

**Appraising “Green Development”: An Ecocritical Reading of Tamsula  
Ao’s *Laburnum for My Head***

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**Abstract**

The existence of human beings presupposes the presence of Nature which gives substantial room to human beings to accommodate themselves in it, none the less; human beings in return turn violent and insensible to it. Being the part and parcel of Nature, everybody has the right to make proximity to Nature but nobody can be allowed to cause damage to it under any circumstances whatsoever. If needed, one can draw sustenance from Nature but nowadays, on many occasions, natural resources are being indiscriminately exploited for selfish interests. Tamsula Ao’s short story collection, that is, *Laburnum for My Head* incorporates two contrapuntal tales—“Laburnum For My Head” and “Death of a Hunter”— at the opening of it to project the long standing tension between radical environmentalism and reformist environmentalism. This paper is intended to bring out this conflict as represented in the garb of tales thereby asking thinkers to mull over the notion of “green development”, paying adequate heed to the necessary requirements of impoverished human beings.

**Keywords-** *Environmentalism, Environmental Economics, Green Development, Globalization*

I

Better when I had only a dilly bag

Better when I had nothing but happiness. (“Then and Now”)

We belong here, we are of the old ways. (“We Are Going”)

**Introduction**

Eminent Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo had composed these lines to take white settlers to task for evicting aboriginal people from their habitats in order to carry out colonial enterprise, thereby resurfacing the veracity of anthropocentrism at praxis. Renowned Academician and short story writer of International repute, Temsula Ao, makes full use of this opportunity to delve deep into the prolonged debate, i.e. the sharp tension between deep ecology and shallow ecology, and divulges the pros and cons of both the sides through relating two brilliant tales. In this context, one may pertinently ask: what is the reason that led a group of environmentalists hailing from the First World to ruminate on the large scale exploitation of natural resources? In *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard has found an answer to this query and said that radical environmentalists intend to “decouple” human economy and natural ecology as far as possible in order to safeguard Nature.

This response may at times seem to be tenable in that environmentalists have openly stood against cruel atrocities of elite men of First World. They are of this opinion that natural resources need to be protected from the ruinous onslaughts of elite human beings and cannot be put at risk. On the other hand, this response seems at once untenable in that all the strands of radical environmentalism cannot be accepted simply because it is fraught with loopholes in it. The critics of radical environmentalism hold that the project of it is an utter failure at praxis. Reformist environmentalists think that anthropocentric viewpoints need to be taken into account, for human beings are very much part of it. This ongoing debate has brilliantly been represented in “Laburnum For My Head” and “Death of a Hunter” By Temsula Ao, thereby tempting readers to make it subject to ecocritical overtures. Whereas the former story celebrates the doctrines of Deep Ecology, the latter turns out to be a critique of the earlier one. The representation of the sharp tension is quite engaging so far aesthetic pleasure is concerned. Thus this paper is intended to investigate the verity of radical environmentalism against the backdrop of socio-cultural scenario of Third World and whether reformist environmentalism can be reckoned as a potent alternative of it. Insights from other disciplines are to be drawn to explore the relevance of the notion of “green development” in this context.

## II

In this paper I intend to exclusively concentrate on the two intriguing tales— “Laburnum for My Head” and “Death of a Hunter”— to unravel the theoretical turns and twists embedded in these tales. The eponymous tale runs like this: The story is about Lentina’s deep and keen, sincere and passionate fascination with laburnum flower which is yellow in colour and usually overlooked by onlookers following its diminutive stature. Right from the inception of the tale, the pretty look of laburnum flower allures to the aesthetic sensibility of Lentina, the protagonist of this tale:

Every May something extraordinary happens in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town. Standing beyond the southernmost corner of the vast expanse of old cemetery— dotted with concrete vanities, both ornate and simple— the humble Indian laburnum bush erupts in glory, with its blossoms of yellow mellow beauty.  
(Ao 1)

The story takes a strange turn when Lentina expressed “[. . .] her desire to have some laburnum bushes in her garden” (Ao 2). Immediately, she decides to plant some laburnum saplings in her garden and to wait until yellow laburnum flowers are blossomed. But unfortunately, each year all her efforts go in vain due to some inscrutable and inexorable forces. For instance, in the first year, all her efforts are marred by the following incident:

One day she heard loud barking and cows mooing very close to her compound. When she came out to investigate, she found that some stray cows on being pursued by her neighbour’s dogs and finding her gate slightly ajar, had rushed into her garden and were blissfully munching on the plants they found there, including her precious laburnum saplings. (Ao 3)

One day Lentina expressed an unusual wish: “... why not have a laburnum tree planted on her grave, one which would live on over her remains instead of a silly headstone?” (Ao 4). She kept it secret to her relatives and decided to buy an empty ground where she wished to be buried and a laburnum tree would be planted: “This is my spot, I want to be buried here when my time comes” (Ao 6). A series of incidents took place and one day she succumbed to her ailments. After her demise, she was laid to rest for good and her gravesite was decked with laburnum flowers as she wished. At last, she found a room of her own amidst laburnum flowers— “... an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality” (Ao 20).

On the other hand, “Death of a Hunter” relates the poignant tale of a hunter named Imchanok. The story comprises his spine-chilling hunting operations. Imcha had been serving in a low primary school as a teacher and along with it; he used to hunt down unruly and disturbing animals that used to spoil his harvest or that of others in his village. Sometimes, he used to kill animals to get meat

for his family. Gradually, his reputation as a dexterous professional hunter got disseminated among others. On one day, suddenly, Deputy Commissioner of Govt. sent an offer to him, i.e. to kill an elephant. He was forced to follow the instructions from the Govt. He was provided adequate arms and ammunitions to execute this assignment. He willy-nilly accepted this proposal and went into the forest with his assistants. Having exerted heavy efforts, Imcha was able to gun down that elephant and consequently was rewarded. After it, he took up boar hunt in the village and emerged triumphant at the end. Finally, he resolved not to take up any kind of hunting offer in future. While going through an awkward headache, Imcha went through a sea change in his attitude to hunting as a profession. He buried his hunting self for good along with “. . . boar’s tooth and dismantled gun” (Ao 40).

What comes out of these two tales is that whereas in the earlier tale, being guided by strong will and passion, Lentina insisted implicitly that we need to be caring and sincere to Nature. In other words, she celebrates ecocentric perspectives through her actions and tacitly upholds the doctrine of Deep Ecology. On the contrary, Imchanok in the following tale discards hunting out of tremendous psychological duress and dilemma created upon him by Govt. Though he quits from his profession, he is a strong believer in anthropocentrism, for he used to hunt animals on the basis domestic needs.

### III

In order to get to the bottom of the two theoretically contrastive tales, theoretical assumptions pertaining to Deep Ecology as propounded by Arne Naess in George Sessions’s *Deep Ecology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* and anthropocentric ideology need to be critically taken into account. Greg Garrard understands Deep Ecology as a worldwide enterprise based on “. . . long term population reduction throughout the world” (Garrard 21). Deep Ecologists are concerned with “. . . encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of human not only toward all members of the ecosphere but even toward all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. . .” (Sessions qtd. in Garrard 22). Deep Ecology demands “. . . the environment movement must shift from an “anthropocentric” to a “biocentric” perspective” (“Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique” 73). It is very critical of global warming, globalization and rapid population growth across the globe and its consequent impacts on Nature. Deep Ecologists tend to approach Nature with an apocalyptic vision that existing natural resources will be exhausted soon if hostile attracts on Nature are not stopped. Deep Ecologists opine that wilderness needs to be guarded from massive destruction for the sake of the human beings and biologists can only be allowed to step in the terrain of wilderness. Apart from it, taking recourse to Eastern spiritual traditions, Deep Ecologists argue that we need to give priority to Nature over human beings inasmuch as without Nature, human beings cannot survive in the world. Deep Ecologists pay little heed to contextual specificities and thus treat environmental degradation as global phenomenon.

The precepts of Deep Ecology have been strongly contested all over the world for its crass generalization of ecological problems. For instance, Ramachandra Guha has taken radical environmentalism to task for paying little attention to anthropological aspects. In “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique” Guha has rebuffed the contentions of deep Ecology and has firmly argued that American Environmentalism in general and the preservation of wilderness is “...positively harmful inappropriate when applied to the Third World” (75). He substantiates his contentions by reminding us of those impoverished people whose bare survival chiefly depends on Nature. They live on Nature and thus their innocent dependence on Nature should not be misconstrued as mere exploitation of natural resources. Guha has blamed those elite people who recklessly cut down trees to set up high-rises or make wooden furniture to decorate their rooms. Guha put it as: “Because India is a long settled and densely populated country in which agrarian populations have a finely balanced relationship with nature, the setting aside of wilderness areas has resulted in a direct transfer of resources from poor to the rich” (75). Guha has implicitly suggested that the forces of globalization have triggered off several problems that are disrupting ecological balance. Being indoctrinated by the persuasive strands of globalization, elite people design to create “free nature” in the name of the preservation of wilderness to make money out of it. Guha understands that nature preservation is “more than a business” in the west and is an ingenious form of the exploitation of natural resources. Though Arne Naess has refuted all the allegations brought against him by Guha in the article entitled as “Comments on Guha’s “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique””, he has subscribed to the views of Anil Agarwal : environmental protection per se is of the least concern to the most of these groups. Their main concern is about the use of environment and who should benefit from it” (Agarwal 167). Guha thinks that the evil intention to loot natural resources needs to be ceased and adequate legal actions must be taken in this regard if required. Equal distribution of natural resources should be carried out to mend certain stereotypical attitudes to Nature. Deep Ecology is proximate to consumerism and thus is impervious to the sufferings of poor men. Guha holds: “Deep Ecology runs parallel to the consumer society without seriously questioning its ecological and social-political basis” (79).

#### IV

It is absolutely baseless and fatuous to claim that Lentina intends to have some laburnum flowers on her grave just to put an end to the familial feuds. Rather, she exercises her subjectivities to confront the challenges that she might anticipate. If it were so, she could have easily chosen any better alternative to settle the domestic disputes. Though financial constraints coupled with her psychological disappointment make her miserable and intolerable, she shows mental strength to come

to terms with difficulties. Had she not been resilient and resolute, she could not have fought her misfortune dauntlessly. Lentina is not at all worried of her femininity, rather is proud of it and subsumes it to be the source of her inspiration against all despair and distress. In support of it, one may argue that had she been scared of her femininity, she would have given up her wish. Being an unflinching votary of Deep Ecology, she kept all her plans secret inasmuch as she wished to censure the selfish thoughts of others. She had to call her plan “a selfish motive” as a strategic ploy to buy the plot from khalong. One may argue that Lentina did not express a wish to have a concrete gravestone due to some financial restraints and was thus forced to wish for a laburnum grove instead. It may be contested by saying that had financial reason been the reason behind it, the narrator would not have firmly claimed: “She had always admired these yellow flowers for what she thought was their femininity; they were not brazen like gulmohars with their orange and dark pink blossoms” (Ao 2). Thus it is quite clear that the probable charges against her do not stand to reason at all.

On the other hand, “Death of a Hunter” stands contrary to the earlier one. Imchanok, the protagonist, is a seasoned hunter and possesses extraordinary skills in it. Reading the text it can be understood that his source of income is cultivation apart from the salary the he gets out of his service in the school. Being driven by urgent necessities, he used to hunt down wild animals either to secure food for family or to protect his land from the marauding march of wild beast. When he is forced to kill an elephant and consequently is rewarded, his conscience pierces his mind thereby leading him to give up hunting as a profession for good. What is striking to me is that when he used to gun down wild animals out of necessity, he did not feel guilty of it. But the when Govt. forced him to kill that elephant, he was battered and buffeted, tattered and tormented by the pricks of his conscience. One may be critical of Imcha’s hunting profession by arguing that he could easily restrain himself from taking up hunting as a profession being a permanent teacher in primary school. But this argument does not seem to me reasonable because Imcha had to kill out of some needs and does not exploit natural resources to gratify his selfish interests. His salary might not be enough for him to run his family smoothly and that is why he could not solely hinge on his job as a teacher. It can be pertinently argued that Imcha quit his job not because he shifted his faith from anthropocentrism to biocentrism but because he understood that reckless killing of wild animals beyond one’s needs is extremely vicious to ecological balance. Environmental economics says that complex issues pertaining to society— poverty, class division, unequal distribution of natural wealth, population explosion, to name only a few— need to be resolved to get the better of the environment. What is important here to note is that the problems of human beings can hardly be overlooked if one really wishes to care for Nature. It could be possible that as Imcha stays away from town, he is naturally deprived of getting modern facilities. In other way, except his job at the school, he does not have much solid scopes of

income. Imcha does not cogitate much on whether he should accept or quit his job inasmuch as he is morally upright and knows that he does not harm Nature. In fact, scientific research proves that small scale hunting does not disrupt ecological balance at all; rather the mass scale hunting wreck havoc on Nature<sup>1</sup>. Population explosion is another reason that puts Nature at risk. It could be possible that Had Imcha not belonged to the lower class and have no financial constraint; he would not have taken up hunting as a profession. The quitting of his job can be reckoned as his tacit protest against the ruthless attitude of elite men.

## V

The juxtaposition of the two contrasting tales at the opening of the book is very significant. What is interesting here to note is that Ao has exhibited her intellectual brilliance in leaving it up to the readers to choose one of the two ecological ideologies. The contrast is intended to facilitate readers to take note of the pros and cons of the conflicting notions. Theoretically speaking, both the ideologies have potentials to vie with each other in equal terms. The refutation of each other's standpoint cannot put an end to the real problems. The tussle between the ideologies has put the improvement of ecological crisis in an impasse and thus the situation gets worse with the passage of time. What seems to me more crucial and challenging than to carry on this debate is to mend the exploitative mindset of elite people. In this regard, insights from ecological economics—the notion of allocation, distribution and scale— can be resorted to delve deep into the conflict.<sup>2</sup> Now one may pertinently ask whether we can take into cognizance the notion of “green development” to bring environmental crisis out of a deadlock. W. M. Adams has worked out “green development” in his work *Green Development: Environment and Sustainability in Developing Countries* and has implored:

Green development focuses on the rights of the individual to choose and control his or her own course for change, rather than having it imposed. The green agenda is therefore necessarily radical, but it is also open-ended, flexible, and diverse. Green development is almost a contradiction in terms, not something for which blueprints can be drawn, not something easily absorbed into structures of financial planning, or readily co-opted by the state. It shares the very real tensions between techno-centric and ecocentric environmentalism (O’Riordan 1988; Turner 1988b). It requires the state of nature and the state of society to be considered together. It demands an interdisciplinary approach to analysis, training and policy. Green development is something that very often emerges in spite of, rather than as a direct result of, the actions of development bureaucracies. Green development programmes must start

from the needs, understanding and aspirations of individual people, and must work to build and enhance their capacity to help themselves. (378)

What comes out of it is that the idea of “green development” seems to me reasonable because it tends to reckon insights from both the ideologies instead of choosing either of them. In order to explain how this notion can be brought into effect, Adams said:

Green development is not about the way the environment is managed, but about who has the power to decide how it is managed. Its focus must be the capacity of the poor to exist on their own terms. At its heart, therefore, greening development involves not just a pursuit of new forms of economic accounting or ecological guidelines or new planning structures, but an attempt to redirect environmental and developmental change so as to maintain or enhance people’s capacity to sustain their livelihoods and to direct their own engagements with nature. Escobar (2004) calls for ‘dissenting imaginations’ that can think beyond modernity and the regimes of the globalized economy and the exploitation of marginalized people and nature. (379)

Thus, at the close of this account, it can be cogently mooted that the theoretical analysis of these two conflicting tales is intended to lay bare the notion of “green development” as a potent alternative line of thought, thereby exhorting readers to mull over it with adequate attention.

## Notes and References

1 In “Deep Ecology Revisited” Ramachandra Guha has claimed: “...scientific evidence has established that small scale hunting will not endanger its viable populations and will, in fact, save human lives put at risk by the expansion...” (275).

2 Robert Costanza and et.al in *An Introduction to Ecological Economics* has noted:

**Allocation** refers to the relative division of the resource flow among alternative product uses— how much goes to production of cars, to shoes, to plows, to teapots, and so on. A good allocation is one that is *efficient*, that is, that allocates resources among product end-uses in conformity with individual preferences as weighted by the ability of the individual to pay. The policy instrument that brings about an efficient allocation is relative prices determined by supply and demand in competitive markets.

**Distribution** refers to the relative division of the resource flow, as embodied in final goods and services, among alternative people. How much goes to you, to me, to others, to future generations. A good distribution is one that is *just* or *fair*, or at least one in which the degree of inequality is limited within some acceptable range. The policy instrument for bringing about a more just distribution is transfers, such as taxes and welfare payments.

*Scale* refers to the physical volume of the throughput, the flow of matter–energy from the environment as low-entropy raw materials and back to the environment as high-entropy wastes (see Figure 1.1). It may be thought of as the product of population times per capita resource use. It is measured in absolute physical units, but its significance is relative to the natural capacities of the ecosystem to regenerate the inputs and absorb the waste outputs on a sustainable basis. (89)

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