

## **Negotiating Ecological Crisis in North-East India: An Ecocritical Reading of Select Literary Texts**

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**Abstract :** The paper discusses the creative writings from North-East India as ethno-eco-centric texts. It examines the literary representations of socio-cultural, economic and political ideologies of the ethnic communities of North-East India to locate the ecological crisis and environmental injustice. The aim has been to expand the structures of ecoculture framed in these literary texts. Nevertheless, from our reading of the texts under study, we found that the ethnic communities of North-East India, though moving away from their ecocultures, still possess traditional ecological knowledge, which could be helpful in understanding and solving the environmental crisis and the impending catastrophe.

Key Words: North-East India, Ecocriticism, Ecoculture, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Anthropomorphism

Ecocriticism, as a field of enquiry, having institutionalised in the academia in the early 1990s, revisits several issues concerning nature and culture, particularly their symbolic representations in literary texts. It examines the cultural, economic and political ideologies which are responsible for ecological crisis, and also for perpetuating social and environmental injustices. It also examines whether the environmental crisis is an effect of anthropocentrism or what DesJardins (2013) calls “unjust institutions and practices” (206). Ecocriticism also raises several other pertinent questions, the reflection on which will create ecological consciousness/ awareness.

North-East India is a land of varied topography, hotspots of biodiversity, and mosaic of cultures. Comprising of eight states, it forms a “disruptive zone” being “fraught with immense diversity” (Sharma 1). However, these states, despite sharing certain commonalities like rich ecology, identity politics and uneven socio-economic development, have “either very little or no cultural, ethnic, dietary, linguistic, or religious affinities among them” (Sharma 1). A bode of about 220 tribes and located in two of the 35 biodiversity hotspots of the world (Sivaperuman & Venkataraman 6), this enchanted geographical region is, however, regarded as “a homogeneous province, a single political domain, inhabited by kindred peoples with a common history” (Ngangom & Nongkynrih ix). So, in dealing with political or socio-economic or everyday issues, which have far reaching effect in the society, most of the creative writers across the eight states of the region not only situate themselves in their locales but also draw resources from their ecosystems. Thus, it requires the creative writers of the region to be, perhaps, ecosophical in spirit while negotiating local issues in global terms. Some of the dominant and recurrent themes, “which give a sense of distinctiveness to the writings from this region” (Misra xxxii), are— identity, insurgency, trauma, memory, corruption, ethnic violence, migration,

internal displacement, exile, ecological concerns, mysticism and so on and so forth.

This paper engages with ecocritical theories for the critical evaluation of creative writings in English from North-East India, particularly the creative works of Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Monalisa Changkija, Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham S. Nongkynrih, Mitra Phukan. One of the aspects of culture as mentioned by Franz Boa in *General Anthropology* (1938) is the relationship between human and nature. However, ecocriticism redefines human's relationship with nature, challenging the dualistic construct of the Western thought. As ecocriticism begins with an assumption that culture and nature are interconnected and mutually influence each other, literary texts go beyond the description of nature and wilderness to a discursive study of human actions and its effects on nature. It also identifies the roots of ecological crisis, which again is related to social and economic injustice. As students of literature positioned in North-East India, our task is to look into the literary texts of this region for possible understanding of how environmental crisis has posed ethical and aesthetic dilemmas, and how these texts disseminate ecological values and traditional ecological knowledge. The literatures from this region are also diverse both in form and content, and produce a wealth of ecological knowledge, which needs to be discovered, classified and analysed. It is, therefore, incumbent on us to locate the writings of the region in "a tradition that cares for the landscape with respect and reciprocity" (Dreese 7) and evaluated "in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (Kerridge, et. al. 5).

One of the significant and unique aspects of the literatures of the region is the imbrication of orality and literacy. As such, most of the creative writers of

the region are primarily the cultural commentators of their respective communities. It is they who retrieve and preserve the worldviews and traditional ecological knowledge of their communities. For instance, in "The Old Story-Teller" (2013), Ao lays claim to the role and responsibility of a chronicler of her Ao-Naga culture in order to preserve for posterity the culture and tradition of her community:

I have lived my life believing  
Story telling was my proud  
legacy

. . .

Warriors and were-tigers  
Came alive through the tales  
As did the various animals  
Who were once our brothers  
Until we invented language  
And began calling them savage.

(Ao 240-42)

In this poem, the symbiotic coexistence of humans and nonhumans in Ao-Naga belief system is symbolically portrayed. However, Ao states that the modern (Western) education has gradually made them abandon their worldviews. Therefore, she insists in preserving her cultural identity and traditional knowledge by telling the story of her people.

The North-East has been a home to several ethnic communities belonging to diverse races with 'creation myths' of their own. These creation myths, based on nature, are considered to be "humankind's earliest stories" (Buell 1). For instance, Temsula Ao's "Stone people from Lungterok" (2009) refers to the evolution of man from the stones, which are inanimate things:

Lungterok,  
The six stones  
Where the progenitors  
And forebears  
Of the stone-people

Were born  
Out of the womb  
Of earth (Ao 1)

The poem reveals that the ancestors of the Ao-Nagas were born out of the six stones in Lungterok. It shows how the consciousness of the people of these ethnic communities is structured by nature. For them, humans and nonhumans including non-living things are interwoven.

Similarly, in Mamang Dai's "The Missing Link" (2004), we find a poetic reflection on the migration stories of Adi community:

I will remember then  
the great river that turned, turning  
with the fire of the first sun,  
away from the old land of red-robed  
man  
and poisonous ritual  
when the seven brothers fled south  
disturbing the hornbills in their  
summer nests. (Dai 11)

In this poem, Dai takes resort to the memory of the river to find the place from which her community had migrated. As the river, having originated in the "land of red robed man" (Tibet), moved southward to reach the present abode of Adis, she believes it to be the fate of her community as well. By endowing anthropomorphic traits to nonhumans like river in the poem, Dai illustrates the ecosophical tradition of the Adi community.

Nevertheless, the belief system of the Adi community is based on the animated existence of the living and the nonliving things, which is referred to as 'animism.' In the poem, "The Balm of Time" (2004), Dai declares her faith in animism as it conceives of spiritual connections of humans and nonhumans including inanimate objects:

Yes, I believe in gods.  
In the forest faith of good and evil,  
spirits of the river,  
and the dream world of the dawn. (Dai 57)

In this poem, the connections among human, nature and the spirit are articulated. Thus, it produces a set of ecological ethics, which govern the lives of the Adis. It also gives them a distinct ecological identity.

However, in a poem like "Genesis" (2003) by Easterine Kire, we find that the abundance of natural resources in a particular locale played an important role in the decision of the ancestors to settle down, and, thereby, in the formation of their identity. Each community also negotiates with nature in specific ways in the construction of its culture. Kire speaks of nature's plenitude in the poem thus:

Keviselie speaks of a time  
when her hills were untamed  
her soil young and virgin  
—  
every evening they would return  
their baskets overflowing  
with the yield of the land  
when they would gather around  
and their songs filled all the earth. (Iralu 219)

The ethnic communities depend on nature for everything, including their food and pleasure. They lead a fulfilling life. Therefore, it can be argued that they lead an ecosophical life, which Naess (1989) defines as "simple in means, rich in ends. It is not to be confounded with appeals to be Spartan, austere, and self-denying" (Naess 88). Further, it can be argued that since nature is an integral and sacred part of their lives, it should not be exploited. In this context, Leopold (1949) observes: "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, beauty and stability of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262).

However, nature not only sustains these communities, but also shapes their 'ecological identity.' In Mamang Dai's "Ties" (2004), the memory of the landscape creates a strong bond with the world and its ecology.

In the poem, Dai stresses on the ecological identity stating that she always carries the image and identity of her native land:

Among strangers and friends  
Suddenly I would recall  
rivers, and summer rain  
the holy stones  
of your dim country  
ringing in my ears.

—  
to taste the mountains,  
the breath of these,  
at sunrise to sip  
the sweetness... (Dai 14)

As the landscape has agency, like a living being, it acts on her psyche. As Donelle Dreese (2002) states “it is not an uncommon human experience to long for the particularities of that place that have had a powerful effect on their psyche” (1). The ethnic people from the North-East attach themselves to the place and its ecology. All their narratives are, thereby, structured by the ecology of the place, which Yi Fu Tuan (1977) calls ‘Topophilia.’ Apart from Topophilia, the “affective bond between people and place” (Tuan 4), the flora and fauna of the place shape their art, architecture, practice and belief system. In “Ties”, the sense of belonging to her native land is strongly evoked by the memory of the picturesque and enchanting landscape. Interestingly, the landscape of her native land transforms, according to Scheese (1994), from an image into a dominant character.

Even Robin Ngangom, in his poem, “To My People” (1988), seems to assert that one is responsible to his/her native land. If in “Ties,” Mamang Dai recreates her relationship with her native land, Ngangom here is asking his people not to abandon their roots. If they do, their ecological identity will be shattered. He believes that if his people move out of their land, it would amount to a desecration of the land, as the

outsiders will never understand the ‘ecoculture’ of his community:

My people make a bonfire  
of your ancestral granaries  
and cede your primordial hills  
to vultures from the plains.

...  
One day you’ll find  
no earth, no trees or river  
and would even sell  
a handful of blue sky  
to prolong your decadence.

(Ngangom 42)

In this poem, Ngangom is concerned about his people, culture and ecology. He seems to be perturbed by the influx of outsiders, both in literal and metaphorical sense. In the literal sense, what he wants to say is obvious; but in the metaphorical sense, he is concerned about the people of his community because they are apparently forsaking their indigenous faith, belief system and ecological knowledge in favour of foreign faith and ideas. Consequently, a new culture would evolve, which would fashion a new ecoculture, perhaps radically different from the one he was familiar with. Thus, he bemoans the loss of his worldview and the ecological landscape.

As culture depends on nature, the “present sense of self” or identity can be “salvage(d)” by the historical representation of “the stories and places from the past” through a process call “mythic reterritorialization” (Dreese 24). In *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), Easterine Kire engages with myths to reconstruct the culture and tradition of the Angami Nagas. The following paragraph illustrates the ecological consciousness encoded in the culture of the Nagas:

Do you know why we call the tiger ‘elder brother’? Levi asked his younger brother. “Of course” Lato replied, “every child of this village knows the answer to that question. It is because man and tiger and spirit were brothers once. When we were hunting two months ago, we heard a tiger growling. Dolhu shouted, ‘it’s only us, elder brother’ and he stopped growling immediately. “Well,” returned Levi, not to be outdone, “Our hunting group saw a tiger. We were on the rocks near Yalho bagei when it walked past below us.” “And he didn’t charge you?” “No, he went past and never looked up” replied Levi. “Oh it must have been a weretiger,” concluded Lato rather smugly at which Levi sprang back “It most certainly was not a weretiger. (14-15)

In this paragraph, Kire seems to focus on how myths help in establishing the relationship between human/culture and tiger/nature in their worldview. By mentioning about the ‘weretiger’, she debunks the epistemological division of nature and culture. Among the ethnic people, the ecological consciousness is manifested in their cultural values as encoded in “myths, folklore, and ritual practices” (Guha 2). According to Guha, the ecological wisdom of these communities is embedded in their living practices. Thus, for the ethnic people, to the dismay of the West, there is no distinction between culture and nature; in fact, both are interwoven. Further, conservation of nature is done culturally, either by creating a sacred structure around it or by implanting a structure of fear.

Notwithstanding their beliefs in the sacredness and munificence of nature, the ethnic communities are also scared of nature’s fury. They are scared of the rage of nature, which may roll up in the form of, say, flood

as described in Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* (2005)”

The Red River is spate, wearing its full monsoon regalia. It was indeed red here. Red with the topsoil washed down from the high mountain plateau above. Red with the tumultuous volume of water that rushed through this cleft between two hill ranges. Red with fury at being thus confined. Red with violence that raged on its banks. (342)

In the passage above, the flurry of the river seems to symbolise its anger. It is often said that nature rebounds with equal vigour if it is disturbed. Phukan, perhaps, is referring to the ecological wisdom that if nature is dominated recklessly, it becomes furiously violent. The flood is an expression of its fury for being violated by man for his selfish gain. This is an example of the language that nature uses to snap at man.

However, in the poem, “Of a People Unanswered” (2003), Monalisa Changkija presents how nature has been destroyed by man in the name of industrialization and urbanization:

Yes, I’ve seen our rice fields  
turn into factories and mills  
our green hills  
reduced to barren brown  
our rivers have dried  
and our once sparkling fish  
lie dead on sandy banks. (Changkija 216)

In this poem, Changkija describes the human induced destruction of nature for their material interests. The increase in population, and the advent of colonial modernity and its attending forces like urbanization, transportation, mining, plantation (colonial forestry), bureaucratic corruption, technology, quick mobility etc have driven man to exploit nature for their expanding needs and lavish living. Nevertheless, the

emergence of the individual self in the community lives leads to a transformation of ethnic culture. Interestingly, a new configuration in their culture has taken place, disengaging itself from its dependence on nature. Further, the competition for accumulation of wealth among individuals in the community further accelerates the propensity to exploit nature. Thus, she laments the loss of ecological consciousness among her people.

However, the deprived section of the ethnic community, who still has certain ecological concerns, has been, what Van Plumwood (1993) calls, 'incorporated'. According to Van Plumwood, Incorporation is a process through which the deprived are made to conform to the norms created by the dominant group (30-45). As such, ethnic communities are gradually deracinated from their ecosystems. Thus, in the poem, "Only Strange" (2011), Nongkynrih laments at the loss of tradition in its conflict with capitalist modernization. He expresses his anguish at the destruction of their rich ethnic culture, and the hopelessness in the new ways of life:

In the park I saw  
those strange flowers again  
that I have seen bossing around  
courtyards and private gardens.  
Like flowers, only strangers  
And strange ways have come  
To bloom in this land. (Nongkynrih 7)

In this poem, Nongkynrih feels a sense of rootlessness as the tradition he was born to has been replaced by a new culture that is strange to him. His ecological identity is shattered, and his memory of the ecology of the past has made him restless, for he can't relive those experiences in reality. The capitalist ideologies and apparatuses have been in direct conflict with the epistemologies and structures of the ethnic

communities. Consequently, they are tilting heavily toward the western mode of living. Therefore, it can be argued that the process of religious conversion and modernization brought about by colonization in the first place, and cultural modernity that ensued played an important role in the annihilation of the culture of the past in the North-East. So, it has led to a renewed and vigorous search for their identity, meaning, values and mores in/through the literary texts. In order to reconcile with the past, it is important for the creative writers of the North-East to set, as indicated by Plumwood (2002), the humans within nature, and to reset nonhumans within culture to defeat the modern practice of privileging of culture over nature.

From our study of a select creative writings of North-East India, we can conclude that the ethnic communities have adopted sustainable ways of living. However, this beautiful region, known for its rich cultural diversity, natural resources and heritages, is gradually shifting from a self-sustained economy to a capitalist economy with an agenda for rapid development. The creative writers of the region are apprehensive of such modes of development, particularly of its impact on nature. Therefore, they are radically repositioning the ideas and principles governing our understanding of man and nature in the literary texts. Informed as they are about global warming, resource crunch and environment induced diseases, these writers from North-East India are trying to find a creative solution to the problem espousing bioregionalism and traditional ecological knowledge for the welfare and survival of man and nature.

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