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Reflection of Cultural Ecofeminism in Temsula ao's story "laburnum for my head"

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Abstract

Cultural Ecofeminism propounds that women have more affinity with nature because of their superior attributes like modesty, motherhood, caring and nurturing. Cultural Ecofeminism concentrates on the association of the essence of femininity with nature. This paper attempts to explore Temsula Ao's short story "Laburnum For My Head" in the perspective of cultural ecofeminism and assesses the protagonist Lentina in the same light. Lantana's epiphany sensation draws the story to cultural ecofeminism. Lentina can be closely associated with the unnamed protagonist in Atwood's *Surfacing*, who wants to diffuse herself among nature. Lentina also wants to get blended with nature in her other phase of life which is eternal.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Cultural Ecofeminism, epiphany sensation, essence, femininity and attributes.

Ecofeminism is one of the branches of feminism that concentrates on environment and its relationship with women. The thinkers of ecofeminism fall on the concept of gender to focus the relationships between humans and the natural world. Ecofeminism is one of the concepts in the human sciences. The human sciences analyse social, biological and cultural aspects of human life. Especially, ecofeminism is a call out to women to save the planet. The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by a French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme On la Mort* in 1974. Françoise asserts that women are life-givers, life-preservers whereas men are exploitative, plundering and subjugating both nature and women. This paper attempts to explore Temsula Ao's short story "Laburnum for My Head" in the perspective of cultural ecofeminism and assesses the protagonist Lentina in the same light. Cultural Ecofeminism is otherwise called as spiritual ecofeminism, another branch of ecofeminism that speaks about the value of nurture, compassion and humanity towards nature. The term 'Cultural ecofeminism' was first proposed by Carolyn Merchant in her book *Radical Ecology*, "...cultural ecofeminists tend to value intuition, an ethic of caring, and human-nature interrelationships." (pp. 193-221) Cultural ecofeminists encourage an association between women and environment. They argue or propound that women have more affinity with nature because of their superior attributes like modesty, motherhood, caring and nurturing. They tend to value qualities identified in women and their reflection in action. Cultural ecofeminists analyse the psyche of women who are very much sensitive towards the voice of nature. Starhawk, one of the cultural feminists, propounds three concepts of earth-based spirituality. The first concept is 'immanence' that presupposes that the Goddess exists in all the particles, the second concept refers to the 'interconnection' that spots the oneness between the natural cycle, the third concept details the 'compassionate' lifestyle of women with nature. Cultural ecofeminism desires to replace the God of patriarchy with the Goddess of humanity in relation with nature. Its motive is to recreate an egalitarian harmony between the human and nature by erasing all the hierarchical thinking and dualism. Temsula Ao was born in 1945 in the Assamese town of Johan. She is a short story writer and ethnographer. She is a retired professor of English at North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). She served as the Director of North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur from 1993-1997. She is known for her famous short story collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. As an ethnographer she is known for her ethnographical work *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* which is the most authentic documentation of the Ao-Naga community. She was the recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award in the year 2013 for her short story collection *Laburnum For My Head* which was published in the year 2009. Temsula Ao, in her interview, opines that "Laburnum For My Head" advocates, "a woman's sensitivity would be a fit vehicle to advocate such revolution concept in a patriarchal society." The eight short stories in *Laburnum For My Head* are about the lives of people from the vibrant and troubled region of Nagaland in northeast India. "Laburnum For My Head" is the first short story that details the life of the protagonist Lentina and her concern for mother nature. It is a simple yet powerful story sketching the psyche of a woman and how her attributes are connected with nature and her environment. This story can be reflected as a commentary of traditional norms and cultural values which mutes the voices of women. The story revolves around the Naga woman Lentina and her unusual obsession for the laburnum tree. Lentina desires to have laburnum bushes in her garden. The laburnum tree holds wild yellow flowers with the buttery texture and the flowers hung towards the earth. She wants to bring this wild beauty to her garden because she associates the attributes and essence of femininity with these flowers. "The way the laburnum flowers

hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture.” (2) Though she tries very hard to grow laburnum trees in her garden, she fails in her attempt to do so. Growing laburnum trees in her garden becomes her passion and obsession. Her family members are afraid of her strange unhealthy fetish for laburnum trees and begin to talk openly about this in close family gatherings. “She could not understand their concern and was inwardly hurt by their seeming insensitivity to beauty around them.”(4)This evidently portrays the epiphany sensation that Lentina holds towards her environment in particular, towards the laburnum trees. She encounters the striking sudden realization that she wants the laburnum tree amidst her. After the death of her husband, an impulse urges her to join the group of men accompanying her husband on his last journey. Usually, women do not partake in the last rites at the graveyard in her tribal commune. However Lentina takes a bold decision to join the rituals in the burial ground. There she witnesses the erection of memorials using expensive and luxurious stones and granites. She ponders over the cheap mortal beings and their desires to be luxurious even after their death. The gravestones are the result of the useless attempts made by their relatives to maintain the status of the dead ones. Then she ardently decides that her grave should be ornamented with the laburnum trees. “...all she had craved for was a spot to be buried where a laburnum tree would bloom every May.” (11)Laburnum tree stands as the symbol of nature to Lentina who wants to deconstruct all the ornamental headstones and replace it with the natural ornaments, the laburnum blossoms. She believes that the laburnum tree will outshine all the conceited structures raised in granites and marbles. Even before her death, she wants to see the blossoms of the laburnum in her gravesite. She wishes not to get buried among the ridiculous stone monuments of the big cemetery but to sleep peacefully amidst the laburnum trees. She desires nothing other than that. She approaches Babu to prepare a secluded place for her grave. Khalong, a poor man whose land is near the extension of the graveyard, finds it difficult to sell it. Lentina appears as a Goddess to him when she purchases his land for her gravesite. She instructs Babu to plant Laburnum bushes in her gravesite. She feels excited and visits the gravesite daily and waters the plants. She prepares a room for her eternal life and yearns to get diffused amidst nature. The concepts of cultural ecofeminism very much reverberate in this short story through the character Lentina and her affinity with nature. The story clearly portrays how the essence of femininity safeguards nature with a philosophical touch. The voice of nature is heard by Lentina who is very keen towards it. She wants to plant laburnum trees in specific, since she attributes the flower with one of the essences of femininity called modesty. The story clearly depicts Lentina’s motherhood, her nurturing and caring nature. Essential differences can be witnessed in this story where Lentina’s family members are insensitive towards the environmental cues whereas she creates a grip in nurturing nature that shows her motherhood. In spiritual ecofeminism, nature is adorable with the philosophical attributes of women which is the core essence for the presence of nature. The protagonist Lentina can be equated with the unnamed protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, who links her own life with the other beings of nature to perceive the rhythm of nature “the lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing”(S 251)Lentina also diffuses herself with nature and throws away all the civilization that destroys the biosphere. She nurtures the trees as a mother to be one with nature after her death which shows her affinity towards the sacred mother earth. She overthrows all the worldly things behind and dedicates her life for her passion of nurturing nature. After fulfilling her passion, she dies and enters into the eternal world with the crown of laburnum blossoms.“...the story of the unromantic life of an ordinary woman who cherished one single passionate wish that a humble laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her crown.”(20)The entire terrain, which is amused with the bloom of laburnum trees with its bright cue modestly hanging towards the Earth, now hangs their heads in shame.

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