

In a Strange Darkness: An eco-critical reading of some select poems of North-east India

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ABSTRACT

Expressing nature-centric concerns in literary mode may date back to a few centuries, yet the term 'eco-criticism' emerged only in the last century to specifically denote a vast body of writing which articulate an excruciating writerly sensibility for protecting the sacrosanctity of the flora and fauna from man-made atrocities on nature. Though this field of study shows a conspicuous theoretical affiliation with the West, the fact remains that in the *Kavya* literature of India, in the classical texts and epics, there is no dearth of sentiments as well as ideologies that form the basic foundations of that theoretical framework known as Eco-criticism. For example in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama's role in protecting the greenery near Ayodhya from the ravages of demons like Thataka and her powerful sons Mareecha and Subahu, at the behest of Sage Vishwamitra and the *Khandavadahan* episode in the *Mahabharata* that may be read as an altered text of a teleologic blindness to consequences of ecocide committed for regal purpose that shapes the relation between man and nature (in terms of reptile Aswasena's anger against Arjuna for the killing of the former's mother in the burnt forest) – all this metaphorically strikes at the core of some eco-conscience that forms the staple of the literary theory under discussion.

The present article dwells on some representative poems of the North-eastern part of India, that serves as the heartland of poetic imagination which attains, more often than not, a prophetic height while recommending a harmony between nature and nurture.

Key Words: Nature-centric, Eco-criticism, Flora and Fauna, Teleological

The incorporation of ecology in literature has been considerably great since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and now a days, eco narratives are studied as forms of oral literature popular among indigenous communities in which narratives relating to nature and surroundings of a particular region, dealing both with its primeval purity of the past and subsequent changes in course of time, holds as a repository the history and development of the community living there and its habitat into its present look. The ecosphere that has entered the collective psyche of a particular community, becomes manifest in the literatures of India's North East. To be more specific, a moving note of eco-conscience is thoroughly recognizable in the poetry of India's North-east though with habitual tonal varieties of expression in different states.

A synoptic survey of poetry in the seven (or eight including that of Sikkim) sister states in India's North-east bears out how even a minor change in the familiar environment sparks off a writhing sensitivity in the poetic heart that always felt a perfect peace with the plenitude of nature such as the mystic hills and magic rivers flowing with their gorges and ravines through

dense forests along mountain ranges, often punctuated by small habitations in hamlets characterised by, among other things, -- the *jooms*, the mixed smell of traditional flowers and the fragrant rice in the *Nabanna*, the melodic spell of a mythic bird or a traditional stringed instrument that fills the hollow of the evening sky. However, eco-consciousness as a mark of poetic experience shows distinctive qualities as per the delicate nuances of thoughts and feelings bred by the changed milieus, however little, for poets of different states. The present article proposes to offer a bird's eye view of the works of some leading poetic figures of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh.

In the works of Manipuri poets of early stage, nature is held in traditional reverence often as a vesture of the ethnographic nature of the communities and even as explicative of their religious faith. For example, an uncritical and adulatory attitude to nature can be traced in the poem *Remnants of Chanchipur* by L Kamal Singh, a poet of pre-Independence Manipur who views nature as the manifestation of the Meiti identity, a significant portion of which is constituted by Hinduism or more specifically by Vaishnavism. The urgency to highlight the pristine beauty of nature as perfectly consonant with the scriptural faith of the Meitei is manifest in the conscious use of eco-spiritual symbol of *Shalagram shila*, or the stony form of Vishnu in Hindu pantheon while glorifying Chanchipur, the older capital of Manipur in the following extract:

In the golden land of the earth
Like the fruit inside the lotus
And the shalgram under the garlands
Shines ancient Canchipur. (Anupama:2014: 065)

With passage of time, the earlier reliance on nature for finding an image of spiritual alliance is gradually discarded in favour of more realistic considerations such as negotiating fear or terror with their corroding impact upon the mind. In the works of Manipuri poets of the Post-Independence period such as Robin. S. Ngangom and also Thangam Ibopishak Singh, to a certain extent, nature, as reflected through the ironic and alienated poetic stances to experience, so often looks like a tapestry of terror and suspense lending a bare backdrop to life. In the poem *My Invented Land*, by Ngangom, the soil that had a sanctity of usage over generations, the homeland that never knew 'boundaries,' had as if been 'changed utterly' without any premonition of being imposed upon a redefined contour: "At cockcrow one day it found itself/inside a country to its west," The lack of spiritual affinity with the mainland is further fuelled by a suicidal bid of the insurgent people to dislocate the state from her umbilical cords of indigenous culture in the name of a fanatic nationalism: "My people have disinterred their alphabet,/burnt down decrepit libraries/in a last puff of nationalism..." (*My Invented Land*, lines.11-13). The bleak futurity and unedifying nature of the present disappoints both the young and the old generation respectively:

My home has young people
Who found their dreams in a white substance
And the old has transplanted their eyes
it has leaders who have disappeared
into their caricatures. (L.20-24).

A claustrophobic awareness of terror in the last stanza bred by expressions like -- a 'nightly knock', 'lingering torchlight', 'sonnet on corpses' (of the raped and abandoned) -- shows a bewitched nature of familiar homeland that is as if 'invented' into an uncouth light owing to 'a tryst with destiny.' The pang of psychological migration for want of love and a condition of

a diasporic condition in one's familiar space, bred by some exigency of situations, receives a vociferous treatment in another representative poem of Ngangom *When You Do Not Return*.

Leaves no longer respond
To the alchemy of seasons,
.....
.....
.....
when you do not return, and dreams
turn to rust, the flame and the dew
cannot create art. (Dancing Earth, L.7-14)

The loss of the original sanctity of the space results in a multiform character of emerging evils like - the corruption in the practice of religion ('while the poor remain cold and naked/the preacher is warm and fed'), the schematic moves of politicians to simply 'use' the student-power for furthering vested interests ('In the streets students shout themselves /hoarse for newly arrived patriots') and an overall enmeshment of principles making the yardsticks of political judgment vulnerable ('The right and the left have become synonymous/and citizens garland only the thieves') etc.etc. It is in the fitness of things that nature serves as a lackluster, mechanical backdrop for activities prompted by some sinister intelligence in the form of militancy or its countermeasures:

....dead waters breed
reptiles in our minds, gunfire reverberates
in the hill, and bullets sprout from
windows instead of geraniums. (D.E, L.41-44)

The trauma of a life strangled by both militancy and anti-terrorist measures in the state has been tellingly captured with an astute handling of the image 'barbwire':

The barbwire
of the day encloses us as we enter the era
of the assassin. (L.46-48)

The wistful cry for a lost eco-space is expressed in the rhetoric of unfulfilled love in another poem *Monody* where the persona seeks to imaginatively recapture the 'days coloured by water and smoke' by allowing memory 'to follow the road to the house of birds' falling 'on the way' to the beloved's 'door.' A promise for a bucolic retreat to the mystic hills and ravines as the perfect setting for the dream of the beloved far from the concrete jungle in the town is unmistakably felt in the following lines:

I will go to stark villages
where fog billows up from gorges
past dancing floors
to climb dizzy mountain paths
and feel the shock
of losing you to the mist.(D.E, 17-22)

In another elegiac piece *To Pacha* (dedicated to the memory of Pacha Meetei, one of the finest Manipuri writers who died amidst extreme poverty), Ngangom wails the deplorable condition

of his homeland which being lacerated by violence, and injustice and insentient rules and protocols, remains aloof to the pathetic end of an artist and communist Pacha who had his own vision of a homeland:

There are no more tears to shed
In this withered country where they
Kill pregnant women and children; its
Nipples have long gone dry, and leering
Death walks your homeland.(D.E, 7-11)

The caustic irony in the interrogation ('And why should/anyone weep for your lonely alcoholic end?' line 11-12) is as if retrospectively answered in the following lines that depict the degeneration of the space as a result of a tenuous relationship with the Centre over the issues of terrorism and counter-terrorism – a condition where mutual hatred and acrimony between army and the local youth creates such a climate of mistrust and unrest leaving no room for reason and propriety ; where youth, human blood and even death has lost their dignity:

Young boys and soldiers are butchering each
ther by the dozen, in the hills, the angry
streets, day after day, and too many heroes
and villains are not worth remembering at all.
Death is callous, Pacha, in the land of your
innocent birth. (D,E, Lines.13-18)

In short, the poetry of Ngangom presents a sort of eco-narrative under the metaphor of homeland which shows a problematic space of aborted hope and a jilted love for the land with the dream of peace lured into the mires of frustration.

In the poetry of Thangam Ibopishak Singh, nature is stripped off her usual, romantic associations and betrayed as an inane canvas that has no hue to encourage fancy. The poem *Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dream, Colour of Wind* offers an interesting case study:

True, the poet says:
Leaves do not move without a fleeting wind.
True, I also say:
Even if the wind blows or not, even if it rains or not,
Leaves never move
If there are no leaves
On the bare tree.
(DE, II L.1-7)

An incisive irony characterizes the poet's views on nature vis a vis human sentiments. The following excerpt nicely presents a helix of perceptions veering between beauty and the base and the tensed climate of the land under the threat of militarism/counterinsurgency is nicely projected with a brilliant synaesthetic effect much akin to that of Baudlaire:

Which is more fragrant
The report of guns or the scent of flowers?
The sound of guns lies on the nose,
The odour of flowers on the tips of flowers.

Blind men see colours on voices.(DE, IV.L.39-43)

Quite often, the apparent calm in nature seems to be like proverbial calm before storm which is as if symptomatic of some cataclysmic regeneration of mankind following a perpetual saga of selfishness, greed and abuse of natural resources. The following extract from the poem *Volcano, You Cannot Erupt* as if taunts man's guilty consciousness stifled by a contrived pose of innocence and wish-fulfillment in his attitude to nature:

Pour in filth, pour in faeces ,
By heaps, the unholy misdeeds to fill up
The clear depth of the earth to the brim;
For future generations too, for the years and the centuries
Create an unregenerate, rotten society;
Then say, Volcano, you cannot erupt,
Lava, you cannot open your eyes. (D,E, Lines.11-17)

In short, Ibopishak's poetry articulates a common despair over the wretched lot of his home state and in the fitness of things, nature here looks equally lackluster with an embryonic suggestion of some ominous possibility.

In the works of younger Manipuri poets such as Saratchand Thiyam, one may discern a telling apprehension of violence as in the poem *The Snowy Wilderness*. The poem shows the insentient aspect of violence threatening to turn this panoramic state into a 'snowy wilderness' with the expansion of the white shroud that cover the killed ones:

A loud blast, reverberations
gelignite smoke shuts out everything
and the sky rubs vigorously
its two eyes. They become blood-shot.(L.12-15)

The gorges whose dark depth could be uncovered only by lightning, now look stripped off their privacy by the searing light of serial blasts and the tyranny of the 'white' --- of light and of the sheet covering the dead, paradoxically exposes the 'dark' of death or a bleak futurity facing the land:

The blackened people of this dark land
are scattered by the wind.
They are strewn here and there
white sheets cover them
on this wind swept floor. (L.28-32)

The poems like *Sister* and *Gun Muzzle* also celebrate the same theme of the home state dehumanized by the perpetuated cult of violence where the flowery youth is ostracized by the operations of the terrorists and the contestant agency of military surveillance. The following lines from the poem *Gun Muzzle* underscore the pathos of the predicament facing the commoners.

....it is not possible to prevent a thing
When a gun's muzzle has been trained.

When the youth who journeyed seeking light
Returns covered with a white cloth
Who would like to receive him?
Gun muzzles too face each other sometimes
And grief becomes the lot of ordinary people. (DE, L.6-12)

The backfires of globalization, urbanization and capitalist consumerism with regard to the seamy repercussions upon nature, are more or less prominent also in the poetry of some other writers of the post-47 period such as R.K.Bhubansana and Kh. Anandini.

A gnawing concern for the health of eco-sphere vis -a- vis modernization runs paramount also in the poems of R K Bhubonsana who in his poem *Light be Put Out or Mind Kept in Dark* openly interrogates the efficacy of the Loktak Hydal project with relation to its adverse ecological impacts such as destabilizing the homestead of people living nearby, destruction of paddy fields previously occupying the site etc.etc. The very opening lines of the poem as quoted below, read as an ironic commentary on the arch binary of light and darkness; of development and its paradoxical backfires in terms of nature or sanctity of man-nature relationship and recalls much of the revelations of Marlow in Conrad's classic text *Heart of Darkness* (1899):

Should Light be Put Out or Mind Kept in Dark
Should light be put out or mind kept in dark
it's government's new notice
either of the two has to be chosen, it says. (Lines.1-5)

Another poet convincingly writing on the ecological impasse as a reaction to development is Kh. Anandini. In her famous poem *O Earth*, the poet articulates a global concern over human need and greed in manipulating the resources of nature in the name of progress while this turns out to be a nonchalant move such as holding picnic on the peak of a volcano, to imagine sweet and sour and the following extract is a pointer to the Faustian fate man is gleefully courting in the euphoria of pleasure: 'Terrible earthquakes, violent cyclones, unseasonal thunderstorms cause/endless Miseries for you.'

In fine, though the poets of Manipur residing outside the state treat the issue of eco-anxiety from different angles, indigenous poets with an 'insider's viewpoint,' take up the issue while emulating in their respective métiers, more or less, the Wordsworthian clench – 'What man has made of man!'

In the poetry from Arunachal Pradesh, the eco-consciousness seems to attain a spiritual and a mystical significance through the perception of nature in the light of animistic revelations. Mamang Dai writes poems that are steeped in an ethos of eco-spirituality where life like a river, flows through the barren lands of experience which with a depressing set of banalities, is comparable to her hometown in the poem *SMALL TOWNS AND THE RIVER*:

It is always the same,
in summer and winter,
with the dust flying,
or the wind flying down the gorge. (L.3-6)

However, it is the 'river' that signifying the unintermittent flow of traditional tribal values and the rich heritage of her land, has a 'soul' and hence, the capacity to see through the extremities of human experiences such as life and death. Containing within her fold different *avatars* or forms of water such as the 'mist on the mountaintops' or 'the first drop of rain to dry earth,' the river ultimately bolts into a symbol of eternity: 'the river knows/ the immortality of water.' Likewise, the 'mountain' as a palliative for the absence of a written record of the past for the writers, reserves the potential of re-living history in human consciousness by taking them backward down memory lane to their lost roots. In the poem *An Obscure Place*, the mountain through the reification of 'memory and desire', as if embodies the history of a place and personal lineage and the different slopes as it were signify the *palimpsestic* design of human history:

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, (DE, L.1-8)

In another poem *No Dreams*, one comes across a superb evocation of eco-mysticism when the persona feels spiritually at one with 'speechless ardour' of big mountains or hills 'washed with light' at night with the stream of 'love' in the form of the river.

Yet, man's callous treatment of the ecosphere and his indifference to the flora and fauna breeds a poetic anxiety for severe consequences of such activities which betray a teleological blindness in man. The abrupt change in the familiar world in the poem *Gone* for example, silhouettes the passage of a happy past and makes the recognition of a loss as the only potent reality with a feeling that the element of bliss in the environment is gone:

At night we sleep with guns and gulls
tugging at land and oceans,
and ropes coiled to barren rock
where once flowers were to seed
pumping blood, and singing voices. (L.5-9)

The eco-centric concerns reach an acute ironic expression in the poem *Remembrance*. The symptoms of cataclysmic possibilities in the environment only remind the poet of the common human folly of exploiting nature on a rampant scale and yet taking the same love and kind returns that she had rendered to man for centuries for granted. In a superb art of understatement, the poem opens with an ironic speculation about the expectation or propriety of anything 'normal' – be it in life or in the surroundings:

Why did we think it was trivial
that it would rain every summer,
that nights would be still with sleep
and that the green fern would uncurl

ceaselessly, by the roadside.(L.1-5)

For persons like the poet, initiated into the mystic ways of environment ('for we knew where the sun lay resting /in the folded silence of the hills'), depletion of natural resources is written on the wall:

Why did we think survival was simple,
That river and field would stand forever
invulnerable, even to the dreams of strangers,(L.6-8)

However, decoding the signs of ecological disaster is characterized by a vague foretaste of some uncouth apprehension of some sinister transformation of the familiar, sacral space. Here one comes across a superb evocation of eco-anxiety under the seductive garb of the green:

In the hidden exchange of news we hear
that weapons are multiplying in the forest.
The jungle is a big eater,
hiding terror in carnivorous green.(L.13-16)

In the poetry of Mamang Dai, one notes an unconditioned allegiance to the ecosystem which as it were, stands for a sacral space for belonging with well defined, accessible contours (in the eyes of the indigenous people) that assures safety from the vast and inscrutable outer world. The concluding lines of this seminal piece Remembrance seems to drive home such an impression:

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 outlines of the hill
lifting our eyes to the invincible sky.(L.24-29)

In Mamang Dai, eco-consciousness and anxiety is spelt out in communicating an urge to locate a sanctimonious system of surviving vitality in nature which could help men to overcome crisis, man-made or otherwise.

Another poet of the state Yumlam Tana celebrates an intense ecological sensibility permeating all his themes. The major concerns in his poetry are - an innate bond between men and animals as kindred products of nature, the distinctive features of the Nyishi community (to which the poet belongs) such as the Nyishi legends, folklores, rites and ritual etc. etc. Tana's poetry features an exaltation of the diverse forms of native culture and tradition which taken over all, projects a poetic search for identity in the matrix of his own philosophy of Spiritual Ecology or Creation Spirituality:

And we grew up to manhood
Alas! He grew nails, he grew claws,
He grew fangs, he grew a tail;
And asked me to give him a scratch

And my nails marked on his body
The black stripes of a tiger! (Tana 2003:14-15)

The following excerpt from the poem *The Man and the Tiger* for example, gestures to a feeling beyond the sanctimonious man-nature relationship – a feeling of solidarity offered by nature which cuts across geographical segregations in the poet's vision:

The Tsangpo flowing through the Dibang valley
And the plains of India
And Bangladesh
At last in the ocean finds the solace of brotherhood.
(Tana 2003:14-15)

Notwithstanding this eco-mystic and often a prominently eco-feminist renditions of poetic thoughts and feelings, the poets of North-east can hardly suppress their concern for the degrading impacts on nature coming as corollaries to the projects of urbanization and modernization. Interestingly, what bothers the poetic self is not so much the government's agendum of progress as man's willful dislocation from/indifference to his age-old relation with nature as manifest in the rampant extortion and depletion of natural resources for materialistic gains.

Taken overall, it is either the ingredients of a sordid reality and the pathos of poverty on the one hand or the compulsion/ perversion on the part of the humans on the other, -- that sets the tone of ecopoetics in the North-eastern part of India. One feels simply surprised to note how the poets of India's North-east manage to detect in the pretext of chaotic experiences, the text for creative and curative expressions.

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