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A Critical Study of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Iyaruingham* (*Love in the Time of Insurgency*) from Ecofeminist Perspective

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Abstract:

The corpus of literature emerging out of the eight states of North- East India mostly demonstrates the issues of political unrest and conflict as reflected in literary imagination. Nagaland, one of the most troubled regions among the eight states of North- East India has been witness to various forms of conflict and violence. The Second World War remains an important historical event for the Naga people as the impact of the war was severe on Nagaland. Situated at this context, the present paper evinces an interest in an ecofeminist study of the war-ravaged landscape of Nagaland and the 'otherised' position of women as delineated in Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's novel *Iyaruingham*, translated by the author himself English as *Love in the Time of Insurgency*. Ecofeminism, a movement against the working of the anthropocentric endeavours of patriarchal society has mostly been vocal against the brutalities of war, deforestation, militarization and urbanisation. They claim that the ideologies that justify the practice of warfare, racism, colonialism, Speciesism, spring from the same patriarchal mode of thinking that legitimizes naturism (man's superiority over nature) and the subjugation of women. Keeping these arguments in view, the paper seeks to make a parallel study of the predicament of the female protagonist, Sharengla, an abducted war victim and the war-ravaged natural landscape of Nagaland, where the experience of the woman is equated with the condition of the shell-shocked landscape.

Keywords: Women, Nature, Second World War, Insurgency, Nagaland.

Introduction:

Ecofeminism as an academic space of intervention evolved in the 1970s and 1980s out of the intersectional dialogue among the diverse areas of the feminist and environmental academic deliberations. The French radical feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term 'ecofeminism' in the year 1974 to suggest the correlation of purposes of

the movements related to the fields of feminism and ecological studies. The theoretical orientation of ecofeminism is premised on the deliberations that the exploitation of nature, the oppression of women, the racist and colonialist oppression of indigenous groups of people – all are inherently connected with the workings of the dominant patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies. Ecofeminism as an academic discipline confronts the patriarchal forms of oppression and anthropocentric exploitation of the environment and advocates the active agency of women against all forms of oppression and exploitation.

Though the inception of the academic orientations of ecofeminism was initiated in the West, a glance at the postcolonial Third World countries such as Africa or South Asia, particularly India, leads to the historical evidence of women led movements against environmental degradations in these developing countries. The Chipko ('chipko' is a Hindi word connoting 'to embrace' or hug) Movement (1973) in India, a women led ecological movement to safeguard the trees saved 12,000 square kilometers of sensitive land at the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. Even before the 'Chipko' movement, India had witnessed the struggles of indigenous women to safeguard nature against the encroaching endeavors of developmental projects. The recent times have witnessed the emergence of other women environmental activists such as Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, C.K. Janu and Mamang Dai.

Further, the contended shared status of women and nature as the 'other' is not a homogenized or universal category. The different stratifications of spatio-temporal dimensions define the modes of otherisation and exploitation. The shared existence of women and nature in Western societies differ significantly from the experience of the Third World women who draw their sustenance from the ecology and share a reciprocal tie of survival with the ecology. Ecofeminist critics like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies have deliberated on the specificities of the experience of women and nature in the Third World countries. Vandana Shiva contends in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*:

With the violation of nature is lined the violation and marginalization of women, especially in the Third World. Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance...Their interaction with nature, with their own nature as well as the external environment, was a reciprocal process. They conceived of their own bodies as being productive in the same way as they conceived of external nature being so. (41)

Shiva's contentions about the Third World women in general could specifically be situated at the context of the experience of the indigenous women of the North-East India as they form a reciprocal symbiosis with nature where nature is seen as a prime source of meaning-making and agency.

The seven provinces of North-East India (excluding Sikkim), popularly known as 'seven sisters', share different myths and oral tales related to the mountains, rivers and the ecology which engulf them. The earliest literary expressions of the provinces of North-East India were basically oral literature until the Roman script was adopted as script for the Tribal Literatures. The vernacular literature of Assamese is as old as any vernacular literature of India and has a long history and tradition. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, one of the most respected Assamese writers of all time was the first Assamese author to achieve the nation's most prestigious literary award, Jnanapith Award. Bhattacharya has contributed immensely to the domain of Assamese literature by writing many novels, short-stories, poems and essays and his literary expressions are always regarded as authentic refractions of the changing socio-cultural experiences of the ethnic and indigenous groups from the North-East India. His celebrated novels, *Aai*, *Shataghni*, *Mritunjoy*, *Iyaruigam* have always presented the real picture of his people, a projection which remains somewhat less noticed by the majoritarian Indian fraternity.

The Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel by Bhattacharya, *Yiaruingam*, translated by the author himself from Assamese into English as *Love in the Time of Insurgency*, showcases the gory impact of the Second World War on the lives of the ethnic group of people, the Tanghkul Naga and also portrays their struggle for a separate land that resulted in armed conflicts with the military forces, events that have been plaguing the normal flow of life in Nagaland for so many decades now. The Assamese title of the novel *Yiaruingam* can be translated into English as 'people's rule'. Considered to be one of the first novels to address the impact of the Second World War on Nagaland and the postcolonial Naga struggle for self autonomy as opposed to the Indian nation state, the novel refracts the authentic experiences of the Nagas during the late 1940s and the 1950s. The novel won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1961 and addresses different forms of inequalities and the struggle by different ethnic groups, pitted against the majoritarian discourse of homogenization and groping for an identity of their own. At the same time it unmasks layers of hierarchies which perpetuate the dualisms that govern the forms of inequality, such as coloniser/colonized, culture/nature, modernism/ethnicity, men/women,

human/animal where the former terms are privileged over the latter terms and placed as superior agents of control over the categories of disempowered groups. Situated in this context, the present paper evinces interest in analyzing the twin exploitation of women and the ecology of Nagaland through the lens of ecofeminism with specific study of the war victim, Sharengla and other minor women characters of the novel and the simultaneous destruction of the productivity of the soil and ecology of the region due to the war as depicted in the novel.

The ravishing presence of the Second World War in Nagaland that destroys the serene counterbalance of the ecologically rich region runs parallel in the novel to the coalescing of different ideologies that led to vociferous claims of separate statehood. The impact of world war upon the ethnic group of people and the brewing insurgency and inter-ethnic group conflicts that structure the novel open up a scope of discussion about the place of women and the natural world in this long history of armed conflicts that involves mainly the agents of patriarchy and revolves around their interests and welfares.

The first form of hierarchical dualism displayed in the novel is evident in the practice of war mechanism to perpetuate power. The practice of warfare, being advocate of active ways of subverting people by means of gory violence and brutality, have remained one of the main issues against which ecofeminism have always been vocal. Ecofeminism, since its very inception as an academic discipline, have denounced war by scathingly criticizing the life-threatening impact of war on women and the environment. Ecofeminism further tries to unmask the hegemonic prevalence of patriarchy that governs the ideologies working behind war, directly linking them with all subversive ideologies of colonization, oppression of women and exploitation of nature and animals. Ecofeminists have always been vocal against such brutal mechanisms of control and destruction with a claim that mostly women and the natural world undergo the worse effects of such kinds of destruction. According to them, military technology is a direct way of rendering the perpetuity of patriarchal culture and dominant political control by means of coercive violence. The nuclear weapons poison the environment. The military culture coercively exploits the poor people and damages the lives of indigenous people, women and animals. It destroys nature in large amounts. Such oppressive ideologies indirectly empower the hierarchical structure of androcentric discourse, and thus conform to the divide that places man at the centre of everything, pushing women, the people of marginal section and the natural and non-human world at the periphery.

In the novel, the invasion of the Japanese army through the China- Burma- India

border and their war with the British colonial forces mark the beginning of the destruction of the ecological balance of the region and the ethnic ways of living. The novel unfolds the story of a host of characters of a small village situated between Manipur and Nagaland-Sharengla, a rural woman and her once betrothed lover, Rishang and showcases how human lives and the landscape of Nagaland is wounded beyond repair because of war and how the characters cope with the complexities of human relationships which gets different hues and shades at the pretext of a war ravaged Nagaland. The novel chronicles the exploitation of Sharengla by the agents of warfare, an act that leads to ostracize her in her society, which, being a patriarchal one, renders her to a helpless subject position. Sharengla, the female protagonist, falls prey to the lust of a Japanese soldier and is abducted by him. After having stayed with her for some months, he leaves the place with a fear of being killed by the invading British soldiers. After being restored to her won tribe, she finds the world with all its patriarchal bias waiting to judge her and ostracize her for her 'infidelity'. Her marriage to Rishang, "her former friend, the man whom she was to have married" (Bhattacharya 18) is cancelled as she is ravaged by another person and Rishang gets engaged to another woman, Phatikphang. Sharengla, though never able to hate the Japanese soldier wholeheartedly, remains a victim of his abduction forever. Her mother died of unrelieved sorrow due to the unprecedented events of violence and her father had died of a peculiar disease that resulted from war and 'her cottage had been reduced to ashes' (Bhattacharya 18). Having undergone the worst onslaught brought by the foreign forces, she remains a victim who is treated like a leftover commodity and her life, with a constant search for meaning and identity, remains a victim of the norms and patriarchal bias that govern the society. The novel, though primarily focuses on the role of Rishang as a saviour and fighter for the cause of his people, implicitly unmask the workings of hierarchy and entails a scathing interrogation of the ways in which women are culturally perceived by and represented in the society where Sharengla is seen "as a huge zu jar from which everybody can drink" (Bhattacharya 125). The inhuman ostracising of Sharengla based on the norms of 'purity' of the body of a woman becomes a corollary to the plundering of the fertility of the soil of Nagaland due to the continuous bombings and shelling. The image of the blasted heath, a war wrecked landscape to which she returns, becomes an important metaphor in the novel. Throughout the novel, the transformed identity of Sharengla runs parallel to the images of shell- shocked earth and a ravaged and deeply wounded landscape, both wounded ruthlessly at the hands of patriarchal control and

power. The novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* recounts how she witnessed the destruction of her village:

Slowly she climbed a nearby hill and reached the top. She looked at the village at her feet, looking so sad and devastated in the midst of the softly rippling hills, the ribbons of streams and rivers. Some houses were still burning, pigs and chicken scurrying helplessly around. The village church, too, burned. The spire was licked by small shooting flames and bits of burning wood were beginning to fall from it. The cross was no longer visible. (17)

This twin study of the defloration of the central female character and the ecology of Nagaland lead the novel to an ecofeminist reading. In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Katie Conboy writes :“[j]ust as man’s civilizing impetus transgress wildlife, land and vegetation into territories to tame and control, so too does it render woman a form of nature to apprehend, dominate and defeat” (50).

Ecofeminism, a movement against the simultaneous subjugation and exploitation of women and nature has always been vocal against the working of exploitative anthropocentric endeavours which affect women and nature in the worst possible way and advocates the agency of women to start an ecologically sustainable movement. Ecofeminism has mostly been vocal against the brutalities of war, deforestation, militarization and urbanisation. As an academic discipline intent on studying and understanding the ideologies that theorizes and justifies man’s superiority over women, nature and the non-human world, ecofeminism structures its range of arguments and criticisms on the basic proposition that the androcentric purposes of western white middle class men is held accountable for all subversive ideologies that justifies man’s superiority and control over both women and nature and the weaker section of the society. Ecofeminists claim that the ideologies that justifies the practice of racism, colonialism, casteism, spring from the same patriarchal theories that justifies naturism (man’s superiority over nature) and his oppression of women (Warren). In its discussion of the worst effects of the subservient patriarchal hegemonies, ecofeminism has been vocal against the brutalities of war, deforestation, militarization and urbanization, all of which are regarded as harbingers of destruction of the natural world, and control women and the people of the marginal section of the society. Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive* defines ecofeminism as “[T]he violence against nature, which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model , is also associated with violence to women who depend on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families, their societies” (Intro xiv).

This definition of ecofeminism by Shiva is very apt to describe the deteriorating condition of the natural world and the devaluation of women in the society of the North-East India who are largely dependent on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves but the exploitative presence of the agents of war and military forces for a prolonged period and the violent uprisings distanced them from nature. Bhattacharya in his novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* also demonstrates a similar kind of threat that loom large due to the presence of war in the region:

The ngalalong, where Sharengla stayed, was right in the centre of the temporary village... It was the house of the virgins...The presence of soldiers in the village had put an additional burden on them. Armed village boys guarded the ngalalong zealously , escorting the girls when they went out- to fetch water from the stream, collect firewood, to transplant or harvest the paddy fields. (22-23)

An exact contrast to this threatened existence of women in the war ravaged society is reflected in Sharengla's reminiscences in the novel over the peaceful life during the pre-war days which was in perfect harmony with the natural world: "remember those days we roamed these forests, collecting butterflies, flowers, orchids..." (20). The serene forest she reminisces about once served as a metaphor for the harmonious co- habitation of the humans with the natural world that has now become a devastated space which evidently connote the anthropocentric plundering of that serenity by the agents of warfare and destruction. The natural space has now been turned into the brewing hearth of the armed conflicts and the carefree lives of women have come under a perpetual threat due to the presence of the soldiers in the region.

Ecofeminist theorists like Carolyn Merchant, Ynestra King, Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Mary Mellor and others vehemently counter the capitalistic and anthropocentric exploitation of nature, the domination of patriarchal hegemony over the otherised gender groups in society, the racial otherisation of the indigenous people and all other latent forms of exploitation and otherisation. If we were to have a look at the history of the formation of such domination, it becomes evident that in the relentless pursuit of man for profit, alongside the exploitation of the naturalness of nature, there has been running on the domination and subjugation of women and their devaluation as passive in the society. The individuality and subjective identity of women have very subtly been neglected by the discourses of patriarchy which aligns them with nature, goddess and nation, all concepts created by men and where women are not allowed any agency going beyond a dependent existence on men. Although

the radical ecofeminists consider this hegemonic association of women with nature as a source of oppression and devaluation of women's unique womanly qualities, the school of essentialist ecofeminists consider that such imposed connection between women and nature can be regarded as a site of agency and empowerment for women by validating their essential values of nurturing. Women, as some ecofeminists believe, do have a distinguished relationship with nature because of some of their identical qualities which, to some extent at least, endow them with a powerful agency. But with the advancement of urbanisation, globalisation and the practise of warfare, women's special relationship with nature has been very exquisitely destroyed under the continual invasion of science, and technology. This process of distancing women from nature, who sustain the ecological balance, poses further risk of ecological imbalance and devastation.

The novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* revolves around the backdrop of the Second World War which had a devastating impact on Nagaland. Imphal was bombed by the Japanese Tojo Army in 1942 and most of the homes were occupied by the Japanese soldiers and the local inhabitants fled to different villages. The tribesmen of Nagaland, having been hostile to the Japanese, supported the British to fight against the Japanese. Taking advantage of the support from the tribesmen, the British forces transformed the ecologically rich land into a military camp with airfields and "camped now in the devastated area with their guns and ammunition, their hand grenades and water bottles, and waterproof groundsheets" (Bhattacharya 22). The war, the harbinger of destruction to the land also had its claim over the fertility of the soil of Nagaland. Due to continuous shelling, the soil of the land has been damaged, rendered infertile for a long time. Ynestra King says about the impact of war in 'The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology':

The level of weaponry and the militaristic economic priorities are products of patriarchal culture that speaks violence at every level. Our freedom and our lives are threatened, even if there is no war and none of the nuclear weapons are ever used. We have tried to make clear the particular ways that women suffer from war-making – as spoils to victorious armies, as refugees, as disabled and older women and single mothers who are dependent on dwindling social services. We connect the fear of nuclear annihilation with women's fear of male violence in our everyday lives. (462)

The war, a brutal mechanism of control, being perpetrated by the hegemony of the western white male, has always been severely criticised by ecofeminists. Nagaland, a state rich in its greenery and ecological wealth, had to bear the brunt of the worst effects of the

war. The Second World War remains an important historical event for the Nagas. This is primarily due to their participation in the Battle of Kohima, which was a part of the Burma Campaign between the British and Japanese during the Second World War. During the war the Nagas suffered lot of hardships at the tussle of the power game between the British and the Japanese. The prolonged fights and the presence of armed forces destroyed many villages beyond repair. In order to do away with the Japanese from the Naga villages, the British conducted air raids. Naga houses containing paddy grains were set ablaze by the British Army as a measure of denial to the Japanese. The novel under study bears a testimony to this kind of destruction- “Paddy fields, including Phanitphang’s, had been damaged in the bombing” (Bhattacharya 43).

Alongside the Second World War that continued to devastate the land, an underground movement against the Indian nation state was going on in Nagaland during the 1950s. The growing political dissent among the majority of young Nagas against the policies of mainland India and the separatist claims for an independent Nagaland that could protect the interest of different ethnic groups also found expression through active conflicts and warfare. The conflict between traditional ways of living and the invasion of modern values in their lives and their resistance to adhere to the rules of a foreign force continue to dictate the plot of the novel. Characters like Videssellie, Phanitphang, Ngazek fight actively for the cause of their ‘freedom’ from mainland India. They felt that the Nagas must strive for an ethnically defined freedom and not just be a part of free India. The conflict between the indigenous values and postcolonial modernity defines the narrative space of the novel.

Whereas Ngazek sought to secure an ethnically defined freedom and save the traditions of the Tanghkul Nagas, Rishang and Khating believed that modern ideas, education and Christianity could make a better Nagaland. The separatist movements for a ‘free’ Nagaland and the resultant arrival of government military troops resulted in further violence in the region. Different ideologies of the leaders who fought for the cause of an independent Nagaland and the conflict between tradition and modernity gave rise to parochialism. The separatist movements resulted in continuous violence in the region and perpetual acts of violence had altered the traditional ways of living and distanced the people from their lands that provides for their sustenance, “[T]he pre-harvest festival had come and gone. Harvest was nearing. But the villagers had not yet gone to the fields (Bhattacharya174).”

The novel manifests the ‘ecofeminist’ response of women to the practice of warfare as contrasted to the androcentric ideologies. Amidst the discourse of the androcentric purposes

of war, it is the women characters in the novel that are seen to express their concern over the loss of the fertility of the soil due to the bombings. The images of the shell-shocked earth and the detachment of people from the cultivation field due to the longstanding presence of war seem to have taken a toll on the normal flow of life. The anguish of Sharengla bears a clear testimony to the claims of ecofeminists over women in general as having strong derision toward the practise of warfare, “you have to be a woman to realize what war means” (Bhattacharya 32). The same note of derision is heard from Sirala, the mother of Phanitphang, “What are you fighting for, tell me? To sacrifice the little you have, for others? This killing business is terrible” (Bhattacharya 33). The novel clearly shows the dichotomy between the ideals of the male domain with that of the female domain, the male one, being engaged in warfare and talks of violence, whereas, the women are shown to express their disdain for such violence perpetually. The hatred for violence is heard from Sharengla throughout the novel, “I am not going to work either for him or for Videsselie. I dislike such violent activities” (Bhattacharya 115). Her constant fight for a respectable position in the society expresses her anguish, “This society has nothing to give to an unchaste woman” (Bhattacharya 212). Even the minor women characters are heard expressing their concern over the condition of the soil, as is heard in the voice of a woman, Atip, “[T]he fields have been barren since war. We must begin to cultivate them now” (Bhattacharya 93). The life of the women in North-East India is defined by their close affinity to nature and their dependency on the natural wealth for the sustenance of their life. Ethnic women, in this region are sturdy and hard-working, well adept in field work and cultivation and have in-depth knowledge about the natural world that surrounds them. Women in this region share a natural understanding of the necessity of the preservation of the ecological diversity and their dependency on the natural world relies on the ethics of the sustenance of the ecological balance. Studies show that it was with the intervention of capitalism and reductionism that the ecological diversity of the region came under a threat. The colonial enterprise of the white masters didn't relent the natural world also and the capitalist world-view, introduced by the white masters, that reduces the natural resources into objects of market profit, had resulted in an insistence on the planting of homogenous 'marketable' trees and a demolition of the heterogeneous plants and trees that originally marked the diversity of the region.

A slanting gaze at the evolution of the history of the struggle for ecological survival reveals that the struggle of the Indian rural women against the ecological degradation marks a distinct period in the history of the struggle for environmental justice. Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive* writes, “Indian women have been in the forefront of ecological struggles to

conserve forests, land and water. They have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakriti, the living force that supports life” (Intro xv). In the novel, mostly women are shown working in the fields, which bears testimony to the fact that women are the major guardians of the sustenance of life and nature. In fact, Sharengla was also working ‘all alone in the paddy field’ (Bhattacharya 1), from where she was abducted. Thus, the woman and the land are both relegated as vulnerable and susceptible to the androcentric and patriarchal endeavours of power and control. The woman, Sharengla is a powerless victim who was abducted from the field by the agent of warfare, the Japanese soldier and his act renders her body into a site of exploitation. The field from where Sharengla was abducted also manifests the same stance of victimhood as it has been ‘womanized’ (Warren) by the practice of warfare, as helpless, wounded and exploited as Sharengla due to the effects of bombing by both the Japanese and the British forces.

On a symbolical level also, the predicament of Sharengla can be equated with the predicament of the soil of Nagaland. As a result of her abduction by the Japanese soldier and a forceful liaison with him, she gets pregnant and delivers a dead child, which becomes very significant in the symbolic reading of the novel as the soil of Nagaland has also turned infertile due to the ravaging effects of continuous bombings. The woman and the land, both rendered helpless in the face of the agents of warfare have lost their ability to protect and sustain the seeds of life within them. The dog, Abei, left behind by the Japanese soldier, is the only creature that remains a constant companion to Sharengla, sharing the same predicament of the ‘otherised’ existence. Left behind by its master, the Japanese soldier, the dog is also a victim of war, denied any place anywhere and becomes a constant companion to Sharengla. Here, the pet and the woman both share a similar state of existence, rendered ‘other’ in the patriarchal society. Their subjectivity has been denied and they do not have any identity. The dog, the soil and the woman – all of them are shown to share the similar position in society. Such representation of these entities as ‘others’ validate the claims of Karren J. Warren where she claims that the woman, the natural world and the animals share the ‘otherised’ space in an androcentric society which is always governed by the interests of its androcentric masters.

Conclusion:

Bhattacharya craftily unmasks the workings of patriarchy and the hypocritical standards of society where males are the privileged lot and women are expected to take up the subservient positions. In the novel, Rishanhg, though the apparent saviour of his people,

moderate and sensible in his outlook to life, nevertheless exhibits this patriarchal bias very much in relation to his attitude to Sharengla, the 'ravaged' girl, "She does not deserve these roses. They were meant for a virgin who was to be my wife. Sharengla will not be accepted by my society, she is no more than a concubine, ravished by another man" (Bhattacharya 19). Bhattacharya voices discontent and believes that women cannot feel liberated as they are enmeshed in various discursive and social formations that shape their identity. Sherry Ortner in her article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" contends:

The issue of women, their pan-cultural second-class status could be accounted for, quite simple, by postulating that women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it's always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were part of nature, then culture would find it 'natural' to subordinate, not to say oppress, them.

(6)

In the novel we find that all of the women characters have direct association with the natural world and they are both subordinated and suppressed by patriarchy in a similar way as nature is tamed by culture. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya builds up a world that includes trees, soil, air, the animals etc that stands parallel to the oppressed lives of the female figures in the narrative. The reader could identify the ecofeminist concerns of Bhattacharya in the novel where he tried to expose the hierarchy of patriarchal society that exploits and dominates both women and nature.

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