

An Ecocritical Study of the Origin Myths and Totems of the Karbis

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism shares the fundamental belief that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. As a theory it negotiates between the human and the non-human. It studies the connections among self, society, nature and text. Human culture can by no means be separated from nature. Our attitudes towards the natural world is nothing but what we do to ourselves and to our culture. In general it examines the relations between writers, texts and 'the world'. In ecocriticism 'the world' covers the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism uses ecology and ecological principles not only to the study of literature, but to the web of natural, cultural and supernatural phenomena as well. The ecocritical works reflect a common motivation –the consciousness that we have come to the age of environmental limits, a period when the impacts of human activities are hampering the earth's basic life support system. One way to rethink our conceptions on ecology and to end anthropocentrism is to study myths. Nature has always occupied an important space in the myths. Karbis' mythological treatment of nature bears age old concepts and perceptions on what we study today in ecocriticism. The myths, folk beliefs, rituals and traditions of the Karbis of Assam clearly show their interconnectedness and dependence on nature. The present paper would make an attempt to examine the role of nature in Karbi myths and in their life and also study how this relationship of interdependence has been somewhat threatened and given a new dimension by the emergence of new religion, education, modernity.

Key words: Ecocriticism; Karbi tribe; origin myths; religious beliefs; culture.

Ecocriticism is a late twentieth century development in the field of literary interpretation and criticism. The term 'ecocriticism' was first coined by William Rueckert in his essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'. It was published in 1978.

Thenceforth the term remained virtually unused in critical vocabulary until the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting. It was during this meeting that Cheryll Glotfelty accepted the term and paved the approach for its use in the critical arena- thenceforth it came into use in the study of 'nature writing'. This decision of Cheryll Glotfelty was backed by Glen Love at that very meeting. The forming of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in 1992 and Interdisciplinary Studies in literature and Environment in 1993, helped the term to bloom. However the publication of two seminal papers: 'The Environmental imagination' by Lawrence Buell, and 'The Ecocriticism Reader' edited by Cheryll Glotfelty(1996), gave a new impetus to the entire movement of ecocriticism. It would be relevant to quote Glotfelty's frequently used definition of ecocriticism in this context:

"What is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies."(xviii)

Ecocriticism studies the connections among self, society, nature and text. Human culture can by no

means be separated from nature; they reside in the nature. So acts towards the flora and fauna is nothing but what man does to himself and to his culture. Ecocritics in general examines the relations between writers, texts and 'the world'. In ecocriticism, 'the world' includes the complete ecosphere. Its approach to literary criticism is earth-centred. Ecocriticism also refers to the theoretical approach to the inter-related web of natural, cultural and supernatural phenomena. Majority of the ecological works replicate a common motivation: the consciousness that we have landed into the age of environmental limits, a stage when the impacts of human activities are hampering the planet's basic life support system. Generally ecocritical readings have been concerned with modern works, from the time of industrial revolution and thereafter. This is because the degradation of environment has increased alarmingly since modernity. In this regard we may quote Brair Wood:

"...myths have long been understood to perform the social and cultural function of instructing people in acceptable or improper behaviour and in performing the task of fusing seemingly impossibly contradictory interpretations of the world."(119)

Some of our modern conceptions of nature are partly constructed by our ancient myths and Nature has continuously occupied an important space in the myths. The Karbi tribe's mythological treatment of nature bears age old concepts and perceptions on what we study today in ecocriticism. The old myths, folk beliefs, rituals and traditions of the Karbi tribe of Assam clearly show their interconnectedness and dependence on nature. This relationship has been somewhat changed due to the emergence of urbanisation and Christianity. Thus, these myths stand immensely relevant to ecocriticism. In fact the study of myth and folklore can aid in the deeper understanding of the root causes of ecological problems and also help in the re-establishment of a more ecocentric culture.

According to Jonathan Bate:

"all human communities have myths of origin, stories which serve both to invent a past which is necessary to make sense of the present and to establish a narrative of humankind's uniqueness and apartness from the rest of nature" (Bate : 26)

The Karbis as one of the oldest ethnic groups inhabiting Assam, belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic stock. They are now mostly found residing in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The religious beliefs of the Karbis are reflected in their myths. They can be regarded as animists. They believe in innumerable supernatural powers, gods and deities—some benevolent and some malevolent. They have a deep reverence for all types of natural objects. Hemphu and Mukrang are the two principal benevolent household gods of them.

Masira Kohir, a holy song of the Karbis narrates the basic principles of creation. It can be sung only during *Chomangkan*(the death ritual). The song narrates how Hemphu and Mukrang created the Karbis from the egg of a mythical bird known as *WoPlak Pi*. The verse relates that the first members of the Ahoms, the Khasis and the Karbis were hatched out of the eggs laid by *Wo Plak Pi*. It speaks of the common origin of all major ethnic groups of Assam. It also indicates the oneness of human and animals.

According to a myth of the Karbis, after the creation of the earth, the first thing that god created were the plants. Goddess *Rakbepi* sowed the bamboo seeds. She tied pieces of bamboo thread round the stems to strengthen them. That is why the bamboos have scars at the joints made by the threads. Bamboos are used in almost every festivity of the Karbis. Next came the phase of the creation of animals. *Hemphu* and *Mukran* in association with *Pithe* and *Pothe* first created the elephant to serve man. Then they created the tiger and empowered it to eat the wicked.

So even today anyone killed by a tiger in the Karbi society is believed to have committed some big crime. Finally more than a hundred gods came together and created *arleng*(man) from the egg of an unearthly bird.

As per another Karbi myth, at the initial stage of creation, all earthly creatures- both animate and inanimate, spoke a common language and thus they were united. Once they all collectively tried to build a ladder to *Aakarang Sargat*(Heaven) to co-inhabit with gods. The gods conspired to break their unity. Using supernatural charms, gods made the mortals forget their common language. This created a discord among the groups, which permanently broke down the close relationship between human and animal. This myth clearly states that the heart of Karbi culture is dominated by a deep sense of oneness with and connection to all earthly creatures.

The myths of the Karbis portray the spiritual aspect in the relationship between the human and their natural world. As a matter of fact, nature is portrayed as a major character in the myths. Nature is presented as a living entity which acts around and along the human characters. The Karbis love nature so much that they think twice before exploiting nature for their personal gain. This is reflected in their physical activities and thoughts and principles which are influenced by the surrounding environment. Nature is an integral part of the Karbi agricultural life, religious beliefs, festivals and their ideas about the world and human life.

In the first place, we have to mention the different individual and community activities observed by the Karbis. They believe that violence of nature's course brings wrath of the earth. They also believe that maintenance of peace at domestic and social lives satisfies the mother earth- resulting in good harvest. The Karbis observe *Wophong Rongker* expecting it to protect them from the destruction caused by flood

and help them in getting timely rain. *Rongker* is observed at the outset of the new year by worshipping different gods and goddesses in the hope that blessings from the deities would free them from various problems like diseases and natural calamities and also would ensure a good harvest. Another festival *Hacha* is celebrated after the harvest. This is a merry making festival and they offer their thanks to the deity for the good harvest on this occasion. The Karbis believe that the spirit of the creator(*Karjong*) has a role in all these activities. So, they respect all life forms and consider it a crime to kill any living creature unreasonably. In order to beg forgiveness for any such doings, they perform a small ritual just before killing any domestic animal for food. They also believe in rebirth. Anyone who commits grave sin or crime is reborn as an animal. So the Karbis are very careful about harming animals. A ritual called -*San-ki- mi- kechu* is observed before consuming the first bamboo shoot. In this, they offer a portion of the bamboo shoot to the concerned deity who is supposed to be instrumental behind the nurturing of the bamboo groves.

Besides, the Karbis are extremely respectful to their ancestors. They believe that their ancestors had been integral part of the land and hence, the hills, streams, forests etc. are not only the abode of the spirits and gods, but also the souls of their ancestors. The Karbis believe in the divinity of nature. The natural objects like trees, rivers, hills, caves etc. are believed to have divine powers. They believe that nature has a great role to play in their life -from the time of birth to their death and even thereafter. The Karbis (especially the women) therefore in order not to disturb the serenity of nature hardly enter the forest or venture a hill alone. They especially revere a hill called *Rang Le Sai*. In going there they are extremely careful about their acts and the words they speak. They are afraid that while being alone in the forest they may commit

some sin unknowingly. They have the fear that they might come face to face with *Khenlong po*, a huge, hairy wild man who likes human flesh to eat.

Moreover the language of the Karbis clearly reflects the influence of their natural surroundings. Their society makes use of many oral devices- myths, folksongs, hymns which frequently make reference of the flora and fauna. It reflects their closeness to nature. Their folktales are the very product of the environment. This shows how nature shapes the mental make-up of the Karbis.

The life of the Karbis is based on their physical surroundings, developing belief systems. They guide their social, cultural and religious aspects of life in a sustainable way. They believe that they have a mysterious relationship with some plants and animals. As such they refrain from collecting or consuming some plants and from killing or eating the meat of certain animals. A plant, locally named *Tejhi* or *Timur* (Scientific name *Garuga pinnata*), is the most sacred plant of the Karbis. It is under this plant that the Karbis are believed to have born out of the eggs of an unearthly bird. The plant is believed to carry miraculous powers.

The Karbis have five major clans- Terang, Teron, Enghee, Ingti and Timung among others. Each clan revere different species as sacred. There are beliefs and myths highlighting their attachment with specific plant or animal, which ultimately became their totemic object. Out of the numerous totems, mention may be made of the hornbill, the monitor lizard, the imperial pigeon, the *Insung* plant, the racket-tailed drongo, the Arhi plant, the pangolin, the woodpecker, the dogs and the crab. All the clans consider that the totemic plants or animals had helped or protected their respective ancestors or had proved to be some peculiar use or service. The *Jambili athon*, is an important object of the Karbis. The bird at the top of it, Racket-tailed Drongo is held as the king of birds;

symbolic of the traditional Karbi king. The woodpecker in the *Jambili athon* is believed to be a follower of the king. Dogs hold a special position in the Karbi society. A myth narrates that two dogs were created by gods to protect the Karbi forefathers from the evil. They also refrain from the killing of crabs as it believed to carry divine punishment. Overall they show respect for and do not destroy their totems.

The Karbis utilize the resources of the forest as food, fuel, medicines, religious practices etc. They believe in curing diseases by using medicinal plants and praying to the deity. Forest ecology is an inseparable part of the Karbi culture, religious practices and beliefs. The totemic beliefs of the Karbis act as a method of conserving the natural resources. Such methods should be encouraged and documented through scientific investigations.

The closeness and respect to nature integral to the ethos of the Karbis have been gradually dwindling due to a number of reasons including the impacts of religion, western education, modernity, urbanisation and the market economy. The emergence of Christianity has been greatly instrumental in bringing the Karbis to a new crossroads of change. The religion has of late made great inroads into the Karbi life, by its missions providing the people living in the hinterlands with modern education, medical facility and even clothes and food at times of needs. The first- ever religious conversion in the Karbi society took place as far back as the time of Srimanta Sankardev, when a few Karbis were converted to Vaishnavism and those converted became part of the non tribal Assamese people while making themselves baptised to a new socio-cultural life (being in many ways different from their old one). A few other new religions like the Lokhimon and the Sat Sang also made their presence felt among the people. New religions resulted in new societies and the Karbis thus came to lose many of their old patterns in their religious, social and cultural life.

The spread of western education via the missionaries of the Christianity in Karbi Anglong is responsible in making the youths believe that nature is to be utilised for the betterment of life. The new generation Karbis are today depending upon the forest resources to cater to their pecuniary needs. In the process, a large number of herbs, roots etc. That may be useful for traditional medicines have been getting lost. Deforestation is on the rise. The unsustainable exploitation of natural resources is also affecting the traditional belief system of the Karbis, besides disturbing the ecosystem.

Along with the Western education and culture, the growth in Infrastructural facilities in the areas of education, transport, communication and recreation etc. are also leaving its tell tale effect upon the socio-cultural identity of the Karbis. With urbanity comes detachment with the old method of cultivation and social life. Many among the new generation Karbis find it hard to communicate in their mother tongue.

The Karbi hills are abound in beautiful landscapes that have become sources of attraction for the tourists. Ironically though, in trying to entice the tourists, the places have to sacrifice much of their old ambience. Construction of roads and buildings are done by cutting down valuable trees and herbs. Increase in the use of vehicles and opening of industries too pollute the greenery. Moreover, the diverse food habits of the foreign tourists do also affect the traditional food culture of the local community.

At the juncture, as presented above, Totemism and myths may be proved as useful methods for studying the relationships between numerous clans of a Karbi tribe and the world of nature. Totemism holds its organic bond with nature, thus having a bearing upon the balance of the biodiversity. The totemic belief however no longer captivates the mind of the Karbis, especially the new generations. Those few who still

nurture this, find themselves somewhat isolated and even ignored in this respect. Totemic belief thrives upon the principle of the need of living in coexistence with nature. It is heartening to see that of late, the Karbis have shown some interest in this by taking some institutional initiatives to safeguard and revive their traditional culture, myths and also totems.

Ecocriticism can play a crucial role in studying the degradation of environment in the modern age and also in throwing guiding light on the impact of urbanisation and globalisation on the ecology, causing global environmental problems. A balanced view of development and sustainability is the need of the hour. This can be attained by working on themes focused on nature and environment in written as well as oral literatures thus to get on the business of turning our attention to the level of the origin of the myths.

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