. Hibiscus, gardenia, bottle-brush...comprise the variety of flowering plants...and a few Ashoka trees standing on the far edges also seem to be doing quite well” (Ao 20). Thus, as Naess’ philosophy states that “large wilderness areas are required in the biosphere to allow for continued evolutionary speciation of animals and plants” (Devall & Session 73), similarly Lentina’s laburnum connects death with growth, regeneration, and flourishing. It allows for transformation and continuity within the ecological cycle.

Laburnum and Ecological Self-realization

The hedonistic gratification makes one see the self as the egoistic striving towards individual growth and salvation, overlooking the existence of other selves. However, one has to remind himself again and again that his existence as a self is not in isolation from the other. Instead of competing with egos, one has to start identifying oneself as a human with the other human as equal partners. However, as Arne Naess discusses

Deep Ecology's sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world. We must see beyond our narrow contemporary cultural assumptions and values, and the conventional wisdom of our time and place, and this is best achieved by the meditative deep questioning process. (Devall & Session 67)

Lentina’s relationship with the laburnum was so deeply rooted that she started to see her own self in the laburnum's yellow blossoms. This connection gave her the realization that made her resist many of the human-centred and socially imposed ideas of identity. As tradition states, it is the men who are to accompany the dead’s last rites to the graveyard and have to stay back and supervise the burial procedures until the erection of the temporary fence and the crucifix and the headstone. Women are barred from entering the gravesite, no matter what relation they must have had with the deceased. Pulled by a certain impulse at the sight of the hearse, Lentina showed her desire to go to the gravesite, but showing the hedonistic gratification of the imposed rules of identity, “her words were met with silence” (Ao 4). But she despised those silent stares and entered the graveyard only to decide on the planting of laburnum over her own graveyard and help in the flourishing of life. Her rejection of the social rules and expectations society puts on women was a self-realization she was blessed with only because of her attachment to laburnum.

Furthermore, in the time of her health deterioration, the very news of the saplings thriving provided her “with the will to live where food and medicines seemed to have failed...there was a heading towards a healing that was more than physical” (Ao 15). Lentina’s equating herself with the tree aligns with what Bill Devall and George Sessions write in their work *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered*, saying

“...the realization of “self-in-Self” where “Self” stands for organic wholeness. This process of the full unfolding of the self can also be summarised by the phrase, “No one is saved until we are all saved”, where the phrase “one” includes not only me, an individual human, but all humans, whales, grizzly bears, whole rainforest ecosystems, mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on. (67)

This self-realization of Lentina made the laburnum thrive, which majestically bloomed on her crown once every May, stating that the human Self is no different from the ecological Self of the nonhuman entities which are usually overlooked by human hedonism. Lentina thus achieved a fuller sense of herself through her relationship with the laburnum, letting it survive after all the failed attempts, bringing in that ecological egalitarian umbrella.

Conclusion

Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* shows the passionate desire of Lentina for the covering of her burial with the buttery-yellow blooms of laburnum, bringing the deep understanding of human unprecedented control over the environment, which Deep Ecology states is a form of “species chauvinism” (Sessions xiii). The concrete headstones in the old cemetery show how man has gone to the extent of controlling and overcoming mortality by dotting the gravesites with the make-believe of humans that talks of permanence of the deceased even after death. The pulling out of the small saplings by the gardener, along with the spraying of the deadly concoction of DDT, is more than what speaks of the Anthropocene man has become, going to the far end of stopping the “continued evolutionary speciation” (Devall & Sessions 73) of all the big to the tiny species which appear small but play their own intrinsic roles in the ecological flourishing. However, Ao, through her protagonist's move, challenged the entire concept of human conceit of man controlling species for their own selfish fulfilments when the new gravesite saw no more lack of thriving but saw an “environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality” (Ao 20). Beyond anthropocentrism thereby demands a change, an ideological transformation whereby the human world has to live in harmony with nature, knowing the intrinsic worth which the entire nature carries. The wrong belief about the more than sufficient availability of resources must be transformed, knowing that species are limited and their extension is essential with a non-dominating self-realization, a common thriving with mutual reverence and interconnection. Ao's Lentina and her laburnum urges the readers to move toward and for ecological renewal.

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