

Nature as an Actor: Applying Actor-Network Theory to Tamsula Ao's Laburnum for My Head

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ABSTRACT

Nature has consistently inspired literary writers to explore the intricate relationship between human beings and the natural environment. In *Laburnum for My Head*, Tamsula Ao presents nature not as a passive background but as an active presence that shapes human thought, emotion, and action. This paper examines the role of nature through the theoretical lens of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which recognises both human and nonhuman entities as participants in interconnected networks of agency. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study investigates how the laburnum tree, the cemetery, the seasons, rainfall, soil, and other ecological elements interact with human actors such as Lentina, Babu, and the Town Committee. The analysis argues that these interactions collectively influence the narrative and redefine conventional ideas of memory, death, and remembrance. Lentina's determination to replace stone monuments with a living laburnum tree demonstrates an ecological vision in which human existence remains inseparable from the natural world. Rather than functioning merely as a symbol, the laburnum tree emerges as a nonhuman actor that shapes the protagonist's identity and decisions. By applying Actor-Network Theory, this study offers a fresh interpretation of Tamsula Ao's ecological imagination and contributes to contemporary discussions in environmental humanities, ecocriticism, and literary studies.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, nonhuman agency, ecological network, Tamsula Ao, *Laburnum for My Head*, environmental humanities.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental concerns have become increasingly significant in Indian English literature, encouraging writers to explore the interdependent relationship between human beings and the natural world. Among the prominent voices from Northeast India, Tamsula Ao is recognised for her sensitive depiction of indigenous

culture, collective memory, and ecological consciousness. Her short story *Laburnum for My Head* explores life, death, remembrance, and humanity's enduring relationship with nature. Unlike narratives that portray nature merely as a setting, Ao positions the laburnum tree as an active force that shapes the aspirations and decisions of the protagonist, Lentina. Through the contrast between permanent stone monuments and the recurring blossoms of the laburnum tree, the story questions anthropocentric ideas of remembrance and proposes nature as a more enduring and meaningful memorial. Consequently, the narrative foregrounds the interconnectedness of human life and ecological processes.

NATURE AND AGENCY IN LITERARY STUDIES

Conventional literary criticism has frequently interpreted nature as a passive backdrop or a symbolic reflection of human emotions. Recent developments in environmental humanities, however, have challenged this perspective by recognising the active role of nonhuman entities in shaping human experiences. The concept of agency has therefore expanded beyond human subjects to include plants, animals, landscapes, weather, and material objects. Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory proposes that agency is distributed across networks consisting of both human and nonhuman actors rather than being confined exclusively to people. From this perspective, the laburnum tree in Ao's narrative functions not merely as a symbol but as an active participant that influences Lentina's choices, relationships, and perception of mortality. Likewise, the cemetery, rainfall, soil, weeds, and seasonal cycles contribute to the unfolding of the narrative by interacting with human actors.

RESEARCH GAP

Critical discussions of *Laburnum for My Head* have largely focused on ecocritical and ecofeminist interpretations. Scholars have examined Lentina's emotional attachment to the laburnum tree, her

resistance to patriarchal burial customs, and the ecological symbolism of flowering trees as alternatives to stone memorials. While these approaches have deepened the understanding of the story's environmental and feminist dimensions, they primarily interpret nature as a symbolic extension of human consciousness. Consequently, the independent agency of nonhuman entities—including the laburnum tree, cemetery, rainfall, soil, weeds, stray cows, and institutional spaces—has received limited scholarly attention. Applying Actor-Network Theory addresses this gap by examining how human and nonhuman actors collectively produce meaning and influence the narrative.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study investigates the role of nature as an active participant in Tamsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* through the framework of Actor-Network Theory. It analyses the interactions between human and nonhuman actors to demonstrate that agency is distributed across an ecological network rather than centred exclusively on human characters. The paper also explores how the laburnum tree transforms conventional understandings of death, memory, and burial by replacing static monuments with a living ecological memorial. In doing so, the study establishes Actor-Network Theory as a valuable approach for interpreting Indian English literary texts.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative approach in which the primary text is examined through detailed textual interpretation. Actor-Network Theory (ANT), particularly Bruno Latour's understanding of the relationships formed between human and nonhuman entities, is employed as the central theoretical framework (Latour). The analysis places Tamsula Ao's "*Laburnum for My Head*" in conversation with critical discussions of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, environmental humanities, and ANT. Rather than treating the natural environment as a passive background to human experience, the study investigates how plants, animals, weather, material objects, social practices, and human beings become interconnected within the narrative. Latour's approach is particularly useful because it allows the effects produced by nonhuman entities to be considered alongside human

actions and decisions (Latour). The study therefore uses close reading to identify the different relationships through which ecological and social meanings are produced. In doing so, it argues that Ao's narrative distributes agency across a network of human and nonhuman participants rather than locating agency exclusively within individual human characters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tamsula Ao has received critical attention for the manner in which her literary works bring together the cultural experiences of Northeast India, historical memory, social identity, and relationships with the natural environment. Her representations of nature are closely connected with the lives and experiences of the communities she portrays. Critical studies of her writing have consequently examined the interaction between ecological concerns and cultural experience, particularly in relation to the landscapes and communities of Northeast India (Asmitha).

"*Laburnum for My Head*" is particularly significant for an ecological reading because the story connects the remembrance of the dead with the continuing processes of the natural world. The desire to commemorate a deceased person is represented through two contrasting possibilities: a permanent human-made monument and a living tree that changes according to the seasons (Ao). The latter provides a form of remembrance that does not depend upon physical permanence but continues through growth, flowering, and renewal. This ecological dimension has also been recognised in critical discussions of Ao's work, which identify the significance of environmental consciousness in her representation of human life (Haseeb).

An ecocritical reading of the story draws attention to the way the natural environment becomes inseparable from the human experiences represented in the narrative. The laburnum is not introduced simply to beautify the cemetery. Its seasonal presence contributes to the meaning attached to the burial ground and provides an alternative way of thinking about remembrance (Ao). The contrast between the enduring appearance of marble and granite and the changing life of the tree creates a distinction between human attempts to establish permanence and the transformations that characterise ecological existence. Haseeb's discussion of Ao's ecological consciousness is useful in understanding this emphasis on the relationship between human life and the environment (Haseeb).

The story has also been approached through an ecofeminist perspective, particularly in relation to Lentina's association with the laburnum. Gogoi's reading connects the protagonist's relationship with nature to questions of female identity, resistance, and patriarchal structures (Gogoi). Lentina does not accept the conventional expectation that her husband's memory should be represented through an elaborate stone monument. Instead, she develops a personal vision of remembrance based on a living tree. Her determination to pursue this vision despite opposition and repeated disappointment gives her relationship with the tree a dimension of resistance (Ao). The connection between female agency and the natural environment is therefore an important aspect of the story's ecofeminist significance.

The relationship between Lentina and the laburnum has also been examined in more recent scholarship. Bhuyan's rereading of the story highlights the importance of Lentina's desires and her engagement with social and natural structures (Bhuyan). Such scholarship provides a foundation for understanding the tree as more than a symbolic representation imposed upon nature by the human characters. Its physical existence affects Lentina's choices and becomes part of the process through which her understanding of remembrance develops.

The laburnum can consequently be associated with several interconnected ideas, including renewal, modesty, continuity, and the transformation of memory. Its recurring flowering creates a natural rhythm that contrasts with the fixed appearance of stone memorials (Ao). The cemetery thus becomes a space where two different approaches to remembrance meet: one seeks permanence through human construction, while the other depends upon the recurring processes of the living environment. Existing ecological interpretations of Ao's work support the importance of this interaction between cultural practices and environmental processes (Asmitha; Haseeb). The present study extends this discussion by examining these relationships through Actor-Network Theory.

THE CEMETERY AS AN ECOLOGICAL NETWORK

The cemetery in "Laburnum for My Head" can be read as a space where human practices and environmental processes continually interact. Ao establishes a distinction between the old burial ground and the newer cemetery, with the latter acquiring its particular

character from the laburnum trees that flower during the appropriate season (Ao). The cemetery is consequently defined not only by graves and memorial stones but also by the plants, soil, seasons, weather, and other elements that occupy and transform the space.

The stone headstones represent an attempt to give memory a stable physical form. Their inscriptions are intended to preserve the identities of the dead beyond the limits of individual human memory. The laburnum introduces a different form of remembrance. Unlike stone, the tree does not remain unchanged; it grows, sheds, flowers, and responds to environmental conditions. Its significance therefore emerges from its continuing transformation rather than from physical permanence (Ao).

The management of the cemetery further demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining complete human control over the environment. Human beings clear unwanted vegetation and attempt to regulate the appearance of the burial ground, yet plants repeatedly return and occupy the available spaces. This recurring interaction illustrates the ecological dimension of the cemetery and corresponds with critical observations concerning the active relationship between human beings and nature in Ao's work (Haseeb).

ANT provides a further way of understanding this relationship. Latour argues against restricting agency exclusively to human beings and emphasises the importance of examining the associations through which different entities produce effects (Latour). Applying this perspective to Ao's cemetery means considering the role of entities such as trees, stones, soil, rain, vegetation, animals, and seasonal change alongside human actions. These elements do not all possess agency in an identical manner; rather, each can affect the relationships and events within the network.

The changing appearance of the cemetery demonstrates this process. Vegetation grows around the graves, while the branches of the laburnum eventually interfere with the visibility of the inscriptions on the memorial stones (Ao). The tree therefore affects the physical condition through which human memory is represented. The monument is created by humans, but its subsequent appearance is partly determined by ecological processes. This interaction complicates the assumption that a human-made memorial can establish complete and permanent control over remembrance.

The cemetery can therefore be understood as a network rather than as a simple physical location. Human

mourners, burial customs, tombstones, trees, animals, soil, rain, and seasonal cycles become interconnected through their effects upon one another. The ecological significance of this representation is consistent with studies that emphasise the relationship between culture and environment in Ao's fiction (Asmitha). However, the ANT perspective developed in this study shifts attention from nature as a symbolic backdrop to the relationships through which human and nonhuman entities actively participate in the formation of the cemetery's meaning.

THE LABURNUM TREE AS A NONHUMAN ACTOR

The laburnum occupies a distinctive position in the story because its presence affects the thoughts and actions of Lentina. The tree is introduced through Lentina's admiration of its appearance, particularly the characteristic form of its flowers (Ao). What begins as an aesthetic attraction gradually develops into a sustained effort to cultivate the tree. The tree consequently becomes connected with Lentina's understanding of beauty, remembrance, and the appropriate way of commemorating the dead.

The significance of the laburnum becomes clearer when Lentina attempts to reproduce it in her own surroundings. Her attempts do not proceed according to her wishes. The young plants are damaged or removed, animals interfere with their growth, and adverse weather conditions create further difficulties (Ao). These incidents are important from an ANT perspective because Lentina's intentions are repeatedly modified by entities that she cannot completely control. The plant, cattle, rainfall, and other environmental conditions therefore become part of the chain of relationships through which her project develops.

Latour's ANT makes it possible to examine such relationships without assuming that only human characters can influence events. In this theoretical framework, an actor is significant because of the difference or effect it produces within a network of associations (Latour). The laburnum is relevant in this sense because its presence gives direction to Lentina's actions, while the conditions required for its survival also alter the course of those actions.

Lentina's repeated attempts to grow the tree demonstrate that her relationship with it is not based solely on visual appreciation. She continues to pursue her objective even when circumstances repeatedly prevent her from achieving it. Her persistence also

places her at odds with members of her family and with established expectations concerning burial and remembrance (Ao). The tree therefore becomes connected to a wider network involving family relationships, social customs, personal desires, and ecological conditions.

An ecofeminist interpretation can further illuminate this relationship. Lentina's refusal to abandon her preferred form of remembrance can be viewed as an assertion of individual agency within a social environment shaped by established expectations. Gogoi's ecofeminist reading provides a basis for connecting Lentina's relationship with nature to questions of gender and resistance (Gogoi). Similarly, recent criticism has continued to consider the significance of Lentina's desires and her relationship with social and natural structures (Bhuyan).

The laburnum consequently functions in the narrative at both symbolic and material levels. Symbolically, it becomes associated with the form of remembrance Lentina desires; materially, its growth and vulnerability directly affect the actions undertaken by the protagonist. This distinction is important for an ANT reading because the tree is not treated merely as a symbol created by human interpretation. Its material presence has consequences for the human actors who interact with it.

The laburnum can therefore be understood as a nonhuman actor within the network of the story. Its relationship with Lentina is accompanied by interactions involving animals, rainfall, soil, vegetation, family members, and social practices. These relationships demonstrate that the development of Lentina's ecological vision does not originate exclusively from human intention. Instead, it emerges through a series of interactions between human desires and nonhuman conditions. Ao's story thus presents an interconnected world in which human life, material objects, and ecological processes continually influence one another.

THE LABURNUM TREE AND LENTINA'S ECOLOGICAL BOND

Lentina's emotional attachment to the laburnum tree represents the deepest expression of her ecological consciousness. Following the death of her husband, she no longer finds meaning in elaborate stone monuments that traditionally commemorate the dead. Instead, she imagines a flowering laburnum tree as the living memorial that should mark her final resting place. Her

aspiration reflects an alternative understanding of remembrance, one grounded in renewal rather than permanence. The tree gradually becomes an inseparable part of her identity, providing purpose and emotional fulfilment throughout her later years. She entrusts Babu with helping her realise this vision, revealing that the achievement of her dream depends upon a network of relationships involving both human and nonhuman actors. From an Actor-Network Theory perspective, the laburnum tree possesses agency because it motivates human action, reshapes personal relationships, and transforms Lentina's perception of life and death. Rather than existing as a symbolic object alone, the tree actively participates in constructing her identity and offers a living alternative to conventional memorial practices.

NEGOTIATING BURIAL PRACTICES AND ECOLOGICAL AGENCY

Lentina's determination to secure a burial site for her laburnum tree demonstrates her resistance to conventional social practices and institutional authority. After numerous difficulties, she acquires land adjacent to the cemetery, recognising it as the ideal space for fulfilling her ecological vision. She openly rejects marble headstones and elaborate memorials, considering them artificial expressions that fail to preserve genuine memory. Instead, she imagines a cemetery where flowering trees replace stone monuments, allowing nature rather than architecture to commemorate the dead. Achieving this vision requires negotiation with multiple actors, including landowners, government officials, legal regulations, and members of the Town Committee. Rather than confronting these institutions directly, Lentina strategically works within existing legal structures by proposing regulations that encourage the planting of flowering trees and the numerical identification of burial plots. Her donation of land to the committee further strengthens these negotiations, illustrating how social and ecological networks intersect. Through the lens of Actor-Network Theory, agency is distributed across humans, institutions, legal documents, land, and vegetation, all of which contribute to the transformation of the cemetery into a living ecological memorial. Lentina's success therefore results not from individual determination alone but from the collective interaction of diverse human and nonhuman actors.

NEGOTIATING INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS AND ECOLOGICAL AGENCY

This story has powerfully presented the hidden darkens inside the humans which shadows them from the responsibility they carry. On the day of the funeral ceremony of Lentina's husband, there evolved a dispute between her daughter in law for spending money for the rituals. This reveals the shattered form of human emotions towards their family members and this stands as an instance for why Lentina silently thrives her love to plant the laburnum tree which makes her to feel complete. In this story Lentina fights against the community to accomplish her desire, as it is considered to be illegal to have the ownership of the land without the approval of the Town Committee. She has cleverly prepared a document under certain conditions that states like in the place of new cemetery only flowering trees should be planted instead of headstones, she can choose her own site for her burial, and the plots should be recognized only by numbers. As Lentina figures out the future issue, she managed the situation by convincing the chairman and the committee members by donating a piece of her land to them. Only after the legal formalities are done she reveals her plan to her family members that she wants to plant something in her gravesite.

BABU AS A MEDIATOR IN THE HUMAN-NATURE NETWORK

Achieving her inevitable task, she asks her driver to assist her in growing the laburnum tree in her own site. As days passes she becomes weak and longs to visit her site to make sure the progress of her treasure tree. Her fear of getting old and weak makes her to lose her confidence day by day but her driver has a strong belief in her recovery. Her driver reports her everyday about the progress of the trees which has only become her source of medicine for relief. In this context it is seen that Lentina hesitates the physical presence of humans and relies only on the distant nature. In the process of her recovery period, Lentina herself becomes the healing power for her family members by radiating her energy in the house. Her recovery is symbolized in the form of tiny blooming of laburnum flower from the tree they planted in her site. Her driver Mapu (Babu) undergoes commotion in delivering her long cherished desire becoming true, as he fears that Lentina may consider it as a sign of her departure from the world. In this reference, it can be related that **the life of Lentina is correlated with the life of laburnum tree**. Its only Babu who understands the endless desire of Lentina, who is a warrior to fight for her dream come true.

THE FULFILMENT OF HUMAN–NONHUMAN AGENCY

Babu believes that than the news of her husband's death, the blooming of laburnum flowers will affect her mentally for which she holds her breath. The absence of her husband doesn't bother her much whereas she consistently longs for the presence of the laburnum tree. The author addresses Lentina and her driver as a strong-willed woman and her faithful servant. As in the journey of growing the laburnum tree their relationship is reflected through the loyalty and trust. She longs to witness the signs of her flowering laburnum tree by driving near the new cemetery. The day of joy has come with the blooming of yellow flowers in the laburnum tree in the month of May and as Babu gets excited to share this miracle to his mistress, he gets to hear from her saying '**I FELT IT IN MY BONES**' which again proves the strong connection she has with the nature. She dresses as if for a grand occasion on that day and leaves from her house to admire her joy of living. They return after cherishing the day of success for their efforts and on the fifth day she completes her early dinner and bides her maid an early goodnight. The next day is the day of her departure, as her family members find that she died in her sleep. As the story ends it still leaves the impression of the thirst of her passionate desire to have flowering plants in her gravesite and it is further being celebrated by the people who doesn't witness any stone monuments rather different variety of flowering plants that stands firm on the gravesite in the new cemetery. As the story presents Lentina will have a **frequent visitor** who greets her gravesite every year in the month of May which was the only aspiration for her lifetime.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Tamsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* can be reinterpreted through the lens of Actor-Network Theory by recognizing nature as an active participant rather than a passive background. The analysis reveals that agency in the narrative is distributed among both human and nonhuman actors, including the laburnum tree, the cemetery, soil, rainfall, seasonal cycles, Babu, the Town Committee, and Lentina herself. These interconnected actors collectively shape the protagonist's choices, challenge conventional burial practices, and redefine the meaning of remembrance. The laburnum tree emerges not merely as a symbol of hope or renewal but as a nonhuman actor that influences human emotions, decisions, and relationships, thereby transforming the cemetery into a dynamic ecological network. Through this perspective,

the story moves beyond anthropocentric assumptions and illustrates that memory and identity are co-created through the interaction of humans and the natural world.

By applying Actor-Network Theory, this paper offers a fresh critical perspective that extends beyond existing ecocritical and ecofeminist interpretations of the story. Tamsula Ao ultimately proposes an alternative vision of death and remembrance in which living trees replace artificial stone monuments, emphasizing ecological continuity over material permanence. Lentina's lifelong aspiration to be remembered through the annual blooming of the laburnum tree reflects a profound belief in coexistence rather than human dominance over nature. Her dream is fulfilled through a network of human and nonhuman agencies, demonstrating that nature continues to act even beyond human life. Thus, *Laburnum for My Head* affirms that the natural world is not merely represented in literature but actively shapes narratives, memories, and identities. This study therefore establishes Actor-Network Theory as a productive framework for understanding Tamsula Ao's ecological imagination and contributes to broader discussions in environmental humanities by highlighting the agency of the more-than-human world.

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