

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

April 2014 Vol. 5, Issue- 2

5th Year of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

An Eco-Critical Approach: A Study of Selected North East Indian Poets

Chingangbam Anupama

Assistant Professor, English Department
Kalindi College, University of Delhi
New Delhi

Poetry of the North East India is always marked by a unique presence of nature whether in the form of a simple backdrop scenery but more often as spirits and souls, playing an active role in the artistic creation. One of the reasons for this indulgence could be perhaps the close proximity that the people share with nature. Before the advent of Christianity, Hinduism and other religions, animism and nature worship formed an integral part of the lives of NE people which led to the poets of the region becoming more aware of the immediate ecological surrounding.

Indian English poetry from Northeastern part of India is rich in enshrining various aspects of ecology of the region. It has been a fashion with the poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness.

(Chandra, Das,2007:35)

Thus, it is only natural that the literary works produced here, in North East states, have a special place for nature. The literature of ancient times, classic and even religious texts all around the world has treated nature in a special way, whether it be the Biblical Garden of Eden or the forest where Rama was exiled. Trees and wilderness have played the role of the provider, protector and sometimes destroyer. The North East States, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim, except for Tripura, are nestled at the Himalayan Mountain ranges and thus have been a playground for nature. A closer look at the green writing of the area will reveal many hidden aspects of North East Literature.

The study of ecology has gained immense popularity in the recent years as people have become more concerned about the deteriorating environment and eco-system. Thus, in the field of literature, a new approach, Ecocriticism which mainly deals with a critical reading of literary texts in relation to environment, nature and literature, has come forward. As the basic definition suggests that ecocriticism studies the 'relationship between literature and environment' (Nayar 2013:242), it is interdisciplinary in nature. Yamuna Prasad defines ecocriticism as,

Eco-Criticism may be defined as an art of making judgments on ecoliterature or the relationships between environment and literature and ecoliterature is a mirror of the relationships between man and environment. (V,2011:2)

The term 'eco' comes from Greek 'oikos' which means 'house' and 'critic' comes from 'krites' meaning 'judge'. Hence ecocriticism deals with the expression of judgment upon the writings which delineates relation between nature and man or effects of culture on nature. It was Thomas K Dean of the University of Iowa, who incorporated culture with ecocriticism. He says,

Ecocriticism is a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories) that is the same way connected with human relationship to the natural world.(www.asle.org)

Thus, ecocriticism deconstructs the relationship between nature, culture and literature. Living in an age of constant ecological and environmental crisis, the study of natural-cultural relations has become an important aspect of modern studies. Pramod K Nayar has said in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*,

Ecocriticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches. (Nayar, 2013: 242)

Even though 'Ecocriticism' is comparatively new as the movement started only in the late 20th century, study of nature and man in literature dates back to the ancient times. As already mentioned above, it can be traced back to religious texts, but the most important phase which cannot be skipped is the romantic period of English Literature during the early 19th century. The romantic movement was basically against industrialization of the late 18th century. Most of the poems of William Wordsworth, one of the major poets of the age, also known as a 'lake poet', are reaction to the city life and grime and pollution of the industries. He feels the staggering of the balance between man and environment. He writes,

But Oft in lonely rooms and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet...

'Nature never did betray the heart that loved her' (Tintern Abbey).

Thus, Wordsworth and other romantic poets glorify nature and landscape in their poetry to highlight the relationship of man and environment.

Raymond Williams, in his book, *The Country and City* (1973), has also talked about nature or more accurately the notion of nature, the countryside and city in English literature of 18th century. He has tried to demonstrate how the age (18th century) worked with the notion of culture and nature, other than exploring the environmental aspects of the literature of the age.

Among Indian writers, who have written on the concerning relationship of man and nature, the story by A K Ramanujan, 'The Flowering Tree' can be mentioned. The story inspired from folktales, depicts the tale of a girl who can transform herself into a flowering tree. The symbol of the tree giving sustenance for the girl and her family portrays the relation of nature and how it has been sustaining life. But the destruction of the tree signifies the crumbling of this delicate relationship. It also highlights the problem of deforestation and its effects. For most Indians, trees have always been a form of pious god or goddess along with a source of livelihood. Attempts have been made to save trees from deforestation and the 'Chipko' Movement is a great example of how people have realized the worth of the trees.

Thus, numerous writers have analyzed this relationship of man and nature in literature. Now, coming back to the term Eco-Criticism again, 'ecology' studies the relationship between species and habitat and 'eco-critics' apply ecology into literature and stress on the relation of book and earth. Ecology includes everything related to the earth. Yamuna Prasad in the book *Green Symphony*, says,

It (ecology) includes everything related to earth, water, sky, all non-human elements such as ancient buildings, traditional county houses, agriculture and agricultural lands,

fauna, caves and hills, plants and trees, rivers and seas, birds and animals, serpents and reptiles, winds and seasons etc. which constitute a beautiful gallery of portraits in ecoliterature. Eco criticism is a kind of congenial negotiation between human and non human worlds. (V,2011:5)

The term 'eco criticism' was first coined by writer William Rueckert in his essay ' *Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism*' in 1978. In this book, he defined ecocriticism as 'the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.' Though, the study remained dormant for many years until a series of literary conferences brought it back to the literary front during 1990s. Most prominent of this series of conferences are, 1991 MLA special session conducted by Harold Fromm, called, 'Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies' and 1992 American Literature Association Symposium organized by Glen A Love, entitled, 'American Nature Writing: New Approaches.' The aim of this association, ALA, is to propagate new nature writing and to have a scholarly approach to eco-literature. Thus, this new school of critical studies focus mainly on eco-literature in lieu of the major ecological crises of the present day. Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty define ecocriticism in the Introduction of the book edited by them, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996),

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 texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Coming back to North East Literature, ecocritical analysis offers a scope for examining the intricate relationship between man and nature and explore the place of nature in the material world. As mentioned above, NE literature, particularly in poetry, there is an abundance of nature imageries. Almost all the poems from this area lack the urban sensibility and are unique and refreshing. The concern for nature, as ruthless acts of deforestation and ecological disturbance have swept the entire world and NE is not an exception. Thus, poetry is one of the medium through which this concern is amplified. Nature is not just a source of sustenance for most of the NE states but more of an extension of identity and roots. Thus, harm to nature immediately affects the question of identity. Nature becomes a space where an individual identifies himself. Through the spirits of trees and rivers and mountains, one can find the ancestral roots. Mamang Dai, a celebrated poet from Arunachal Pradesh writes in her poem, *An Obscure Place*,

The History of our race begins with the place of stories

We do not know if the language we speak

Belongs to a written past

Nothing is certain

There are Mountains, Oh! There are Mountains

We climbed every slope, we slept by the river

But do not speak of victory yet.

(Misra2011:5)

For Mamang Dai, the 'Mountains' here cease to be just another landscape and instead become a sphere of history. Through the mountains, she seeks the ancestral cord to lead her back to the lost roots. She further says,

The words of strangers have led us into a mist

*Deeper than the one we left behind
Weeping, like a waving grassland
Where the bones of our fathers are buried
surrounded by thoughts of beauty.*

The poet laments how the people of Arunachal have departed from the age-old belief of their ancestors at the wake of western thoughts ushered in by the British colonizers. The close relationship that the native people had with mountains and the wilderness is falling apart. She says,

*'See! They have slain the wild cat
And buried the horn-bill in her maternal sleep.'*

The destruction of flora and fauna is yet another concern that is present in the poems. It also serves as a metaphor of lost identity as nature in a holistic way represents the collective identity of the people and destruction of parts leads to the distortion of that identity. In her quest for identity, Mamang has used metaphors like the mystic mountains and rivers and forests and these metaphors dominate her poems. In another poem, Voice of the Mountain, she says,

*The other day a young man arrived from the village
Because he could not speak he brought a gift of fish
from the land of rivers
it seems such acts are repeated
we live in territories forever ancient and new
and as we speak in changing languages
I also leave my spear leaning by the tree
and try to make a sign. (Misra2011:3)*

The man here who visits the mountain to give offerings evokes the traditional tribal values of the area. Mamang has delicately portrayed the communication of man and nature. The 'gift of fish' from the 'land of rivers' is being offered to the mountain and in return the mountain tries to 'make a sign' and thus communicates with man. Here, mountain again becomes the spirit of the land and is treated as a subject in the conglomeration of nature and culture. In another poem, Rain, she talks of how it encompasses the whole jungle and herself.

*In the sound of the rain
is contained
all the spirits of the jungle
Living, breathing
crushed, regenerated
dark
always watchful*

Rain here contains the 'the spirits of the jungle'. It acts as an agent to bring a balance to the feelings of the poet, who further writes,

*in the rain the camellias bloom
the incense of the pine
fills the senses again
again, the scales are balanced
between joy and pain.*

Thus, every poem reflects the proximity of the natives of Arunachal Pradesh with nature and how the poet is concerned about the deteriorating relationship in the wake of capitalism and consumerism. She laments for the present condition of the life of people as they have severed this relation with nature. She writes in her poem Remembrance,

*Why did we think gods would survive
deathless in memory
in trees and stones and the sleep of babies
now, when we close our eyes
and cease to believe, god dies.*

But the quest for identity continues and she writes further,
*We dwell in the mountains and do not know
what the world hears about us
foragers for a destiny
all the days of our lives
we stare at the outline of the hills
lifting our eyes to the invincible sky.*

Another major poet of NE is Temsula Ao from Nagaland and she also asserts the identity of her people through the metaphors of trees, mountains and animals. Tracing back the long lost identity of the Ao people after the interventions of Christianity, Temsula invokes the spirits of nature in her poems. In Blood of Others, she writes,

*We believed that our God lived
In the various forms of nature
whom we worshiped
with unquestioning faith.*

But this 'belief' was shaken and finally removed by '*a tribe of strangers*', who came with
*Armed with only a book and
promises of a land called heaven.*

The Naga people became displaced as they were separated from their ancestral beliefs by the onslaught of Christianity as they came '*Declaring that our trees and Mountains/ Rock and Rivers were no Gods.*' Temsula further writes,

*Stripped of all our basic certainties
We strayed from our old ways
And let our soul-mountain recede
Into a tiny ant-hill..*

Temsula has often written about her concern for the destruction of the lush forest and mountains. The symbol of mountain recurs in her poems and becomes an allegorical rendering of the glory of Ao people. The destruction caused to the mountains thus, led to the destruction of the glory of Ao people. From an ecological point of view, disturbing the balance of nature by harming the hills and the mountains will definitely be fatal for the people residing in the area. Temsula's concern can be seen in the lines,

*Alas for the forest
which now lies silent*

*stunned and stumped
with the evidence
of her rape
as on her breast
the elephants trample
the lorries rumble
loaded with her treasures
bound for the mills at the foothill.*

Nature has always been associated with feminine gender by writers and philosophers of all time. Nature plays the ultimate figure of a mother, 'mother nature', who is a provider, protector and giver of life. The figure of 'mother-nature' immediately gives nature the task of sustaining and providing for human race. Nature's products are deemed free and available and something that is taken for granted by man. Feminists, have seen this similar exploits that nature and women suffer in a patriarchal society. Vandana Shiva and Maria Miles, imminent ecofeminists, say,

We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way.

(<http://womenjusticeecology.wordpress.com/2009/07/04/dr-vandana-shiva-and-feminist-theory/>)

Temsula Ao has compared the body of a woman and its violation with the landscape and its devastation. The strong imagery of rape of forests culminates to a barrenness of the womb when she says,

*Cry for the river
Muddy, misshapen
Grotesque
Choking with the remains
of her sister
the forest
No life stirs in her belly now
the bomb
and the bleaching powder
have left her with no tomorrow.*

Thus, the agent of the patriarchal society, the 'bomb' and 'bleaching powder', have cleansed and left the river and the forest barren. Eco-feminists have talked about how a man in a patriarchal society believes in domination over nature and women. Nayar says,

'Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal society's values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature,' (Nayar 2013:249)

Temsula's poems thus, constantly remind the rapid ecological disturbances in NE region as deforestation and excessive use of natural resources are on the rise vis-a vis oppression of woman in a patriarchal society. Another aspect of Temsula's poetry is the celebration of the close relationship that the Ao community has with nature in earlier times. She seems to be reminding the new generation who have trodden far from this relationship, how special it is. She writes in her poem, Stone People from Lungterok,

Stone people
the polyglots
knowledgeable
in bird's language
and animal discourse
the students who learned from ants
the art of carving
heads of enemies
as trophies
of war
stone people
the worshipers
of unknown, unseen
spirits
of trees and forests
of stones and rivers
believers of soul
and its varied forms
its sojourn here
and passage across the water
into hereafter.

Manipur has also seen some writers who have constantly used nature metaphors in poetry, particularly the pre independence writers, Kh Choaba and L Kamal Singh. These writers have romanticized the notion of nature in their poetry. A deeper look into these poems reveals that the glorification of nature is used as a means to assert the *meitei* identity which stood in a brink of crisis because of the Vaisnavism and colonialism. The deliberate ignorance of the heritage of the ancestors and land as the influence of vaisnavism and colonial masters has led the people to look towards the 'west' and it is compared with the neglected state of nature in the region in most of the poems. Thus these poets, Kamal and Chaoba, treat nature as an extension of meitei identity. L Kamal writes in his poem, Remnants of Canchipur,

Veiled by the mountains around
defended by the hillmen
embellished by six seasons
like the garden of the earth
in the golden land of the earth
like the fruit inside the lotus
and the shalgram under the garlands
shines ancient Canchipur. (Singh.2000:88)

Kamal sings the beauty of Canchipur, the old capital of Manipur before it was shifted to Imphal. In the beauty of nature landscape, he tries to insert his identity which he fears is not recognized. In another poem, Chandranadi, he also talks about the depletion of an imaginary river which coincides with the terrible condition of rivers in the state in the recent time,

*Oh! its sad to see the scenery of Chandranadi
its banks have become woods
its interior full of grasses...*

The attitude shown by the poets of post independence Manipur is quite different from the pre independence school. The later half of the 20th century have witnessed a struggle by the NE region against the marginalization of the area as compared to so-called mainland Indian States. Namrata Chaturvedi of NEHU says,

Urbanization along with capitalist consumerism has threatened the cultural identity of this region too. The character of the land has undergone fast changes with the hegemonising tendencies like much of so called Third world has witnesses. Within India too, the center vs. the periphery model has been established by the forces of capitalism which look upon the entire North Eastern region as underdeveloped or backward.

(V,2011:142)

The few decades have witnessed the struggle and fight against this marginalization that Namrata Chaturvedi has talked about by people of the NE states. The end result of such struggle has been meaningless unfortunate violence. Nature has become the battlefield and green of the trees have been tarnished with the red of the blood. The sensibility of the poets of this area, who were born and had grown up among this natural heaven is built on the natural images. And in such a time of crisis, nature becomes an extension of their individuality and 'its contours their defining characteristics.'

Saratchand Thiyam, a contemporary poet from Manipur, has often talked about the violent struggle in his poems. But as a poet from NE, he has compared this violent act of struggle with the images of nature. He writes in ,the snowy wilderness,

*A loud blast, reverberations
gelignite smoke shuts out everything
and the sky rubs vigorously
its two eyes. They become blood-shot
under the sky
amidst the smoke
the sound of gunfire rolls
on and on.(The Waves,1995:18)*

Saratchand has also shown his concern over the effect of glottalization and its effect on nature. He writes in his poem Earth,

*Mother Earth!
The zoo in your bosom today
is slack in security..
the empty skies are today
filled with swarms
of iron monsters that escort
satellites, delivered without check
and they quarrel among themselves.(1995:32)*

Like Mamang Dai, Saratchand had also use the symbol of rain in his poems. While Mamang talks about the spirit of rain that embrace the forest, Saratchand talks of the same rain as a force which can wreck havoc in the life of the people of Manipur. Rain here becomes the angry outburst of nature. He writes,

*Now the rain is getting worse
sister don't go, don't go please don't go
look sister every courtyard is
now become a Mangarak Kanbi..
..Hide sister, please, you must hide
somewhere inside safe and sound.(1995:20,21)*

Another imagery that Saratchand has often used is that of hills and mountains. He has used the symbol of mountain as an allegory of struggle of the people of Manipur. He writes in Hillocks,

*Some hillocks and hummocks still
fearless retreat undestroyed
remain submerged unflagged
to continue the battle every now and then
till their day comes too
to emerge victorious
from the depths of the ocean.(1995:14)*

Thus, nature forms an integral part of the poetry produced in the NE states. The attitude of the poets towards nature and their treatment of it in poems is different from one region to another. Sometimes, nature becomes the spirit of people and sometimes, it becomes the identity of a community and yet some have talked about nature through the current day's violent incidents faced by NE people. The common ground of these poets is their awareness of the changes in the immediate ecological surrounding vis-a-vis the lifestyle of the people. Though Raymond Williams has talked about the binary opposites of culture and nature, the effect of one on the other can be seen in the poems of NE and an eco-critical outlook helps in understanding this intricate relationship of nature and culture that can be found in almost all the poems of NE.

Works Cited:

- Thiyam, Saratchandra, *The Waves*, Poknapham Publication, 1995, Imphal
Chandra, N.D.R. Das Nigamananda, *Ecology, Myth and Mystery – Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India*, Sarup & Sons, 2007, New Delhi
Singh, L Damodar, *Aspects of Manipuri Literature*, Writers' Forum, 2008, Imphal
Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory – An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Viva Books, 2008, reprint 2010, New Delhi
Ed Misra, Tilottoma, *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India-Poetry and Essays*, Oxford University Press, 2011, New Delhi
Garrard, Greg, *Ecocriticism-The Critical Idiom*, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2013
Nayar, Pramod, K, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory- From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*, Pearson, 2010, fifth edition 2013, New Delhi

Websites:

www.asle.org

<http://womenjusticeecology.wordpress.com/2009/07/04/dr-vandana-shiva-and-feminist-theory/>