



Roots, Memory and Resistance in Temsula Ao's 'Laburnum for My Head' and 'The Talking Tree'

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Abstract

This research article seeks to examine how Temsula Ao uses ecological elements and presents non-human agency in her two short stories: "Laburnum for My Head" and "The Talking Tree". The objective is to incorporate a close reading of the texts by using a theoretical framework of Posthumanism, with a specific emphasis on the New Materialist approach. Temsula Ao's writing repositions the anthropocentric concept of human exceptionalism by foregrounding the plants and all other ecological assemblages. The new materialist thinkers suggest that these non-human elements are active participants in the meaning making procedure. Here, Ao uses an experimental narrative technique that follows Naga oral story telling tradition. She not only disrupts the established and accepted hierarchy, but also makes the readers aware of the on-going debate on ecological precarity. The vividly described Laburnum tree from the short story "Laburnum for My Head" serves as a living counter monument to challenge the human memorial practices, through its long, cyclic life span that configures how a person is remembered. Similarly, the forest in other short story "The Talking Tree" serves a common space where all the flora and fauna communicate with each other, while they create a faction to resist human exploitation of their home and values. The paper tries to highlight the "vital materialism" of these "things" by adapting a reading strategy centered on nonhuman representation. The ideas of Jane Bennett (on "Vibrant matter") and Rosi Braidotti (on "Posthuman subjectivity") are integrated here to conceptualize the agency of the plants. The study is an attempt to situate the North-East Indian writing with global discussion on ecological vulnerability by putting forward the Naga indigenous knowledge system, as represented in Ao.

Keywords: Memory, Nagaland, New Materialism, Plants, Temsula Ao.

1. Introduction:

1.1: Temsula Ao and her world:

Temsula Ao (1945-2022) belongs to the Ao-Naga community of Nagaland. The socio-cultural identity of the community is embedded in oral narratives, agriculture and eco-spiritual practices. Her short stories represent how Naga indigenous knowledge system is rooted in ecological system. She has established her own identity in the map of Indian Writing in

English (IWE) with her vivid representation of North Eastern socio-cultural dynamics. While working as a professor of English at North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), she established her name as a creative writer and an ethnographer. Her works reflect her resistance against the national forces that place her native region at the periphery, as evident in the works like *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2005). Her obsession with the North Eastern Landscape is apparent in how she incorporates the green and serene landscapes in her writing. For her short story collection *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), she was conferred with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013. Previously, she won the prestigious Padma Shri Award in the year 2007. In her article "Writing as Affirmation", published in *Indian Literature* (the bimonthly journal of Sahitya Akademi), she critiques the composite identity of the North East India by highlighting the uniqueness of the region's each state, and the tribes within these states: "... these writings deserve more than the cursory perusals as 'categories' that they are subjected to at the moment." All the communities of all the states of North East India have their own cultural heritage and, by mapping them into the same category it denies the individuality of the different communities.

The historical background of Ao's works is very significant to understand her political anxiety. While she describes a state full of earthy colours, she also deals with the violence that has created political upheavals in the state, for decades. Nagaland has gone through one of the longest insurgent movements in the entire Asia. It began in the 1950s, right after the independence of India. The Naga community was resisting the inclusion of Naga territories into the Indian Union, as it was termed as an "excluded area" by the British Raj: "The NNC claims that, except for a century of British rule the Nagas had never been subjugated and ruled by any other people and had never been a part of what today constitute the Indian Nation." (Misra 94) Indian Government had introduced the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) to combat the defiance of the Naga freedom movement. In the introduction of her collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2005), Ao recalls the failure of the Naga Struggle:

"Nagaland's story of the Struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got rewritten into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome." (x)

It resulted in constant surveillance, disappearances, disappointments and fear in the everyday lives of the Nagas. At the same time, Ao doesn't ignore the picturesque landscape of Nagaland and the indigenous way of living in her short stories. The environment that nurtures her mind is also a central element in her works.

Her short story collections *The Tombstone in My Garden* (2022) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) echo her anxiety for the contemporary ecological crisis and the need to acknowledge the indigenous knowledge systems. The relevance of the study lies in addressing the research gap that the existing scholarly work on Ao focused only on her portrayal of insurgency and the post-colonial trauma. It almost neglects her ecocritical, posthuman understanding and the focus on the non-human elements in her short stories. This paper is an attempt to highlight these environmental reimaginations from a New Materialist, Posthuman perspective. Ao's use of oral storytelling technique and ecological consciousness in her fictional work breaks away from the traditional storytelling techniques. The selected short stories for the study "Laburnum for My Head" from *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) and

"The Talking Tree" from *The Tombstone in My Garden* (2022), depict a system which rejects the long-standing duality of 'human' and 'non-human' by decentering the human from the "Anthropocene". The term was coined by Paul Crutzen to define the human centric approach continuing from generations to generations. The ecological participants in these short stories: the plants, rivers, animals, and landscapes function as active characters who possess their own power to memorize, react and show resistance. The narratives reflect her credence in the indigenous ecological belief systems which hold that nature contains both spiritual and active elements people require for existence, alongside all other living things. In a time where global warming and climate crisis is the central debate in the intellectual community, a posthuman reading of her short stories unveils the need of ecological awareness to combat the underlining problems. While it moves the focalization to the subjectivity and agential characteristics of materiality, it redefines how physical space or other non-human elements transmit or invoke memory. The attention to the entanglement of the participating forces critiques the traditional construction of the "other". It signifies the contribution of literature from the North East India towards reconceptualizing the ecological system.

1.2. Literature Review and Research Gap:

As Tamsula Ao established herself as an eminent author in the map of Indian Writing in English, the focus of literary researchers shifted to her oeuvre. The existing literature on her work primarily looks at the representation of North East Indian Landscape and Naga insurgency. In the research article "Traversing the "margins", Interrogating the Center: A Critical Rereading of Tamsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*", Bharti Arora illustrates how the short stories of Ao expose the violence against women in Nagaland, in the time of insurgency. The article locates that the day-to-day struggles of the Naga community is vividly depicted by Ao. It highlights the patriarchal structure of the societal system that turns a woman's life into a living hell. Where as in the research article "Role of Women and Environment in Tamsula Ao's *"Laburnum for my Head"*", Kailash Kumar studies the relationship of woman's mental health with its environment. This eco-feminist perspective emphasizes on the importance of ecological conservation along with female progress. Saranya Chandrasekaran, Rajakumar Guduru and S. Karthick in their paper "Ethno-cultural Identity of North East India with Reference to Tamsula Ao's Select Poems" asserts that Tamsula Ao revitalizes Ao-Naga culture and way of life by merging by regional, historical, feminist elements with ecological representation. Similarly, Shruti Mishra in her paper "A Socio-Semiotic Study of the Select Poetry of Tamsula Ao", calls her writing as a semiotic act of meaning making that not only helps in the reconstruction of Naga ethnic identity, but also preserves cultural memory. In the research article "Versifying Culture", S. Chakraborty highlights the ethnographic elements in her writing that situates the Ao-Naga identity in the socio-cultural context. He posits that her works can be considered as an act of Ao-Nagas' resistance to colonial, modernized forces in order to protect their traditional identity.

The existing literary research on Tamsula Ao's writing focalizes only on the descriptive qualities in her work: from identity crisis to subjugation of women, and from environmental representations to Ao-Naga indigenous knowledge system. It is apparent that there is a research gap on understanding the agential characteristics of the nonhuman entities, as represented in her works. Although the researchers have started to explore the ecological

themes in her fiction, most of them remain within an ecocritical framework: considering nature as just a symbol. The existing research considers the nonhuman elements in her oeuvre as passive, not significantly active as highlighted by new materialist theorists like Jane Bennet and Karan Barad. Thus, this research is an attempt to analysis her short stories from a posthuman standpoint, to understand the entangled relationships.

1.3. Research Questions:

Through the paper, an attempt is made to address the following questions:

1. How non-human elements in the short stories of Tamsula Ao have their own agential existence defying the traditional worldview that considers them as passive?
2. How the objects in these narratives hold memory and help it transmit from one generation to the other?
3. How Tamsula Ao represents the indigenous belief system that echoes the ideas of the New Materialist perspective?

2. Research Method and Theoretical Framework:

The study is an attempt to analyze two short stories of Tamsula Ao "The Talking Tree" and the Laburnum for My Head". The research follows an analytical and interdisciplinary approach that seeks to conduct a close critical reading of the mentioned short stories. The research is qualitative in nature. The theoretical perspectives used here include posthumanism and new materialism.

2.1 The Posthuman Subjectivity:

Posthumanism, emerged out of the poststructuralist intervention with modern day physics, biomedical studies and a few other disciplines, established it as a dominant theoretical framework in the recent times. It critiques the anthropocentric conception that supposed that the humans are at the center of the meaning making process. The relevance of this framework is that it addresses environmental catastrophe by decentering the humans, and by shifting its focus to the epistemic entanglement of the forces. Rosi Braidotti, in her seminal work *The Posthuman* (2013), asserts: "The post-anthropocentric shift marks the end of the exceptionalism of the human". (67) The posthuman thinkers posit that all the participants in the meaning making process: human, non-human, the environment and the technological advancements, come together to form a network while every participant is active and equally important in the process: "a vital entanglement of heterogenous scales, times, and kind of beings webbed into fleshly presence, always becoming, always constituted in relating" (Haraway 163). Similarly, Rosi Braidotti focuses on the nonunitary characteristic of subject: "The Subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human relations" (51) By decentering human, it highlights the agency of the non-human that includes material forms from ecological elements to the human made objects. The contemporary posthuman reading in literature, incorporates a reading of the agential and affective power of these non-human elements, in order to offer a new horizon in understanding materialisms.

2.2. The New Materialist turn:

Though the former movements of 'Materialism': "Historical Materialism" (associated with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels) and "Cultural Materialism" (associated with Raymond Williams) emphasized on the participation of the material culture in the social progressions, it speculated its passiveness. The previous materialist approaches limited the role of material

culture to economics, literature and a few other discourses. While 'the New Materialist' turn is in the view that the material elements have their agential position called "Agential Realism", in its interaction with the other 'actors' in its ongoing inter-activity. (Barad 184) Similarly "Material Engagement Theory" (MET), proposed by Lambros Malafouris suggests "a co-extension of the mental with physical" (5). It is an essential idea that incorporates 'things' with cognitive activities like 'remembering'. Jane Bennett, in her seminal work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) discusses the 'vibrant' nature of matter, expanding Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "Material Vitalism", highlighting the 'active' nature even before the inter-agent interaction: "Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption." (Bennett ix) Jane Bennet challenges the western philosophical position that posits that only the human beings possess agency. It is against the standpoint which views the nonhuman as a passively existing entity. Her argument is that different objects such as plants, foods, metals and other possess what she calls "thing power". She describes it as the ability to influence the humans and it also forms the foundation of "affect studies". This vitality of 'objects' is the groundwork of the theoretical framework used here and paves the path for a posthuman, new materialist reading of literature, to analyze the author's engagement with the 'non-human'. New Materialism is a pivotal movement of the posthuman thought and being." Ao's literary works also represent that environmental elements are not just passive entities but active participants in the "intra-action" of forces, as described by Karan Barad. As in Ao's narratives these elements take the center stage, a new materialist analysis will highlight a new way of reading her oeuvre.

2.3. Recent developments in Plant Biology and Environmental Humanities:

The few last decades saw an agentic turn in Plant Biology and Environmental Humanities. These developments made a new materialist reading of the select short stories more relevant. Using interdisciplinary approaches, the researchers illustrated that ecological elements like plants, forests and microorganisms have their own autonomous existence. What separates these claims from previous claims is that they are based on scientific methodology. At the same time, academic research is also going through a transformative phase. The disciplines are asserting a rupture from the traditional fixed boundaries by adapting an interdisciplinary approach. As a result, new research areas like Digital Humanities, Medical Humanities, Blue Humanities etc. are emerging to the forefront. Similarly, Environmental Humanities emerged from the convergence of Environment Science, Environmental History, Anthropology, Critical Theory and a few other related disciplines. The recent developments in Environmental humanities changed the way we perceive ecology. Monica Gagliano, in her seminal work *Thus Spoke the Plant: A Remarkable Journey of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries and Personal Encounters with Plants* (2018) provides experimental evidence that the plants have their own process of memorizing things, challenging the concept of their passive existence. Her experiment with the plant *Mimosa Pudica* demonstrates that plants can develop their habitual activity by conforming to repeated stimuli. It has the capability to retain learned responses over time. By establishing that the plants take active participation in the ecological network, Gagliano has asserted that the plants have affective characteristics that influence other species. Similarly, in the book *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (2021), Suzanne Simard demonstrates how the trees exchange carbon, nutrients and chemical signal through their definite fungal networks. She incorporates an

isotope tracing experiment to delineate the unique communicative strategy employed by the plants. As these claims are based on scientific methods, these discoveries have strengthened the philosophical movement of New Materialism: which focuses on the “vitality” of material beings. By analyzing the short stories of Temsula Ao from a new materialist stand point, the study highlights the presence of a “object-oriented-ontology” (OOO) in her works.

3. Discussion

3.1. Desire for a living memory: “Laburnum for My Head”

The story “Laburnum for My Head” is a deep exploration of how the non-human, especially the “plants” possess their own agency and vital materialist nature. It also presents how these entities construct a remembering path, for us to return to a moment/person again and again. The process of remembering is too complex in nature, inducing debates among the neuroscientists. Though earlier it was believed to be a haphazard cognitive process, the recent developments in the neuroscientific domain acknowledged the physical embeddedness with our mind i.e. we remember through “things”. In the book *How Things Shape the Mind* (2013), Lambros Malafouris scientifically explained this “mind-things” embeddedness. Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory” suggests that a “thing” emerges when that object stops functioning normally or exceeds its ordinary usefulness: “things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility”. (5) Similarly, Gaston Bachelard, in his classic *The Poetics of Space* (1964) argues how spaces are psychologically alive: “The house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.” (6). The graveyard setting in the story also carries on Lentina, the protagonist’s aspiration to challenge the human memory making process, through concrete structures. From a posthumanist lens, this setting is not a passive backdrop but a space with affective qualities: to invoke emotive, cognitive flow.

The story begins describing the cemetery as “choked with the specimens of human conceit”, highlighting the bleakness of the concrete memorial practices. (Ao, Laburnum 1) Lentina’s critique of the human attempt to commemorate which is temporary is being contrasted with the cyclical renewal process of the natural elements. The author describes the ecological participants in vivid detailing: “That particular spot displays nothing that man has improvised; only nature, who does not possess any script, abides there: she only owns the seasons. And the seasons play out a pantomime of beauty and baldness on the trees standing on the edge of the lifeless opulence, spread over the remains of the assorted dead: rich and poor, young and old, and mourned and un-mourned.” (Ao, Laburnum 2) Ao, left no stone unturned in her depiction of Lantina’s obsession with the Laburnum plant, following an oral narrative style. She bought some saplings and started planting it in her garden, with full dedication. Though there was no lack of effort from her side, luck was not in her favour. While, some cows trespassed her garden one day, the saplings also faced challenge from DDT sprays from the health department: sharing a similarity with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). This intervention reflects how human activities have resulted in the environmental precarity. The human centered approach has made the humans take actions that deployed the ecological harmony: the anxiety in the environment thought made us to shift to posthuman turn.

Towards the conclusion of the short story, the plants are depicted as lively and affective echoing Jane Bennet’s notion of “Vibrant Matter”:

“...flowering bushes take root, blooming in their own seasons on the little mound dotting the landscape. Hibiscus, Gardenia, bottle brush, camellia, oleander and croton bushes of all hues comprise the variety of flowering plants, and at one or two spots you can see some jacaranda trees trying to keep up with the others.” (Ao, *Laburnum* 20)

The contrast between the plants and the gravestones here is significant in order to analyse the affective properties of the both: the cemetery adorned with the colourful plants can sow the seeds of positivity in the human minds while the gravestones reflect the futile attempt of humans to hold something which is temporary. While the personal achievements of a human are lost in the wave of time, the nature celebrates a collective identity which recycles, regenerates from time to time. Lentina's desire for the Laburnum tree for her gravestone reminds us the fact that humans are also a participant in the Barad's ecological “intra-action”, crushing the concept of human exceptionalism that we the humans are in same level with all other elements reflecting the posthuman chain of being. The author carefully depicts the seasonal change: “The laburnum tree on the other hand is alive and ever unchanging 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 scraggly and shorn. Springtime brings back pale green shoots and by May it is wearing its yellow wreaths again...” (Ao, *Laburnum* 2) This passage highlights the laburnum tree's continuous cycle of growth, decline and then renewal. The detailed portrayal of each season highlights the natural rhythm of the Laburnum tree. The human ideas of memory depend on permanent monuments erected so that they act as a reminder. Pierre Nora, a French historian, in his essay “*Les Lieux de memoire*” explains that in the modern era, when the lived memory is disrupted by human activities or ecological calamities, the humans practice artificial process of remembering, termed “sites of memory”. These physical spaces have become a symbolic element of a community's collective heritage. In the short story, where the gravestones are the artificial sites of memory, Lentina's ambitions for the Laburnum tree as her memorial site represent the twenty first century urge to return to the living memorial practices etched in the collective consciousness. Whereas the material memory has the question of permanence, the laburnum tree presents a form of memory based on temporal change and renewal. Though it seems that the tree is moving towards the finality, it continuously returns to regenerate itself.

The philosophical and emotional depth of the story appears in Lentina's changing attitude towards the Laburnum tree. At the beginning of the story, she admires the Laburnum tree for its aesthetic presence. She is attracted to its feminine nature and the graceful way in which it “hung its heads earthward”. It is interesting to note that the tree has affective influence in the mind of the protagonist. Her response is shaped by the gentle and elegant stature of the tree. However, the appreciation of Lentina takes a philosophical turn as the story progresses. The tree forced her to rethink about her conceptions about death, memory and fragile nature of corporeality. An epiphany signals her idealistic transformation:

“Lentina decided that she did not want any such attempt at immortality when her time came..... why not have a laburnum tree planted on her grave, one which would live on over her remains instead of a silly headstone? This way

even her lifelong wish to have such a tree close to her would be fulfilled."
(Ao, Laburnum 4)

The rejection of the "silly headstone" is very significant here. Lentina rejects the human conception of permanence and memorialization through artificial ways. It is the flow in human belief system that humans think that human life is the central element of the inter-species network. That is why the humans attempt to make a human life permanent even after the last breath, through the "sites of memory". But in reality, individual position of humans is very short lived. Our attempt to commemorate through "stones" and "monuments" would eventually fail in the litmus test of time. This same idea is presented in the poem "Ozymandias" by P.B. Shelley. Ozymandias (Ramesses II) was the Egyptian Pharaoh who was very proud of himself and his deeds. Though he believed that his political domination will be timeless, time has made him irrelevant and also forgotten from the historical timeframe. Whereas the natural elements: plants, forests, rivers and others defy the logic. These elements regenerate and reconstruct themselves from time to time, in order to adapt themselves to the resistance from the environment.

In the short story, the Laburnum tree goes for a transformation in each season, making itself anew every time. The lifecycle never ends for nature, if we consider it from a regenerative perspective. But for humans everything ends with death. Human life is a nothing but a short journey where society constructs the "selfhood" and, all the material duties come to a conclusion with the last breath. William Shakespeare has put it beautifully in Act 2, Scene 7 of *As You Like It*:

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages" (Shakespeare 139)

Lentina's decision to choose the laburnum tree for her resting place reflects a posthuman understanding of life and death. It also reflects her recognition of the impermanence of human lives. Instead of trying to preserve her individual identity, she chooses to be a part of larger ecological processes. The idea is very similar to Rosi Braidotti's idea of "affirmative becoming". According to Braidotti, life should be understood as a continuous process, instead of the idea of fixed self. Lentina's body after her death will transform to another living matter. It presents the posthuman subjectivity of identity. The framework defines death as a force which creates a new life, and transforms it to a different identity, instead of bringing life to the end: "flourishing in perfect co-existence, in an environment liberated from all human pretensions of immortality" (Ao, Laburnum 20) It suggests the complex phenomena of the presence of humans and nonhumans at the same space. In his relationship human remains, soil, plants and seasonal cycles are inter-connected in what Karan Barad calls "Intra-action." Similarly, according to Donna Haraway, the entities don't have their autonomous existence before the relationship takes place. Instead, identity is constructed in the interactive process. She terms it "becoming with."

The relationship between Lentina and the laburnum tree is one of the most important aspects of the story. It becomes evident that Lentina does not treat the tree as her property. Instead of considering it as "thing" under her control, Lentina forms a mutual connection with the tree. Karan Barad is also in the view that beings are shaped through their

relationship with one another. The connection becomes more visible towards the end of the story. Lentina was aware that her time in the world is soon coming to an end. Still when she looked at the blooming Laburnum trees, she had a sigh of satisfaction knowing that the Laburnum flowers will be there with her even after her death. Lentina's life will be continuing through the "butter-yellow beauty" of the Laburnum trees. The seasonal cycle of the tree completely changed her perspectives. Mortality is no longer viewed as an absolute end but beginning of a fresh ecological life. This is the philosophical undertone of the short story. The obsession of Lentina with the trees and flowers expresses some sort of anxiety. This anxiety is the reflection of the generational anxiety, due to the global issues like ozone depleting or the "El Nino" effect. The mental health of Lentina is also directly related to the health of the laburnum trees. From an existential position, it was her passion for the flowers and plants that keeping her alive and awake, providing her the meaning of life. Another interesting part is how Lentina has emphasized on the feminine nature of the Laburnum flowers, echoing the "ecofeminist" consciousness of the contemporary time. To sum up, the narrative articulates a posthuman vision in which plants are not passive symbols, but the active agents of memory, continuity, and meaning.

3.2. "The Talking Tree": from vital materialism to inter species communication

India's Forests: Revisiting Nature and History (2026) by Arupjyoti Saikia and Mahesh Rangarajan provides a deep exploration of how forests have their own unique position in the ecological system, across the historical timeline. They are not only the ecological participants, but also sites of indigenous legend, memory and scientific knowledge. The introduction to *Forests and Ecological History of Assam 1826-2000* (2011) synthesizes how the colonial forces have blamed the local population for the ecological precarity, while establishing their identity as the ones behind colonial modernity: "The Commerce of forestry and the peasant society were considered responsible for deforestation". But the reality is that the colonial exploitation paved the way for a future exploitation of the forests, in the name of modernity. Here, the problem is the human exceptionalism, irrespective of the community. Though the North East Indian Tribal Knowledge system endowed a spiritual position to the forests, time has come where the region is in the verge of environmental vulnerability. Thinker Vandana Shiva also critiques the development projects that destroy local ecologies in the name of progress. In her celebrated work *Monocultures of the Mind* (1999), argues that colonial modernity has created "monocultures" not only in agriculture but also in thought: "Monocultures first inhabit the mind and then transferred to the ground." (7)

The "The Talking Tree", from the collection *The Tombstone in My Garden*, presents the forest as a space where the "assemblages" meet, interact and address the burning question of global crisis. The author has given human like characteristics to the plants and the animals to blur the established boundaries between human-nonhuman, subject-object, nature-culture etc. At the same time, the non-human elements are given an agentic position that aligns with the new materialist philosophy of "things", echoing thinkers like Karan Barad and Jane Bennett. In the beginning of the short story, the immediate damage caused by the storm is placed alongside the long-term environmental damage by the human activities. Both the colonial and postcolonial forces are to be blamed for their reckless destruction defying all the ethical boundaries. The story centers around the forest as it functions as an active system that contains affective strategies. The significance of the forest lies in the fact that it performs a unifying agent for the all species that considers the forest as their home.

Though it provides them the space to come together to resist the human forces, the opening scene presents a landscape marked violence, which is not exclusively human. The storm is described in almost apocalyptic terms:

“The ravaged landscape... looked like a scene from a nightmare... The upturned roots of huge trees and their broken branches... This scene reminded one of a huge battlefield in the aftermath of a war where the dead and mutilated bodies lie at grotesque angles...” (Ao, Tombstone 73)

The “ecocritics” observe the “historical timeline” and posits that violence against nature exists beyond human destruction and extends into all natural ecosystems. Here, the narrative uses human destruction as a second layer of violence after the natural forces itself act as the destructive forces. The storm fells the trees, but the humans seek to commodify their remains: “cut these pathetic specimens into firewood... we’ll recover some of our investment.” (Ao, Tombstone 75). The centrality of the narrative zooms into the Tiny, the sapling who challenges the human domination through its own uniqueness. The author has bestowed Tiny with supernatural forces and dark powers to resist the human intervention. The author resists Tiny’s interpretation from two perspectives: first is the anthropomorphic approach that will consider Tiny as human being with human emotional qualities. The second reduces him to a symbol of Indigenous resistance or environmental precarity. Instead, Tamsila Ao presents Tiny within a posthuman framework where Tiny is continuously reconstructing his identity. The surrounding environment and his interaction with other species have contributed to construction of the identity. This is similar to what Donna Haraway has discussed about the concept “becoming with”. It refers to the interconnected reality of all living things. It describes how humans and nonhumans continuously shape and influence each other, dismantling the idea of independent existence. Tiny’s consciousness and ethical understandings emerge from these interactions.

As he is interacting with other participants, he is developing more humanistic characteristics. His fear, which he describes as “he began to feel the first sensation of something fear”, delineate his transformation from a human like being to a complete self-aware entity. The phrase “something like fear” reflect that the author doesn’t directly assign a human emotion to Tiny. The significance of the phrase is that it recognizes nonhuman forms of emotions, subjugating the passive properties endowed to the nonhuman entities. At the same time, he is not a fixed character. Ao represents it as an entity who is navigating through various forms of identity which aligns with Rosi Braidotti’s notion of ‘Posthuman Subjectivity’ where a participant constructs its identity in the inter-entity relationship, instead of having an autonomous identity beforehand. Another important aspect is that Tiny has the intelligence to comprehend the human motives. He understands how the forest as a site of “commodification” for the humans: they will plant the trees, take care of it and use them according to their material need. Through an epiphany, tiny resolves to fight against the humans whose primary objective is to destroy its home: the forest. He is aware that only a unified force can allow them to protect their land. After his appeal to the elephant “dada”, he urges his fellows:

“My dear brothers, tonight we will not sleep because we are going to give a decent burial to our fallen brothers... we will consign our friends to the waters... so that they find peace...” (Ao, Tombstone 81)

“Death” or “Burial” is a recurring motif in the works of Tamsila Ao. The titles of the selected short story collections reveal this obsession. The burial site itself is deeply ecological and

spiritual: "Oh, Mighty One above/ Creator of us all/Big or small... receive these souls..." (82). Here, the author constructs a cosmology in which all beings are part of a shared ontological order. The sacredness of the ecological elements gives us a glimpse of the Naga tribal indigenous knowledge system where spirituality is combined with the landscapes. The unity and agency of the animals align the narrative with the "animal turn" in contemporary thought. Jacques Derrida, in his work *The Animal that therefore I am* (2022), asserts: "The said question of the said animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what respond means" (377); challenging the traditional philosophical belief that animals are inferior because they cannot "speak" like the humans. Similarly, Giorgio Agamben also shares his view on human/animal debate in the work *The Open: Man, and Animal* (2004): "The conflict between the human and the animal is decided within man." (22) According to Agamben, Western philosophy defines "human beings", in opposition of "animals". He critiques how humans are believed to possess characteristics like "reason", "consciousness" and "morality", while animals are imagined as beings driven by instinct or biological life.

The short story frequently uses kinship terms like "brothers" and "friends" to delineate the relationships between the species. These terms are not just used to enhance the aesthetics of the story they suggest that the concept of "belonging" is not limited to the species only. Instead, a species belongs to inter connected network of shared environment and shared vulnerability. This idea is very similar to Donna Haraway's idea of "making kin", in her seminal work *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). She argues that based on mutual responsibility, humans and nonhumans can construct meaningful relationships. In the short story, the forest demonstrates the idea of "kinship" by organizing a burial ceremony for the fallen trees. Terms like respect and dignity are not limited to the humans only. The forest community recognizes the fallen trees as valued member of forest eco-system. Ao assigns a spiritual element to the forest community with the burial prayer. The prayer presents all the entities as a part of a shared creation. But it doesn't simply express an existing sense of community. These actions help to strengthen the community. Here, different entities are reinforced through these rituals. The ceremony becomes a process of ecological world-making. It has allowed the forest community to affirm the ethical values of nonhuman life. At the same time, the prayer also reflects Ao Naga indigenous belief system. They consider nature as living and meaningful. In this sense, the forest is not simply a source of resources but an intersecting point of inter-species communication.

The transformation of Tiny to the "talking tree" represents the ecological evolution that carries forward the past events and memories. The narrative shifts from immediate action to the mythic temporality. The tree stands as a unique tree which has large trunk diameter, tall height and curved waist that extends its branches towards the river. It exists as a living record that preserves all the historical events from earlier times up to today. Interestingly, the large trees contain a little sapling that connects the present condition of the tree with the distant past: "the post memory" that the new generation has to acknowledge the experiences of the previous generations, which they didn't directly experienced but inherited (Hirsch 22). The image expresses one of the central ideas in the story i.e. memory is not stored in fixed objects but it becomes alive through the regenerative process of ecological elements, as also seen in the story "Laburnum for My Head". The tree doesn't simply remember history, but it carries through its entangled process. The short story also challenges the notion that

communicative faculty is exclusive to humans only. One of the important moments in the story occurs when a villager says, "he can talk." But the story never explains how the tree communicates. We may assume that it communicates through sounds, physical presence or through ways incomprehensible to humans. But the recent developments in Environment Science had proved that trees communicate with each other. For example, in the book *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (2021), Suzanne Simard has explained how the trees communicate through similar carbon isotopes as signals. These developments have made the short story more relevant. It is difficult to come to conclusion whether Ao was aware these developments or not, but one thing was definite that the Ao-Naga indigenous knowledge system always acknowledged the agential properties of the Environmental elements. At the same time, the material presence of the trees can shape how humans think, feel, and act. In the short story, the talking tree is an illustration of the broader communication system. It also serves as a guardian of ecological knowledge and material memory.

The ending of the story added another dimension to its meaning. Here, we are introduced to an artist and a series of empty canvases. At first, the viewers are confused and frustrated at the same time, because the frames are blank. A normal expectation of the viewers is that art presents something clear and meaningful. However, after knowing about the story of the talking tree, they started to see the canvases from a different perspective. The narrative moves to its posthuman climax where the photograph of the large tree has the signature of "Unknown". The tree was so exquisite in nature that the photographer was astonished at its majestic demeanor and aesthetic appeal. The story describes that the talking tree has some "mysterious energy", signaling its affective qualities. As a result, the boundary between representation and presence is blurred. The artwork challenges the conventional ideas about art. In traditional understandings of art, the artist is considered as the sole creator, adding to the meaning of the art. Here, the author is subverting this relationship. The nonhuman world is the primary creative force behind the art and the artist just acts as a mediator. The signature "Unknown" represents the creator is from a higher realm and we are just the participants in the great chain of being. The identity of a participant is being constructed in the process which claimed by Donna Haraway is "becoming-with". The empty frames are not really empty. They are filled with the presence of tree and thousand stories that it articulates. It encourages the viewers to deconstruct the deeper meanings of the natural world. The future imagined here is not one of technological mastery or human centered progress, but of attentiveness, humility where memory is sustained through living systems.

4. Conclusion and after thought:

Temsula Ao's aesthetic mastery lies in the alignment of her writing with the on-going interdisciplinary debates to develop solutions to move from the ecological precarity to the sub species entanglement. Both the stories, "Laburnum for My Head" and "The Talking Tree" form a powerful illustration of ecological posthumanism. It also stresses on the idea of "Queer Ecology." The stories emphasize the agency, memory and communicative faculty of the nonhuman. They present a world in which humans, plants, environments and the animals are interconnected and mutually dependent. This vision reflects the ecological precarity and the need of an ethical consciousness. At the same time, her writing addresses the issues with Naga insurgency and communal violence. Her obsession with the ecological

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 elements and death represents her anxiety of a concrete materialistic society where indigenous way of living is choked to death. Her non fictional writing also reveals the same. Like Aruni Kashyap, she is also an active participant in the centre-periphery debate.

The study concludes that ecological elements are a recurring motif in many of her writing where she emphasizes on the vitality of "Things". Here, the nonhuman presences in the stories are not just passive participants supporting the plot, but actively engaged with the narrative. Her writing also reflects how the ecological participants hold and carry memories, exemplifying their affecting power. It combines the past with the present and make humans reflect and take decisions. The literary representations connect her writing with posthuman turn in contemporary philosophy and critical theory. Our engagement with such a philosophical position is the need of the hour. Amitav Ghosh, in his work *The Great Derangement: Climate change and the Unthinkable* (2016), claims that the climate change is not only a scientific or political crisis but also a serious crisis in our imaginative faculty. He believes modern literary forms, especially the realist novel, often fail to address this ecological catastrophe. He advocates for alternative cosmologies based on indigenous knowledge system. It can be found in the writers from the North East India like Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai along with Temsula Ao. Future research on these writers from a posthuman lens will pave a way to understand the interconnected network of participating assemblages.

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