

Of ‘in-between’ Spaces and Varied Transgressions : Reinterpreting Women-Nature Relationships in Temsula Ao’s Writings

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Abstract :

The allegiance of women to the world of nature in most of Ao’s writings gives birth to a malleable responsibility to create and invent, to produce a strong sense of geography. There are some stances which we need to discuss herein. Firstly, a woman is shown to assume the autonomy of different life worlds. Interestingly, Ao’s texts unfold certain set-ups of formative and transformative human action and historically shifting values. Ao’s women characters do justice to the writer’s romantic aspiration of giving voice to the voiceless and empowerment to the powerless in the invasive stretch of her land. Secondly, the rhetorical questions on fragmented world-views, on a litany of disaster, are taken headlong by her women characters. The fractured Naga lives dictated by violence and insurgency, troubled at the face of manipulation, violation, and betrayal, find a moment of release in that robust moment when the women are placed as enunciators and transgressors of normative spaces. The woman finds herself in the free space of the groves and forests, marshlands and water bodies, places that reflect her resourceful, elusive, and wily ways of life. By roping in instances from Ao’s collection of short stories, *Laburnum for My Head*, the paper aims to look at women-nature relationships which unfurls a fertile site for developing a praxis of ‘in-betweenness’; a node of intersection between the human and non-human that relies deeply on shared nourishment, love and sustenance.

Key words: *Eco consciousness, Ecology, Non Human, Eco feminism, Space, In-betweenness*

Introduction

In Temsula Ao’s writings we come across women navigating in the face of the most pressing dangers in the Naga territory. Most of the women imagine life-affirming alternatives, and these imaginations through time and space make her interrogate the human-caused environmental changes which are further punctuated by capitalist agendas, patriarchal power and ideologies. This kind of female embodiment engages in a dialogue, a natural link between sustainability and search for one’s roots. Women are seen to scale heights as only they have the “insights into fostering environmental sustainability on multigenerational timescales” as their ecotherapy can be effective in everyday life, not to mention the disaster ridden Nagaland, its varied sociopolitical terrains, mostly desiccated and arcane (Douglas viii). Conscientiously overseeing the green vistas and demographic spaces, women extrapolate from medicine, biology, astronomy, and contemporary science to address matters related to “pregnancy and childbirth, climate change, psychic capabilities, and post-capitalist economics” (Douglas 2).

Female Bodies as Transgressors

Ao in her writings depict ecological and feminist possibilities for women, but there is also a shared masculinist anxiety which fills the narrative structure of a text with radical shifts. The men are claimants and producers of a cautionary tale of anthropocentric destruction and Ao’s insistence is that in the process of demonstrating an anthropocentric continuity we need “to reverse course and provide humanity with a second chance to develop a sustainable inhabitation of Earth” (Douglas 2). Lentina in “Laburnum for my Head” shows a similar misapprehension as she questions and fails to stick to a series of dichotomies like the pastoral and the urban, reality and utopias, the private and the public, and the human and the non-human providing us the scope to mix myths and narratives, feminist standpoints and varied depictions of nature. Her body that becomes coterminous with a specific tree, the laburnum, reverses the current trajectory of ecocide and also, counters hetero-normative politics. Incidentally her body cannot find a place in a totally domesticated biosphere, in the artificiality of “consecrated ground...choked in the specimens of human conceit” (Ao 1).

“Three Women” attempts to understand acts of transgressions in terms of the voices of the narrators, their stories being woven into modes of oppression. Liberation from oppression provides the trajectory of transgression that draws special attention to the act of speaking for oneself— re-emphasizing the dictum that the ability to speak empowers people and this discourse of being heard and seen, in a way, also expresses their empowering. The three women, Martha, Medemla, and Lipoktula cultivate a voice, a fact that exposes the complex connection between discourses of transgression and the working of power. In the sphere of everyday life, their transgression precisely begins as a combative act, a polyvocal

enterprise that counters not only the dialectics of power but also nourishes a clairvoyant confrontation with the other, chiefly the aggressor and the perpetrator of masculine violence (Agger 62-63).

Lentina's act of smirking on the very day of her husband's funeral, her obsession to grow laburnum plants and her non-traditional ways of life finally culminate in an eco-spectacle, a theatrical device of exuberance—the laburnum tree. The laburnum trees in resplendent yellow blossoms attracting everyone's attention have the power to immortalize Lentina. The tree is described as such in the short story:

So ends the story of the un-dramatic life of an ordinary woman who cherished one single passionate wish that a humble laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her crown.

And every May, this extraordinary wish is fulfilled when the laburnum tree. Planted on her gravesite in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town, bursts forth in all its glory of butterfly-yellow splendor (Ao 20).

There is a peculiar pleasure she derived from the thriving laburnum trees at the end—the trees do not make any reference to history or origin, but they point to an abstraction that leads to a celebration of ephemerality, of spectacle. The tree is an object that endows her with the attribute to transgress the limits of oppression codified in many ways and at many levels. The static tree, immobile and non-motile, can be pitted against the human world, a space populated by body movements, speed and acts of motion. Interestingly, the tree embodies transgression as a point of cancellation of spatial/territorial reference-points. The tree mimics the objects in complete disarray in the human world, subverts the concept of order and of regulative norms. There is no utility of directive paths, no creation of a larger structural paradigm in the world of nature. Perhaps that's why the laburnum tree unshackles Lentina and infuses a new sense of freedom in her. There are no senseless and repetitive networks of "object paths" as the tree produces an inertial constraint on the viewer who prefers to proceed logically from one object to the other (Baudrillard 31).

The act of transgression herein lies in Lentina's answer to the loss of temporal continuity through the tree. She sees the rapid movements that societal demands evoke as a kind of constraint. The tree stands for those spaces which cannot be visualized and thought about, democratic and egalitarian spaces that deride the inevitability of speed. The accelerated pace of a woman, she being on her toes all the time, she playing multiple roles—there is a desire to transgress the strict patterns of life and palpably rediscover the freeways and passageways that create an in-between space or a space within a space. The laburnum trees are not things but relations. Her special labour in growing them affects their materiality, thus, lending them discernible peculiarities, contours and forms.

In regard to "Three Women" Lipoktula's rape by Merensashi creates a space of initiation that is lethal. This space attempts to conceal the scars and pain of the woman; this space does not leave any trace behind. Desiring "an uncultivated, amnesic intoxication", the man stamps on the woman's body a code of silence and forgetting (Baudrillard 6-7). Rape is an articulation of various spatial verbs and adverbs; it is a grammar of creating a space that relies on the notion of materiality of the body, the vitality of controlling it and owning it through violent penetrations. Power invested in authoritarian figures like Merensashi within the societal structure of living and sustaining manufactures a variety of processes and relations of domination. His overpowering presence, his gait and his insatiable sexual urges produce social cleavage and fractures, power's hegemonic verticals.

Lipoktula's final revelation about her "participatory submission", however enables her to produce a new mode of knowledge— she dissolves the idea of disciplinary punishment and disrupts our sense of what is the right thing to do (79). This critique serves as a functional mode that provides an alternative account of who she is and what she desires as a woman. She turns this narrative of victimization around and enhances the possibilities of blowing away hegemonic coherence. Rape ceases to be rape when the woman's consent is involved.

On a different note, in "Three Women" the communicative potential of Lipoktula's silence can also be termed transgressive. Pierre Macherey says that such an act "assigns speech its exact position, designating its domain" as silence, herein, becomes the centre and principle of expression, speech's "vanishing point" (Saltz and Krashner, 2006:96). Lipoktula is seen to keep mum about her rape and consequent pregnancy. It seems speech eventually has nothing more to tell us. Ao makes us investigate the silence, for it is the silence that hides a semantic load. Silence speaks about the registers of political cultures, and it is the rhetoric of the unspoken, the non-vocal that substantially qualifies for a woman's presence/absence as wielders of social discourses. However, in Lipoktula's case, her silence is transgressive as it is created purposefully to elude others, primarily her husband the Merensashi. Her silence does not exhibit a complicit process of submission, rather it hides at its heart the power of revolt. After all, it was she who consented and was receptive to Merensashi's sexual prowess.

Of Mothers and Motherhood

The act of transgression subverts a naïve acceptance of rules, also resists coercion, constraint, and domination. In "Three Women" a form of gaiety and merry-making infuse fresh elements to the narrative. The procedure of giving birth, and also motherhood is celebrated in three generations. The conditions of pregnancy, however, expose a specific

technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. Martha, the dark skinned girl with a mop of unruly curls who is called a “coolie” by her friends and classmates much to her chagrin is not the actual daughter, but is adopted by Medemla. Lipoktula was raped and impregnated by Merensashi. Her daughter Medemla, however, is unaware of the identity of her real father. Martha, towards the end, gives birth to a baby boy. Ao uses a potent language to describe the bond between the three women as such:

Apok, the new father, who is watching the activities of the women from the doorway, now comes forward, directing his gaze towards the bed in order to have a closer look at his just-born child. But his vision is obstructed by the daunting circle of the women, these three different kinds of mothers, standing as though mesmerized by the miracle of new life. He is reluctant to break the spell and, feeling like an intruder in a sacred ceremony, slips out unobserved (Ao 80).

Motherhood, here, becomes a mode of transgressing the limits of a disciplinary society; the three women enter a liberating space of care and cure, love and alchemy, an act that binds them in a bond of shared goals. Motherhood relies on moments of transformation and change, but it also became a device to systematically expel the man, the father, from its ambit as shown in the mentioned scene above. In “Three Woman”, the process of giving birth points to valuing the gain of the body through doubling up or producing another body, and it also brings out the body’s potential to challenge patriarchal norms and structures in the text. Although the woman’s body is a postulant to explain the resistance to a male-centric world, it also represents historically contingent social practices of a specific locale. On the other side is the force of moral signature of a society on the mother-figure, the extent to which the society allows liberty to do, feel or think certain things. The women in “Three Women” represent the oppression of the past that has been inscribed on her body, and also the viability of transformation. The body is used as a site of power and resistance. Giving birth celebrates a grey space, an in-between space, as a remarkable change takes place when the baby comes out—the head first, then the whole body:

The growl she emits is like nothing these women who have participated in many deliveries, have ever heard, and as the last hiss leaves the throat, one of them shouts, ‘I see the head, one more push, baby, just once more.’ Martha hears her and with an ultimate effect gives another push and the baby slithers out of her exhausted body. The baby’s wet and slimy contours as it surges through the passage produces such a sensuous effect on Martha that she will always remember it as more sublime than the transient ecstasies of sex (Ao 79).

However, the initial state of Martha’s and Lipoktula’s pregnancies are put under scanner— this makes us wonder how women get programmed by the social conditions in which they find themselves and also on why they accept being programmed. As a “mode of assujettissement”, women are “invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations” (Foucault 264). But in Ao’s story the women destabilize the limits of the present order and represent a form of critical resistance to a power that, in Butler’s words, sets the limits to what a subject can ‘be’, but beyond which it no longer ‘is’. Also, failing to conform to the condition that the norms define who one is, these women by resisting insubordination creates an organic grammar of transgression. This transgressive space harps in all the resources available, both internal and external, and make the women reign supreme on both their physical terrain and mental landscapes. She, in a way, is the creator here. Medemla, Martha and Lipoktula are no longer trapped in a world that all the time pushes its limits.

Martha writhing in labour pain, thus awaiting a moment of genesis, is in a state of acute anticipation. What emerges after a while is a baby, a validation of her power to create or a real moment of exactitude and clarity. Here, the mother’s body is the shifting intersection between that which it carries, contacts, touches and that which it separates. This ostensible reformulation of subjectivity that motherhood initiates, the individual’s change of social status, or passage into a different category of social membership, and the women being a self-aware author of their own social conduct and product add certain layers to the process itself. In this context, motherhood leaves open the empirical question of whether, and to what extent, the self really is changed? Does it trace a woman’s trepidation for remoulding herself? Does it provide a self-conscious and sensitive understanding of her body which she posits in the interstices of social relations?

The Laburnum Tree: An equivalence of both the human and non-human :

Lentina’s obsession for the laburnum tree throws light on a “conjunction” that one is able to enter into and through which one is able to exercise her desire. This orientation balances green ethics, personal standpoint and social context in defining the woman’s identity. Lentina’s acute awareness of natural sites and materiality and their interrelation and mutual affectivity bring forth the question of ethics— can we include the capacities and abilities of the human world without creating damage to the non-human plane? Can we create an assemblage of the green objects ridden by human objectives? Her preference of a natural burial furthermore shows the organic relationship between nature and women and the bounds of this special communication and representation. The rejection of man-made artifacts and gravesites after her death makes Lentina the champion of a natural cause.

The headstones in the old cemetery bear mute testimony to duties performed by willing and non willing offspring and relatives. The laburnum tree on the other hand is alive and ever changing in its seasonal cycles: it is resplendent in May; by summer-end the stalks holding its yellow blossoms turn into brown pods; by winter it begins to look scraggy and shorn. Springtime brings back pale green shoots and by May it is wearing its yellow wreaths again, to outdo all the vainglorious specimens erected in marble and granite (Ao 2).

In no way her stance privileges the human, autonomous, sovereign subject, rather for her the laburnum tree becomes a continual investment of energy. She tries to gender the tree, and locate it in the site of memory and permanence. This urge is beyond notions of female labour, utility, regression, and the restricted economy of the *oikos*, the hearth and home. Lentina is no more tied to the agonizing process of strife and anguish that every woman in a traditional society knows and experiences. She is a body without control and even after her death she will live and thrive on as the tree will always bear the marks of her subjective impulses. No longer complicit in the process of her self-formation, Lentina will eventually live in other viable forms of life, the laburnum trees.

Lentina's death at the end converges with a woman's right to control her body, becoming not just a question of sympathy or concern, but of what rights one could exercise, or what justice requires. In short, it is a matter of doing what is not permitted or what is termed as impossible. This stance will flourish and flower, not wither away with time. The laburnum trees strengthen Lentina's relationship to/with herself, and make her strive towards self-formation and self-fulfillment.

Conclusion :

The women in the concerned stories disrupt conformity to a universal moral law or societal norm. The aesthetics or the means of a woman working on herself gets manifested in her act of confession (to readers)— Lipotkula states that she enjoyed physical intimacy with Merensashi even though we are made to think that apparently it's an intercourse by force at the beginning. Also, motherhood is projected as a source of empowerment which takes in its fold human creative and libidinal energies as portrayed in the case of Martha, Medemla and Lipotkula. In a similar vein, Lentina experiences herself as an agent of power, rethinks the logic of social interaction, chiefly on how unstable it is to rely on other's values, or to fall into the irrational relativist trap of others' judgments. Ao takes the readers by hand, makes them proceed through the labyrinthine alleys of the text just to arrive at an ephiphany, a discovery of an important aspect of life. This leads to the extrapolation of knowledge of a particular situation, phenomena, and event into generic explanations. By putting the female protagonist in the centre stage, Ao makes her undo partialities and political ideologies. Proved to be a

useful tool for transgression, the women, far from being a retreat from the world, engages with the green world of nature in the production of knowledge, non-restrictive and unbound. Also, she subtly comments on contemporary politics, discussing particular events and trends rather than specific agendas. Taking a resort to nature, the women simulate activity that contrasts with the ground level death and sufferings of the present time.

The thrust here is to project transgression as an economy of production, a fact that has a self generating, self referring value. This act also has the potential to upset the politics of the patriarchal world order. Moreover, this politics converts the mass into cohesive entities. The women, however, provide an unexpected resistance to this; their power lies in their inertia. The allegiance of women to the world of nature here gives birth to a malleable responsibility to create and invent, to produce a strong sense of geography. She is shown to assume the autonomy of different life worlds, and interestingly the stories unfold certain set-ups of formative and transformative human action and historically shifting values. The rhetorical questions on fragmented world-views, on a litany of disaster, are taken headlong by her women characters. The fractured Naga lives dictated by violence and insurgency, troubled at the face of manipulation, violation, and betrayal, find a moment of release in that robust moment when the women are placed as enunciators and transgressors of normative spaces.

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