
**TRANSGRESSIVE FEMININITY AND SILENT REBELLION IN
TEMSULA AO'S *LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD***

R.Mercy Annuncia¹

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, A.V.V.M Sri Pushpam College
(Autonomous), Poondi, Thanjavur, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Palkalaiperur,
Tiruchirappalli-24, Tamil Nadu, India
mercyanu23@gmail.com

Dr.N.Latha²

Assistant Professor & Research Advisor, A.V.V.M Sri Pushpam College (Autonomous),
Poondi, Thanjavur, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Palkalaiperur, Tiruchirappalli-
24, Tamil Nadu, India
latha07@gmail.com

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Abstract: Literature gives enjoyment and appreciation through analysis and description of humans and non-humans. Man and woman were highly influenced by the social environment and it has been reflected in all literary works. Literature is like an art and few people will become artists through revealing all unnoticed events by other humans. Literature has acted as a lens where people can examine society and explore the living souls. This Paper reveals the hidden truth and identity behind the North-Eastern people living in Assam and Nagaland. The North-Eastern part of India has been always known for its uniqueness and mysterious life led by the native people and tribals. People from North-Eastern states living their primitive way of life between myth and reality. Both men and women living in these particular states undergone physical trauma, mental trauma and social conflicts in an isolated area. This paper attempts to interpret the representation of nature, animals and women as empowered characters in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for my Head*. Temsula Ao's work especially short stories explore the themes of environment and gender roles. The main aim of this paper is to portray women as transgressors and depict women not only as sufferers but also as resilient individuals by breaking all stereotypes rooted in a myth. This research analyses chosen short stories of Temsula Ao and investigates the role of women interconnected with nature in North-Eastern states.

Keywords: North East India, Trauma, Transgressors, Environment, Human emotions

Introduction: North East India is considered as one of the most attractive regions which is known for its beautiful mountains and rivers. The North Eastern region has always been an

unexplored heaven of India but is well known for its unique culture and traditional life. The North Eastern regions fondly known as “Seven Sisters” comprises of seven states, which are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Every tribal group in this region has their own tradition, culture, food and crafts. The North Eastern region flourished with humans and a variety of natural resources. North East Indian literature is truly believed as an expression of human conditions and representation of poignant life. This literature writings act as an element of the survival and traumatic experiences of different tribal groups living in seven states. The emerging writers in English from North Eastern India are Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Robin S Ngangom, Janice Pariat, Mitra Phukan and Jhanavi Barua.

Among all North East writers, Temsula Ao is one of the first Naga writer in English with par excellence. Temsula Ao is a renowned English poet, writer and retired professor from North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Temsula Ao is known as a great ethnographer who penned various cultures and customs in her writings. She was a loving teacher and caring mentor at NEHU University. Temsula Ao’s poetry, fiction and non-fiction prose mainly represented the culture and traditional practices of Naga people. As a member of the Ao Naga community, Temsula Ao’s works depict myths and folklore of the Ao Naga community. She expressed the pain and damage done to her people and voiced out the survival progress of Naga women in extreme difficult conditions. All her works stressed out the fact that woman always survived and being proud as an ambassador of her community. She has published seven collections of poetry and three collections of short stories. Temsula Ao is a proud recipient of prestigious Padma Shri award and her legacy will be cherished for making a monumental contribution to Naga culture. In this research, the researcher selected few short stories from Temsula Ao’s second collection *Laburnum for my Head* to examine the contributions of women in family and society amidst extreme hardships.

Laburnum for my Head, a collection of short stories was written by Temsula Ao and it was published in the year 2009. It consists of eight short stories representing the lives of Naga and embrace a human emotion. Temsula Ao described pursuit of happiness and extreme pain of humans and non-humans in her collection of short stories *Laburnum for My Head*. Temsula Ao has used simple language with numerous themes and concepts in this work. Each story of this collection presents the optimistic nature of every women characters. The author begins the book with the lines, “Stories live in every heart, some get told, many others remain unheard – Stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination”. Temsula Ao received a prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013 for her second collection of short stories *Laburnum for my Head*. This study explores the journey of women from the stories “Laburnum for my Head” and “Three Women” as a discourse between transgression and conflicts.

Role of Transgression: The concept “Transgressor” is a difficult character to describe in simple terms. The word transgressor originated from the Latin word “Transgressus” which means to step across and beyond. According to Bible, transgressor or transgression is the

“exceeding of limits and breaking the rule”. This form of transgression will always be acted as a rebellion for one’s own authority against family and society. Transgression can be exceeding boundaries and breaking stereotypes in living places. Many Indian Writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Manjula Bhai, Temsula Ao and Pratiba Ray’s female characters were resisted and they accepted challenges against societal norms. Women as transgressors faced many consequences such as mental trauma, physical trauma, internal conflicts and social issues. Thus, transgressions can be a form of resistance against patriarchal structures and social inequalities.

Transgression can be vary based on different situations depending on the context and categorized into four distinct modes such as psychological rebellion, breaking societal roles, seeking justice and refusing victimhood. Psychological rebellion serves as an authoritative power and have both positive and negative impact. It may lead to changes in human behaviour such as isolation, empathy, social conflicts and pursuit of self-forgiveness. Breaking societal role involves moving across the boundaries, challenging cultural myths and traditional practices. In some extend, transgression is expressed as a refusal of victimhood. Self-forgiveness is an effortful process of not being a victim and accepting the failures and rejection. Through these various modes of transgression, Temsula Ao characters in select stories confront adversity, break challenges and emerged as a resilient individual.

Women as Transgressors: Suffering and trauma are unavoidable parts of human existence. To overcome all struggles, women were forced to become transgressors. Transgression is not limited to breaking the rules but creating a peaceful livelihood based on their strengths is often projected as transgression. Women were subjugated as transgressors in select short stories of Temsula Ao and ignored all stereotypes. Temsula Ao adopts a transgressive mode in her short stories, portraying fictional characters through breaking the laws and exceeding limits in separate zones. The researcher discusses specific female characters from Temsula Ao’s short stories and highlights the concept of fulfilling personal desires by crossing societal boundaries. The characters Lentina from the story “Laburnum for My Head” and Martha, Medemla and Lipoktula from the story “Three Women” were resilient and navigate their experiences in a transgressive way.

In the first story, “Laburnum for My Head”, Temsula Ao represents Lentina as a strong-willed and passionate woman who played a significant role as a transgressor through emerging a small desire to grow laburnum bushes in her own garden. These majestic trees are well known for their magnificent yellow flowers which will bloom and hang downwards gracefully. The Laburnum flower symbolizes beauty, humility, prosperity and joy, flourishing during the month of May each year. Lentina a passionate lover of nature was deeply admired these flowers which are considered merely personal and she saw a symbolic connection between the laburnum flowers and femininity. This silent fascination of Lentina for yearning beautiful laburnum trees represents the act of silent rebellion of breaking societal norms. “She had always admired these yellow flowers for what she thought was their femininity” (Ao 2).

Temsula Ao depicts Lentina as a strong admirer of nature and transformed her into a transgressive woman who strives hard to grow laburnum trees despite several challenges. After her husband's death she had a deep sensation of planting laburnum bushes beneath her gravesite and not to have a gravestone. Lentina planned to grow laburnum bushes before her death and decided to make her gravesite a splendid beauty. Her unwavering determination and constant desire to grow laburnum trees doesn't make her weak and feeble. Rather, she turned into a more impulsive character, stronger and powerful after so many failures in three consecutive years. Her transgressive actions include breaking the myths of her culture and challenging the taboos practiced in her traditions by accompanying her deceased husband to the gravesite, planning to grow laburnum trees in the gravesite instead of keeping tombstones and pre-booking her burial plot before death.

These actions reflect her inner strength and resistance where she is taking control of her death and also achieved her desire by growing laburnum bushes. She visualized the enchanting beauty of laburnum flowers at her gravesite before death. Unlike many other women, she does not suppress her feelings. Instead, she blooms like a laburnum flower after enduring numerous struggles. According to Lentina, death is not a place to feel and feared but rather a moment to be cherished. Finally, she achieved her desire and received a peaceful life after her death. Temsula Ao proved the character Lentina as a transgressive woman by breaking myths and taboos to regain her peace and identity through death. Ao also picturized Lentina as a wonder woman and not like a normal woman who goes beyond normalcy to accomplish her dreams. "The un-dramatic life of an ordinary woman who cherished one single passionate wish that a humble laburnum trees should bloom once a year on her crown" (Ao 20).

The next story, "Three Women" is a fascinating narrative about three women from three different generations. In this story all female characters are transformed into transgressive woman by refusing to accept victimhood. The first character Martha has heart-wrenching story because she lost her mother during childbirth. Her mother's death deeply affected her father who became more aggressive and refused to accept Martha because she is girl child. Medemla working as a nurse at the hospital came forward to adopt Martha as she herself was living alone. Temsula Ao represents the human trait in Medemla's action of adopting a child from different tribe. Despite Medemla's decision, the poor girl Martha was still considered as a victim of racial discrimination due to her dark complexion both at school and in the neighbourhood community. After discovering her true identity Martha refused to see herself as a victim instead embraced with love and care given by Medemla.

"She was in school and coming closer to us said in a clear voice, 'Mother, I may look different from you or grandmother or from all others in the village but I feel no difference in my heart'" (Ao 71).

The second character Medemla has mysterious and tragic story. Medemla stepped out as a warrior after experiencing rejection and betrayal from her lover. Her love life was destroyed because of her own mother's traumatic past as she was raped by the father of Medemla's lover. Temsula Ao portrays Medemla as a second victim and made Medemla's character stronger through adversity. She started to lead her life alone with full happiness and purpose. According to Ao-Naga tribe, the customary age of marriage is between sixteen to seventeen years. However, Medemla rejected this cultural expectation and chose to remain as single unmarried woman. She adopted Martha who belongs to the tea tribe despite facing many challenges. Medemla became a source of inspiration for others, not only as a supportive mother to an abandoned child but also as an independent woman showcasing her individuality and strength.

The third central character in the story is Lipoktula who endured her life by carrying the painful secret behind Medemla's birth. She kept the incident of her rape a hidden truth and Lipoktula's nightmare started when she received a letter from Medemla about her lover. The hidden truth of her rape becomes the silent foundation of her existence. Temsula Ao gave a powerful description of a sexual violence happened to a lonely woman and explores female sexual desires through the character Lipoktula. "Why I not resisted more vigorously, screamed or even scratched his face when he was groping for my sex? I could not explain my own conduct" (Ao 74). Lipoktula reflects self-blame and confusion often experienced as victim of sexual assault. Later, she redirects her life towards raising Medemla with care and devotion as a dutiful mother. Lipoktula chose to live with a lie rather than revealing the truth which will destroy everyone. She never considered herself a rape victim through the act of self-forgiveness.

Temsula Ao framed these three women as miraculous embodiments of survival and resilience. These women were interconnected through birth, experience and emotional sensibility. In this narrative, Ao presents transgression is not merely breaking of societal norms, but also a conscious refusal to remain passive victims of violence.

Conclusion: Temsula Ao represents silent rebellion of women who defy social expectations to pursue their desires and establish their identities. Through her depiction of transgressive women, she promotes themes like self-empathy, self-identity and peace. In the story "Laburnum for My Head" the character Lentina portrayed as an independent and powerful woman with wild dreams. To pursue her passion, Lentina embraced her identity as a Law-breaker. Temsula Ao constructs Lentina's character as rebellious figure who strive tirelessly to interconnect her soul with nature. The transgression spirit implied on Lentina's nature when she decided to reject all taboos and myths. For Lentina, psychological rebellion and breaking societal roles became essential paths to fulfil her dreams. The next story "Three Women" depicts bold, courageous and sensational characters. Martha, Medemla and Lipoktula were vibrant, empowered and determined individual characters through navigating their own paths to survival. Temsula Ao differentiated each character through their strength and power. All three attempt to become a transgressive figure by standing alone and taking

control over their lives. Thus, Temsula Ao portrays transgression in not only a rebellion but the act of survival and creating identity against societal norms.

Temsula Ao written this work in a simple style using descriptive imagery. Symbolism plays a central role in her work to reflect emotional states of her characters. There is a significant potential of further research in Temsula Ao's work *Laburnum for My Head* especially in trauma theory, gender studies, eco-criticism, cultural Identity and ethnic discrimination. The researcher may also explore narrative techniques and thematic analysis from her contemporary works to gain deeper insights.

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