



## Bulletin of Advanced English Studies (BAES)

Journal Homepage: <https://www.refaad.com/views/BAES/home.aspx>  
ISSN: 2617-6459 (Online) 2617-6440 (Print)



### Role of Women and Environment in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*

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**Abstract:** Women and environment play significant role in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). Women empowerment relates to giving women more power over their own life and the circumstances they are facing with. Empowering women is to empower them to break the traditional picture of perfect womanhood where patriarchy dominates and women get all the bad things in their life. Women through their self-assertion contribute greatly towards women empowerment. It is this self-assertion of women that forms the core of Temsula Ao's collection of short stories entitled *Laburnum for My Head*, and this paper. Writers of literature has always been lured and urged by their physical and biological environment to manifest the beauties of nature in their creative endeavour. Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* showcases the correlation between literature and the physical and biological aspects of nature. This paper relates Ao's stance on women and environment in *Laburnum for My Head* by placing the stories in such diverse setting as ecology, environment, non-human animal, violence, bloodshed, marriage, motherhood, animal rights etc.

**Keywords:** *women empowerment; self-assertion; ecology; non-human animal; motherhood.*

#### Introduction:

Temsula Ao is an eminent author who belongs to the Indian state of Nagaland. A retired professor of English at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India, she has worked as chairman of Nagaland State Women's Commission. The Government of India conferred upon her the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013. Besides five books of poetry, she has authored two collections of short stories. Her collection of short stories entitled *Laburnum for My Head* was published in the year 2009.

No human development can be possible without harmonizing the relationship among plants, animals and man. Temsula Ao, through her stories, establishes the need to protect nature, as well as recognize the significance of women in society. The present paper relates the significance of women's development (feminism) and environment through Temsula Ao's collection of short stories entitled *Laburnum for My Head*, (2009).

Feminism's main concern is with the representation in literature of the problem of inequality of women in society and their amelioration. Feminism becomes significant as it urges for women's culture, it desires for the self-assertion, autonomy and free will of women. Self-assertion of women enhances their confidence as they express their opinion freely. Elaine Showalter in her essay, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", affirms that the "hypotheses of women's culture have been developed over the last decade ...in order to get away from masculine

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31559/baes2020.5.1.1>  
Received Date: 17/10/2020  
Revised Date: 31/10/2020  
Accepted Date: 12/11/2020



systems, hierarchies, and values to get at the primary and self-defined nature of female cultural experience.” (Lodge, 321).

Women through their self-assertion are empowered to do something positive in their life. The title story of Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*, provides a glimpse into the life and character of such a woman named Lentina. Lentina yearned for some laburnum bushes in her garden. The laburnum tree is known for its yellow flower. Lentina wanted these yellow flowers as for her these flowers denoted womanliness: “The way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture.” (Ao, 2). So, she decided to grow these flowers in her own garden. In spite of her best effort to grow the laburnum trees in her garden, she failed to do so due to one reason or the other. This made her crave more intensely for the yellow laburnum flowers whenever she saw them on highways and in gardens. Her family members began to speak about her passionate obsession for laburnum which made her feel deeply upset. She did not like their apparent unconcern for natural environment around them:

She could not understand their concern and was inwardly hurt by their seeming insensitivity to beauty around them. But she never gave up her hope of having a full-grown laburnum tree in her garden someday. (Ao, 3).

When Lentina's husband died, her family members decided to bury him in the village graveyard as per the established custom. Lentina decided to accompany her husband on his last journey. Normally, women did not take part in the last rites at the graveyard. So, being a woman, it was quite a bold decision on the part of Lentina. While in the graveyard she looked at the stones set up at the grave of dead people. She thought about man's vain attempt to disobey/challenge death by inscribing names on the stones set up at the gravesites. She knew that these gravestones would neither bring the dead people back to life nor would give them immortality. The gravestones were the result of useless attempts made by the people to maintain the memory of their dead relatives. This they did by constructing huge structures in memory of their relatives. While doing so, these people competed against each other in terms of the size and style of the gravestones as the author says: “This consecrated ground has thus become choked with the specimens of human conceit.” (Ao, 1).

Therefore, Lentina decided that no headstones would be planted at her grave when she died. Instead, she would have laburnum tree planted on her grave as the author says, “...all she had craved for was a spot to be buried where a laburnum tree would bloom every May.” (Ao, 11). The laburnum tree would remain on her grave forever. Nature in the form of laburnum tree would abide there. It would outshine all the conceited structures raised in marble and granite. Lentina wished to grow a laburnum tree on her gravesite in her lifetime. She wanted to ensure that the tree blossomed before she was dead as she says:

I do not wish to be buried among the ridiculous stone monuments of the big cemetery. I need a place where there will be nothing but beautiful trees over my grave. (Ao, 7).

Lentina's love for nature is reflected in her desire to grow laburnum trees on her grave. She seems to reject the idea of placing artificial headstones on human graves as it symbolizes human conceit and pretentiousness. Her action calls for a change in our perception towards our environment and ecology. Lori Gruen observes:

It is immediately important that we each change our own perspectives and those of society from death-oriented to life-oriented - from a linear, fragmented, and detached mindset to a more direct, holistic appreciation of subjective knowing. (Gruen, 61).

The second story of Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* is 'Death of a Hunter'. 'Death of a Hunter' relates the interaction between nature/environment and human being and its repercussion on them. The story on the surface level narrates the life and hunting habit of a hunter named Imchanok. However, 'Death of a Hunter' is much more than that. Nature pours down its fury in the form of wild animals such as elephant, monkey and wild boar, wreaking havoc in the life of Imchanok and his fellow villagers. These wild animals were so vicious in nature that they destroyed the agricultural land of the villagers particularly the rice paddies of the village. First it was the elephant playing the role of a villain as it devastated several acres of farmland and people's houses, killing so many people. Imchanok along with his hunter friends shot the elephant. As the elephant lay dying, Imchanok looked into its unmoving eye that was devoid of any flash and shine. It appeared to him as if the elephant was moaning as he tried to have a peep in its small, round and bright eyes. The dying elephant was trying to communicate him some point which he failed to grasp as the author proclaims:

He would wonder forever because he thought he saw tears in those beady eyes and something else: it was as though the dying animal were trying to convey some message to his destroyer which remained frozen in time; this was to haunt Imchanok for a very long time. (Ao, 23).

Normally Imchanok used to have a sense of triumph whenever he killed a wild animal. But this time he failed to get pleasure though he had successfully eliminated the elephant. The reason could perhaps be that he did not like himself to be held responsible/guilty for killing those beautiful creatures of nature as he questions his own action: 'But why did it have to be he who was placed, in this particular instance, at the centre of the eternal contest between man and animal for dominion over the land?' (Ao, 23).

Imchanok's uneasiness after killing the wild animals resurfaced for the second time when he killed a monkey. The monkey had not only eaten and spoiled the grain but scared Imchanok's family members. Just when he was about to shoot the monkey, the animal had raised its arms as if it wanted to surrender. But the renowned hunter shot through its heart and the monkey collapsed instantly. On seeing the dead body of the monkey, the hunter became increasingly violent and forceful in his behavior which made his family members feel uneasy. Imchanok even decided not to use the grain from the hut where the monkey was killed. He did not consider it right to use the grain that was tainted with the blood of a monkey. He even abandoned the hut where the monkey was killed. For many years, Imchanok's mind was haunted by the sight of the same monkey which had once begged before him for mercy.

Imchanok's disdain for hunting finally came to the full after he had killed a big, wild boar. Strange things started happening in the life of the hunter after the killing of the boar. Imchanok started suffering from severe pain though previously he had never been seriously ill. He stopped coming out of his room and would often cry out at night. The picture of the wild boar haunted him in his sleep making him fearful. He even refused to eat. Finally, his wife suggested that they should visit the exact place in the forest where he had killed the boar. There they should ask for mercy from the animal so that the frightening nights of Imchanok could end.

Both Imchanok and his wife went to the forest. On the way he entered into a river to drink water. As he tried to take the river water in his hand he caught hold of the boar's teeth and showed it to his wife. Then he pointed towards the nearby bushes where soft black hair rested in the midst of the bones of an extremely large animal. He went near the place from where he had shot the big board. There he involved himself in a peculiar kind of activity as he ripped apart a bunch of his hair and propelled it towards the forest that had become the greatest source of worry for him. After performing all this ritual, Imchanok felt as if he was filled with a new energy. When he thought about himself as a hunter, his former feeling of satisfaction derived from his achievements vanished and he was filled with humiliation, distress and repentance as the author says, "... his earlier sense of pride about his skill and reputation as a famous hunter, would be replaced by shame and regret." (Ao, 31). From that day onwards Imchanok left the hunting profession as he dismantled his own gun and buried it inside the ground. Here the title of the story, 'Death of a Hunter', signifies not the physical death of a hunter but the end of his hunting activities for the sake of protecting non-human animals.

In the story, 'Death of a Hunter', we witness traces of patriarchy as many tries to have control over animals and nature. The consequence of power relations between man, animals and nature is clearly evident in the story. Man tries to remove the 'animal residue' that lies within him through his subjugation of nature and brutality towards animals. Marilyn French says that:

Patriarchy is an ideology founded on the assumption that man is distinct from animal and superior to it ... The reason for man's existence is to shed all animal residue and realize fully his 'divine' nature, the part that seems unlike any part owned by animals-mind, spirit, or control. (French, 341).

The role of woman becomes significant in the next story titled, 'Three Women'. As the title suggests, 'Three Women' is a story about three women – Martha, Medemla and Lipoktula. These women, on the one hand, are poles apart from each other while on the other are related to each other through a strange connection that surpasses simple biological bonding. Martha is the adopted daughter of Medemla and granddaughter of Lipoktula. Recalling her past life, Lipoktula says that while she was leading a married life with her husband, she was once raped by a person of her own village named Merensashi. When Merensashi raped her, she tried to dodge him off as she says, "I did try to ward him off but he was like an enraged bull and his passion was brutal." (Ao, 57). However, Lipoktula did not scream or resist too much. She was unaware of the grave moral wrong that she was committing in having sex with a person other than her husband. After the act, she actually realized what had really happened. She was filled with a sense of immorality, shame and guilt as she says, "I sat in the water for a long time as though to wash away the sense of shame and guilt now overtaking me." (Ao, 57).

Lipoktula did not reveal this secret to anybody except her mother who criticized her for being so weak. Here, the author seems to be deeply concerned with the significance of morality in the life of the people in general and its role in literature in particular. In her seminal essay, "Literature and Morality" Shashi Deshpande remarks: "Morality in literature, therefore comes from the author, basically from the philosophy of the author which is the foundation of all that s/he creates." (Deshpande, 116). Subsequently, Lipoktula became pregnant with the child of a man who was not her husband. Even then she decided to give birth to the baby and Medemla was born. This conduct of Lipoktula speaks about the courage and perseverance of a woman who in the midst of suffering and despair is ready to bring her child in this world. According to Beth Zeleny, "As giver and nurturer and endurer of life, woman participates in the cycle of life as seed, then seedling, which ultimately becomes part of the soil that supports future seed" (Zeleny, 1997).

Medemla grew up to work as a staff nurse in a government hospital. She was unaware of the fact that Merensashi was her biological father. She expected to marry Imsutemjen, son of Merensashi, with whom she was engaged for a long time. However, Imsutemjen's father, Merensashi declined to marry his son to Medemla as Medemla happened to be the half-sister of Imsutemjen. If a marriage had materialized between Medemla and Imsutemjen it would have been an incestuous relationship as Medemla's mother, Lipoktula, says, "I had to think long and hard about the terrifying spectre of an incestuous marriage." (Ao, 58). As Medemla did not know the

reason behind Imsutemjen's rejection of her marriage proposal, she felt betrayed and rejected as she says, "I still cannot describe the feeling of rejection and betrayal that seemed to incinerate me, reducing me to nothingness." (Ao, 52). She suffered for no fault of hers. It was totally the fault of her mother, Lipoktula, and her biological father, Merensashi who's illicit liasoning long time back had created this precarious situation for Medemla as her mother says: "I realized that my dark secret had at last raised its ugly head and was about to destroy two families and along with it, my daughter's happiness." (Ao, 57). Medemla felt so dejected after this unfortunate incident that she decided to remain single throughout her life.

Once, a woman came for delivery of her child at the hospital where Medemla was working as a staff nurse. The woman died soon after the birth of her child. When the dead woman's husband came to know that his newly born child was a girl, he totally changed his behaviour. He showed violent temper and uncontrollable anger towards the nurses and the hospital. He even criticised God for giving him a girl child instead of a boy which was his heart's desire. The author describes his violent behavior in the following words: "He stood up in a rage and railed against the nurses, the hospital and above all against a cruel God who had denied him a son." (Ao, 53). The man refused to take the baby to his house. Instead, he handed his baby girl over to the hospital staff and said: "What will I do with another girl? Do whatever you want; I don't want to see her ever, she who has killed my wife." (Ao, 53). The father even held his newly born baby girl responsible for the death of his wife. All this proves the frustration of a male dominated society at the failure to get a male heir. Jenis Birkeland rightly identifies it as:

[T]he polarization of masculine and feminine archetypes and the elevation of the so-called masculine traits and values. Attributes defined as feminine (nurturing, caring, or accommodating) are seen as disadvantages, while those defined as masculine (competitive, dominating, or calculating) are encouraged. (Birkeland, 24).

The baby girl that was disowned and left over by her father at the hospital was named Martha by the hospital nurse. Medemla who was working as a nurse in the same hospital felt attracted towards the little girl, Martha, right from the moment of her birth as she says, "It was as if some unseen hand was forging a bond between my lonely self and this abandoned child." (Ao, 53). Martha was of dark complexion with thick curly hair as her biological mother belonged to a community of tea tribes in Assam whereas Medemla belonged to the Ao-Naga tribe of Nagaland. The genetic and cultural difference between the two really posed a problem for Medemla as she was contemplating on adopting the child. Even that could not deter her but only strengthened her desire to keep the child with her. Racial, genetic and cultural differences were of no value to a woman like Medemla when it came to helping an impoverished child. Medemla had struggled throughout her life to achieve wholeness, completeness and authentic self-hood.

Medemla approached the nursing superintendent of the hospital for permission to adopt Martha. The superintendent told her to first resign from her job and then only she would be able to adopt the child. Indirectly, the superintendent tried to prevent Medemla from adopting the child as Medemla says, "...these people who always taught us about loving the unfortunate, ugly and sick people of the world seemed to disapprove of my wish to adopt an unfortunate child. But I would not give up..." (Ao, 54). Medemla was too resolute to surrender. She left her job for the sake of the little girl. She adopted Martha and took her to her parent's house in Nagaland as Clara Nubile examines: "Indian women keep on struggling against the burden of tradition, against the legacy of the past and the orthodoxy of patriarchal system." (Clara, 271).

Medemla's parents accepted the little child for the sake of their daughter's happiness. As Martha grew up and went to school, her classmates provoked her by saying that her hair was different from theirs, that she didn't belong to their village and that Medemla and Lipoktula were not her real mother and grandmother. Such remarks from her classmates and friends only added to the anger and confusion of Martha as she started questioning her real identity:

If this woman was not my grandmother and her daughter was not my real mother, whom did I have to call my own? Where did I belong and who were my people? And how did I become my mother's daughter and this old woman's granddaughter? (Ao, 50).

Martha's introspection increased her fear. She felt distressed at the fact that she was different from her mother and her grandmother. Her mind began to dread with the idea of her being sent off to the place where she actually was claimed to be a native of. However, she did not want to leave this village where she had lived with her mother and grandmother since her childhood. She felt emotionally bonded with this village, its people, its language, its aura and everything associated with it. She says,

I did not want to be sent away, I wanted to be in this village, with all the familiar faces, speaking the same language, going to the same school and doing everything together...I belonged with them and that I was not in any way different from them. (Ao, 51).

Martha fell in love with a boy of the same village. She became pregnant with the child of that boy before she could be married of. This enraged her mother, Medemla. Actually, Medemla had never fallen in love with any man in her life as she had remained unmarried throughout her life. She never underwent the urge that attracts a man and a woman and brings them closer together because she never considered any other man's proposal with the



intention of establishing matrimonial relationship. Therefore, she failed to understand the effort, commitment and passion that was needed when two people fell in love with each other as was the case with her daughter. Martha says,

...how could one describe the responses of a woman's body to the touch of a man she loved to such a person as my mother, who had never felt the demanding power of such love? And harder still, convince her that once you have tasted love like that, there was no stopping? (Ao, 59-60).

'Flight' is a story that totally hinges upon the interaction between man and his natural surrounding and more particularly between a boy and a caterpillar. The story highlights the origin and growth of the larva of a butterfly and his subsequent imprisonment by human beings purely for their pleasure and luxury. The caterpillar, while narrating its evolution, says that it developed gradually from the small tiny part of a seed left by a moving mother. With the passing of time, its body became longer in form and green in colour. Many people looked at him and made different types of comment and finally a boy named Johnny found him beautiful and decided to imprison him in his shoebox. Describing the beauty of the caterpillar, Johnny says, "Wow, look at him, isn't he beautiful? Mother, can I keep him? Please- I'll put him in a shoebox in my room, he won't disturb anybody," (Ao, 81). For Johnny it was not just a caterpillar. He began to call it 'dragon'.

As Johnny was preparing to imprison the caterpillar in the shoebox, the insect felt as if somebody was forcibly carrying it to another world. The caterpillar says, "I felt as though I was being transported to another world... Suddenly I was being lifted and lowered into some dark place." (Ao, 81). So, the beauty of the caterpillar became the source of curse for him as it got him imprisoned in a shoebox. Inside the shoebox, there was total darkness. Previously, the caterpillar used to enjoy unlimited space and bright sunshine. But the moment, he was put inside the lid, he started struggling. He started getting light and darkness at irregular interval. In his initial days inside the shoebox, the interval between light and darkness was uniform but as days passed by it became non-uniform and relatively great in extent. There were times when he had to spend days in the absence of light. In short, his life became hell inside the box.

Johnny and his family inflicted pain upon the caterpillar purely for the purpose of pleasure and happiness. They treated this small creature as an object that lacked any feeling. They detached themselves from the caterpillar by treating it at par with other non-human elements. This detachment of animals from human being either for pleasure or for scientific experimentation performed upon lab animals justifies their exploitation by man as Lori Gruen says, "Conceiving of an experimental subject as an inferior, "subhuman" other – as a "specimen" meant to serve – lightens the burden of justifying the infliction of pain and death." (Gruen, 66).

Once, a woman came to Johnny's room. Johnny's father opened the lid of the box to let the woman see the butterfly. As the woman looked at the butterfly, she "stifled a heart-rending sob." (Ao, 82). The woman felt suffocated and almost stopped reacting as she glanced at the pitiable condition of the poor creature. However, it was ironical to see Johnny's father becoming unhappy as he watched the woman's reaction. The old man opined that there was nothing to worry about the butterfly as "He does not feel the pain now." (Ao, 82). It shows the insensitivity of human being towards animals who are part of our natural environment as Peter Barry says, "nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it." (Barry, 252).

The butterfly was suffering at the hand of Johnny and his father. It was all because of the callous mental attitude of the father-son duo that the butterfly had become a captive in their hands. To pass time had become a painful affair for the butterfly after they had imprisoned him inside the shoebox. His body was undergoing unusual, unfamiliar and difficult experience. He felt as if he was being crushed under the weight of some unforeseen power. He was no longer his previous self as he says, "Time became a blur for me. Strange sensations were taking place in my body. I felt bogged down by some alien weight and was no longer the same being..." (Ao, 82). Drastic change had happened in his physical and mental make-up since he was kept as a captive in the darkness of the shoebox. He was unable to relax and was full of anxiety. He wished for freedom that he used to enjoy in the initial phase of his life. The butterfly says, "I began to feel restless and longed for the open spaces of my earlier life." (Ao, 82).

After many days had passed away, Johnny asked his sister to open the lid of the shoebox as he wanted to see the butterfly. As his sister opened the lid, Johnny looked closer at the butterfly. He was filled with revulsion. He was unable to believe his own eyes because the sight before him was in contrast to his expectation. The butterfly no longer looked the same creature that he had once put inside the shoebox as Johnny says, "Beautiful? Dragon, what happened to you? You look ugly." (Ao, 83). Though Johnny was disturbed to see the deteriorating condition of the butterfly but he himself was responsible for it. Finding the lid open, the butterfly moved its wings up and down and came out of the container which had really served as a 'dark prison' for him for so many days. Once out of the container, the butterfly was able to feel the 'bright and airy' atmosphere. Further, he was ready to move on into a free area, "the space that was away from the reach of Johnny's world". (Ao, 83). The butterfly's struggle for identity and freedom had finally bore fruit. He had freed himself from the human world that was treacherous, deceitful and agonizing. He had finally succeeded in his lingering and agonizing aspiration for redefinition of the self. It had led him to the right perspective as his soul proclaims: "Fly, you are your own universe now, fly to your destiny." (Ao, 83).

Some of the roles of women in Temsula Ao's stories are similar to each other while some others are different. Lentina's role in the story, 'Laburnum for My Head', chiefly revolves around her concern for preserving nature by planting laburnum trees around her grave and her apparent disdain for artificial and unnatural decorations in the form of gravestones placed by humans near their graves. Lentina has the same love and care for nature and the natural world as the woman in Johnny's room has for the butterfly.

The roles of Martha, Medemla, and Lipoktula in the story, 'Three Women', are different from Lentina's role in the story, 'Laburnum for My Head'. Martha is committed to her love life with her would be husband and becomes pregnant even before marriage whereas her mother has never tasted love and has remained unmarried throughout her life. Martha, Medemla, and Lipoktula are concerned about their familial relationship and share a very close bond with each other. Medemla is not the biological mother of Martha but even then, the two share a close bond with each other. Lipoktula is raped by a man of her village and consequently becomes pregnant with his child. She decides to give birth to their child and ultimately becomes a proud parent of Medemla. Lipoktula's experience of parenting her daughter Medemla is different from Medemla's experience of raising her daughter Martha.

There are certain similarities between the roles of women in Temsula Ao's stories and that of other writers of Indian English fiction. In Temsula Ao's book, Lipoktula commits a grave moral wrong when she undergoes sexual experience with a man other than her husband. She is filled with guilt and grief. Similarly, Devi in Shashi Deshpande's novel, *In the Country of Deceit* (2008), is aware of the serious moral wrong that she commits in having physical union with a man named Ashok who is already married to another woman. She loves and sleeps with a married man as she says, '... I thought of what I had done, I thought, why I had done this? I knew it was wrong; nothing could make it no wrong' (Deshpande, 2016: 114). Devi held herself guilty of adultery as she exclaims: 'I now realized that adultery remains adultery...it is always riddled with guilt and fear, constantly swinging between euphoria and despair.' (Deshpande, 2016: 120). Devayani was torn and broken within her heart as she held herself responsible to a great extent for the immoral relationship that she was having with Ashok. She knew that her relationship with Ashok was based on deceit and immorality. She had lost her peace of mind because of this relationship. It had put a question mark on the very sanctity of such social institutions as marriage and family.

Differences also emerge in the conduct of women in different novels of Indian English writers. On the one hand, Martha in Temsula Ao's story "Three Women", loves and marries a boy of her village, on the other hand, Gimur in Mamang Dai's novel *The Black Hill* (2014) decides to love and marry a boy named Kajinsha who belonged to a different tribe and whose village was located hundreds of miles away from her village. Even though Gimur's community did not permit inter-tribe marriage but she was brave enough to break the rules of her community as she says: 'I will go beyond. When the chance comes for a life beyond, what other choice is there for anyone but to take it?' (Dai,49).

### Conclusion:

After analyzing these four stories it can be concluded that both women and environment play crucial role in enriching the human civilization. Women plant trees at their graves instead of gravestones as they try to protect ecology and environment through their love of nature. In that way they carve a niche for themselves in this male dominated patriarchal world. Further, they play the role of beloved and mother and are capable of raising and protecting their children in the face of extreme difficulty. Temsula Ao's stories redefine women identity and enable a peep into women's world from a woman's viewpoint. The stories tell us that non-human animals form an indispensable component of our biological environment/ecosystem. The non-human animals feel threatened and endangered due to adverse human activities. They, in turn, badly affect the life-cycle of humans. Man needs to stop the hunting and torture of non-human animals in order to sustain the ecosystem/environment. Only a sustained and conserved environment will be able to nourish human life in this world.

### Bio:

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