

Litinfinitive Journal
Vol-7, Issue-1 | 2nd July, 2025
Content

	Article Title	Authors	Pagination
	Content		
	Editorial	Sreetanwi Chakraborty	i-ii
1	Animating the Land: Native American Spirituality, Identity and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Contemporary Literature	Dr. Anu Lakshmi Babu	1-9
2	Industrial revolution as the harbinger of climate crisis - The Anthropocene epoch in Edasseri Govindan Nair's "Kuttiapuram Palam"	Bhaktinath Barman ¹ Dr. Saikat Sarkar ²	20-28
3	Aligning Women with Nature: An Ecofeminist Critique of Tagore's <i>Three Women</i>	Dr. Oindrila Bhattacharya	19-24
4	Wounded earth; Wounded bodies: Submerged Knowledge and Feminist Resistance in Oceanic Spaces	Catharina Silvia M	29-39
5	Decoding the Unthinkable: Cultural Dynamics and Mythical Representations of Nature in Verrier Elwin's Select Tribal Folklores	Dr Manish Prasad	40-48
6	Disclosing the Double Discourse of Terror and Tradition of the North-East: A Selective study of Robin S. Ngangom's Poetry	Dr. Masoom Islam	49-61
7	Nature Narratives in Northeast Indian Literature: Eco-Discourse and Cultural Perspectives	Subrata Barman	62-72
8	Storied Lands and Silenced Voices: Reading Mamang Dai's <i>The Black Hill</i> through the lens of Terristiry	Prajnaa Ananyaa ¹ Amarjeet Nayak ²	73-84
9	The Banter and the Bond: A Tapestry of Tender Tales in <i>Din about Chins</i> by Santosh Bakaya	Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar	85-87
10	"Folklore and the Anthropocene": A Review of <i>The Way to Rainy Mountain</i>, by Scott Momaday	Samantha Robin Christopher	88-91

Editorial

Sreetanwi Chakraborty

Chief-Editor- Litinfinite Journal

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research

Amity University Kolkata. West Bengal, India.

Mail ID: litinfinitejournal@gmail.com | ORCID ID: [0000-0002-2936-222X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2936-222X)

The recent studies and research on biodiversity, climate change, ecological and environmental crisis, depletion of the forest covers and ozone layers, and the problematic level of the Anthropos are some of the factors that are largely represented in many of the postcolonial writings. While the challenges to the Anthropocene are becoming more complex and multilayered, there is a growing sense of responsibility that is getting attached to postcolonial literature. It is true that the Anthropocene always challenges the set patterns of our thought, reflecting and conceptualizing narratives that are fraught with multiple interpretations. Along with this, there is also an addition to the idea of local planetarity, and the concerns about the earth and the globe. At the inception of the postcolonial writings, and the major works of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha have contributed a lot in terms of understanding the crossroads of postcolonial writing. As Laura Brueck and Praseeda Gopinath highlights in their book *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial and Decolonial Literature*:

“At this critical historical juncture an increased emphasis on indigeneity and settler colonialism around the world demands a reevaluation of the hegemonic project of the nation and postcolonial approaches that focus on the nation.” (Brueck and Gopinath 1971)

The current issue of Litinfinite Journal attempts to *Narratives of Nature: Representations of the Environment, Urban Ecology and Planetary Crisis in Indigenous and Postcolonial Literatures*. Dr. Anu Lakshmi Babu's paper concentrates on *Animating the Land: Native American Spirituality, Identity and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Contemporary Literature*. She has highlighted how for Indigenous people, the land is not a commodity but a living entity, a source of life, memory and identity that shapes their worldview and sustains their traditions. This connection fosters a land-based identity rooted in reciprocal respect, stewardship and sacred kinship with nature. However, centuries of colonial intrusion have sought to disrupt this relationship through forced land dispossession, cultural erasure and religious conversion, leading to ongoing struggles for sovereignty, self-determination and cultural survival. Aswathi K R, and Prof. B J Geetha's paper highlights in its interesting title *Industrial revolution as the harbinger of climate crisis – The Anthropocene epoch in Edasseri Govindan Nair's "Kuttipuram Palam"*. “Kuttipuram Palam”, as the author shows, was written in 1954 and it is a prime example of the Anthropocene epoch as the poem features the fears of the poet for the future. Seventy plus years after the poet expressed his anxiety, the inhabitants of the planet behold the Anthropocene epoch manifesting in all its diverse forms. The next research paper is titled *Aligning Women with Nature: An Ecofeminist Critique of Tagore's Three Women*. Here the author Bhaktinath Barman has discussed the ‘Nature’ and ‘Woman’ both are systematically substantiated in the current academia with regard to ecology and environmental sustainability. Ecocritical scholarship in recent times has achieved a ‘significant’ momentum due to the perpetual conflict between the rapid growth of modern technological advancement and a desire for sustainable development. Ecocriticism as a critical theoretical foundation has outgrown into multi-faceted vistas of knowledge such as Deep Ecology, Anthropocene, Third World Environmentalism, Ecofeminism. The next paper titled *Wounded earth; Wounded bodies: Submerged Knowledge and Feminist Resistance in Oceanic Spaces* by Catharina Silvia M is a study on ecofeminism and the Blue Humanities have offered critical tools for interrogating the co-constitutive oppressions of ecological degradation and gendered violence. Yet, alone, each field leaves epistemological gaps. Ecofeminism, as first articulated by Françoise d'Eaubonne, links the domination of nature with the subjugation

of women under capitalist-patriarchal structures.

The next few papers are also a critical and analytical study of the ecology, environment and the facets of planetary crisis. Dr. Manish Prasad's research paper titled *Decoding the Unthinkable: Cultural Dynamics and Mythical Representations of Nature in Verrier Elwin's Select Tribal Folklores* attempts to highlight the folklore concerning the *Myths of Middle India* which was published in 1949. He shows in his paper how the present tribal folklore is a *Dhulia* myth from Karondi, Madhya Pradesh that deals with trees: The wife of Mirchamal Dano, Buchki Rakasin, was a strange woman. She never bore a child; she did not even have a monthly period. The Dano got her a lot of medicine and called many medicine men, but it was no use. After this, the next paper titled *Disclosing the Double Discourse of Terror and Tradition of the North-East: A Selective study of Robin S. Ngangom's Poetry* by Dr. Masoom Islam is a veritable understanding of poetry from Northeast India that is not homogenous but heterogenous. It is homogenous in respect of its geographical location, forests' flora and fauna, indigenous life and lifestyle, the rootedness to the soil and the pristine past of its populace. On the other hand, it is heterogenous in respect of its land, locality and livelihood which is marked as per the variety of ethnicity and ethnic culture, customs, rites, rituals, belief in myth and mythology. The next paper for this volume is titled *Storied Lands and Silenced Voices: Reading Mamang Dai's The Black Hill through the lens of Terristory* authored by Prajnaa Ananyaa, Amarjeet Nayak is a study of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014), a novel set in the nineteenth century in the region now known as Arunachal Pradesh, home to several Indigenous communities, including the Idu Mishmis of the Dibang Valley, through the lens of *terristory*, a concept rooted in Indigenous relational ontology that understands land and narrative as inherently interconnected.

While studying the narratives of ecology, environment and the Anthropocene, we go through one more research paper titled *Nature Narratives in Northeast Indian Literature: Eco-Discourse and Cultural Perspectives* by **Subrata Barman** discusses northeast Indian writing in English has often been misunderstood as dominated by political conflict and insurgency. However, to look closely we find a strong ecological consciousness embedded equally as a prominent feature in their literature. Critics note that authors from Northeast India often "(...) portray the land through a wide range of images of rivers, trees, hills, tradition, culture, myth, and legends," making *ecology* a central concern of their literature. There are also two book reviews, one by Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar, titled *The Banter and the Bond: A Tapestry of Tender Tales in Din about Chins* by Santosh Bakaya and the other *Folklore and the Anthropocene: A Review of The Way to Rainy Mountain, by Scott Momaday* written by Samantha Robin Christopher. Each of these reviews have interwoven strands of cultural and social narratives, often imbibing the deepest aspects of negotiating with the concerns of the environment.

I hope our readers, scholars, researchers and faculty will derive the necessary academic nourishment from Litinfinite Vol. 7, Issue 1. I express my heartfelt thanks to all our esteemed editors and contributors. I offer my sincerest thanks to Penprints Publication, for their constant technical support.

Thanking You,

Sreetanwi Chakraborty

Editor-in-Chief

Litinfinite Journal

Kolkata

References

Gopinath, Praseeda, and Laura Brueck. *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial and Decolonial Literature*. Taylor & Francis, 2024.

Animating the Land: Native American Spirituality, Identity and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Contemporary Literature

Dr. Anu Lakshmi Babu

Assistant Professor of English

NSS Hindu College, Kottayam, Kerala.

Email: dr.anulakshmibabu@gmail.com | Orcid id: [0009-0001-5050-3162](https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5050-3162)

Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between Native American identity and the land, emphasising the spiritual, cultural and communal dimensions of this bond. Rooted in Indigenous cosmologies that view land, animals, plants and spirits as interconnected components of a shared identity, the study highlights how land-based identity fosters reciprocal respect and stewardship. Drawing on Anibal Quijano's theory of decoloniality and Leanne Simpson's concept of 'land as pedagogy', the paper situates Indigenous struggles over land, tradition and identity within ongoing processes of colonial power that seek to commodify and erase Indigenous epistemologies. The paper focuses on the Native American Chippewa author Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, throwing light on the character Father Damien Modeste, whose spiritual journey from Catholic missionary to an embrace of Native animism and cultural hybridity symbolises broader decolonial struggles for sovereignty and cultural survival. The study argues that reclaiming land is both a political and deeply spiritual act for Indigenous communities, constituting an essential process of decolonial resistance and identity restoration amid colonial attempts to sever these vital connections.

Keywords: *Indigeneity, Animism, Decoloniality, Syncretism, Ecology*

Introduction

Native American identity is closely tied to the land and environment, embodying a profound relationship that transcends mere geography to encompass spiritual, cultural, and communal dimensions. For Indigenous people, the land is not a commodity but a living entity, a source of life, memory and identity that shapes their worldview and sustains their traditions. This connection fosters a land-based identity rooted in reciprocal respect, stewardship and sacred kinship with nature. However, centuries of colonial intrusion have sought to disrupt this relationship through forced land dispossession, cultural erasure and religious conversion, leading to ongoing struggles for sovereignty, self-determination and cultural survival. The fight to reclaim land is not only political but deeply spiritual, as Indigenous communities resist the commodification of their territories and assert the land as a vital foundation of their identity and continuity. This paper examines how Native American identity is shaped through an enduring bond with the environment, the spiritual significance of land, and the resistance to colonial

forces seeking to sever these essential ties, as represented in Native American Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich's novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). The paper focuses on Father Damien Modeste, whose transition from Catholic missionary to embracing Native animism reflects broader struggles for decolonial sovereignty and cultural survival. It also inspects how the reclamation of native epistemologies serves as a tool for decoloniality.

In Indigenous literature, the themes of land, identity and struggle are profoundly entwined, forming the backbone of Native American spiritual, cultural and political life. One foundational concept in Native American cosmology is the 'notion of extended self,' which serves as the basis of their spirituality. The human self is not conceived as autonomous or separate; rather, it is deeply interconnected with animals, spirits and the natural world. The intrinsic relationship with animals and the environment arises from this foundational interconnection. Each Native individual is affiliated with a clan that is associated with a totem animal, thereby affirming a collective identity that is deeply rooted in ecological and spiritual kinship. As Joy Porter upholds, there exists an "interconnectedness and relationship between all things, between animals, land, peoples," along with a profound need "to seek individual, communal and environmental balance" (43). This viewpoint blurs the lines that separate humans from non-humans, as well as the spiritual from the physical. Both animals and plants are recognised as members of their respective communities, each possessing a spiritual essence. Consequently, the land, animals, plants, spirits and community are interconnected elements rather than isolated entities, forming a collective identity.

Quijano's Decoloniality and Simpson's Land Pedagogy: Recovering Epistemologies

Anibal Quijano's theory of coloniality of power provides a critical lens to understand the persistent effects of colonialism on Native American identity and their connection to land. Quijano, in "Coloniality, Modernity/Rationality," argues that colonialism did not end with political independence but continues to exert power through enduring structures that define knowledge, identity and social hierarchies according to Eurocentric norms. This coloniality manifests as the ongoing marginalisation and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, particularly through the commodification and alienation of their ancestral lands. Quijano emphasises the need for an epistemological decolonisation—a dismantling of the Eurocentric model of knowledge production that has dominated global thought systems since the onset of colonial modernity. He critiques the Western paradigm of rationality and totality, arguing that while the West developed a version of totality that led to theoretical reductionism and oppressive universalisms, non-Western cultures possess their own holistic systems of knowledge that value diversity, contradiction and heterogeneity without resorting to domination. He writes:

It is necessary to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality. . . . First of all, epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality. (33)

This 'other rationality' resists the imposition of Western universalism, instead advocating intercultural exchange, pluriversality and cognitive justice. Quijano calls for the

freedom of all peoples to produce, critique and transform their knowledge systems, as part of a broader social liberation from structures of inequality and domination.

In this framework, Indigenous struggles for land reclamation and cultural survival are not merely political battles over territory but deeply epistemic and ontological fights to dismantle colonial power and revive Indigenous ways of being and knowing. For Native communities, land is more than property; it is a living, sacred entity integral to their collective identity and cosmology. Quijano's concept of decoloniality—the active process of unlearning colonial frameworks and re-centring Indigenous epistemologies—resonates strongly with the Native American resistance to colonial encroachment, as they seek to restore their spiritual and material relationships with the environment.

Leanne Simpson advocates for decolonising academia by incorporating Indigenous epistemologies. She envisages a resurgence of Indigenous intellectual systems and a reclamation of the context within which those systems operate, goes much further to propelling our nationhood and reestablishing Indigenous political systems because it places people back on the land in a context that is conducive to resurgence and mobilization." (22)

Simpson powerfully critiques the academy's persistent refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy and ethical rigour of ¹Nishnaabeg intelligence. She argues that rather than seeking validation from colonial institutions, Indigenous peoples must enact their intellectual resurgence outside the constraints of the "academic industrial complex." (23). Simpson emphasises that genuine decolonial efforts demand more than superficial adjustments; they call for a profound and collective upheaval of entrenched colonial structures. Rather than seeking to revise existing systems, decolonial scholars, artists and activists must engage in acts of relational resistance and shared commitment aimed at dismantling the very foundations of colonial thought and power, paving the way for emancipatory alternatives. She insists that if the academy truly seeks to support Indigenous thought, it must move beyond symbolic inclusion and actively participate in dismantling settler colonialism by protecting "the source of our knowledge—Indigenous land." (23)

Land dispossession is intertwined with efforts to erase Native identities and sever their ecological and spiritual ties. Quijano's and Simpson's ideas deepen our understanding of the Native American fight for sovereignty as a comprehensive struggle for epistemic justice and cultural survival, challenging the imposed colonial narratives that have historically defined land and identity in reductive terms. Through this lens, Native American literature and activism become acts of decolonisation, affirming land not only as a physical space but as the vital foundation of Indigenous identity and continuity.

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse becomes an essential arena where these struggles for land and identity are vividly represented. It offers nuanced portrayals of the spiritual and cultural hybridity that arises from colonial encounters, echoing the call for epistemological decolonisation. Through characters who grapple with their identities and relationships to land, Erdrich weaves narratives that resist colonial frameworks and assert the centrality of Indigenous worldviews.

¹ Anishinaabe people; can be translated as original people.

This narrative examines the impact of missionary activities, government land allocations and efforts at religious conversion on the Ojibwe community. Such external influences contribute to the fragmentation of Ojibwe identity and disconnect them from their ancestral lands. Louise Erdrich deepens this investigation of spiritual and cultural intermingling through the character of Father Damien Modeste, initially known as Agnes De Witt—a nun who eventually transitions to a Catholic priest serving the reservation. In Father Damien's farewell letter of confession addressed to the Pope, he reveals not only his adopted persona but also the intricacies of his spiritual evolution. Initially a missionary focused on conversion, Damien experiences a significant internal conflict after extensive engagement with Ojibwe culture, particularly under the mentorship of the tribal chief Nanapush. His growing familiarity with Native spirituality and land-based animism increasingly challenges and displaces his Euro-Christian beliefs. The novel traces his journey from a rigid follower of Catholic doctrine to one who embraces Native American animism and ceremonialism, arriving at a point of religious syncretism, ecological consciousness and cultural hybridity.

Through the epistolary form, Erdrich maps not only Father Damien's personal conflict but also a larger cultural, spiritual and religious struggle—the attempt of Indigenous communities to reclaim agency, identity and land. Damien writes of his grief at not receiving any responses from the Vatican, reflecting institutional neglect. He also challenges Catholic rules by breaking “the seal Christ had set on words spoken in that box . . . to a higher confessor” (5) to expose the sins of Sister Leopolda. This act, while sacrilegious by church standards, is framed in the narrative as an ethical imperative aligned with Ojibwe values of justice and community.

In addition, Damien's adoption into the Nanapush family signifies a profound transformation and the emergence of a hybrid identity that is intricately connected to the land itself. His acknowledgement of being adopted by the Nanapush family, a tribal lineage and his subsequent affiliation with the Ojibwe community serves not only as a personal commitment but also as a representation of the symbolic renewal of cross-cultural kinship, firmly anchored in a land-based identity.

Father Damien's transformation, influenced by his increasing closeness to Ojibwe cosmology, reflects a profound realignment of religious and cultural identity. His initial prejudice—mirrored in Agnes De Witt's dismissal of the Ojibwe as “God's doomed creatures” (37)—eventually yields to reverence for Indigenous land and spirituality. After spending significant time with the Ojibwe community and their vital traditions, Damien transforms his previous resentment and becomes a spiritual connector between Catholicism and Native American land-based spiritual practices. His effort to translate the Catechism into the Ojibwe language goes beyond simple missionary work; it represents a meaningful exchange of cultures. In doing so, he participates in a dynamic exchange of belief systems, affirming that “the ordinary as well as esoteric forms of worship engaged in by the Ojibwe are sound, even compatible with the teachings of Christ” (49). This recognition of Indigenous spirituality as “compatible” signals a movement toward religious syncretism—an acknowledgement that sacred connections to land and spirits cannot be erased through colonial theology but must be engaged on equal terms.

The novel demonstrates how spiritual identity is forged not in isolation but in ongoing dialogue with place and people. The Ojibwe's resistance is intricately tied to their spiritual bond with the land. Native figures Fleur Pillager and Nanapush, living on the margins of settlement,

maintain sacred rituals in isolation. When Damien approaches them in the woods, he confronts not merely a pair of individuals, but a sacred land haunted by memory and loss. The description of Fleur and Nanapush— “shells made of loss, made of transparent flint, made of whispers in the oak leaves, voices of the dead” (80) — marks a turning point. In this scene, Damien encounters a form of identity that is neither fully legible to the settler gaze nor fully assimilable to Catholic doctrine. Fleur’s disdain for the priests, who had once brought sickness “in the hems of their black gowns” (81), is both literal and symbolic, marking the trauma of colonial contact. These black gowns carried more than water for baptism; they carried the weight of cultural extinction.

Yet, in the oral tradition of Nanapush, resistance flourishes. His stories are not just cultural artefacts but strategies of survival. Through narrative, he preserves knowledge systems tied to land, spirits and community. As Johnpaul Jones argues in “The Land Has Memory”, “There is no place without a story. Every plant, every animal, every rock and flowing spring carries a message” (1). Stories link generations, encode ecological wisdom, and affirm Indigenous sovereignty. The Ojibwe relationship to land, as Jones argues, is rooted in kinship: “Native peoples have an extraordinary relationship with the land and the world around them that stems from the broadest sense of kinship with all life” (2). Whether they build, farm or hunt, these acts are done with ceremony, consent, and gratitude. “They perform ceremonies to mark each season and give thanks for what the earth has provided” (3). Such practices are more than rituals — they are acts of resistance against capitalist commodification of land.

The theme of commodification reemerges with particular force in the section where the government and religious authorities encourage the privatisation of land. Native communities, once holding land in collective spiritual trust, are coerced into selling parcels under economic duress. This enforced alienation of land fractures Ojibwe identity. The missionaries, under the guise of religious salvation, contribute to this dislocation. “Into this complex situation walk[s] Father Damien, with only the vaguest notion of how the ownership of land related to the soul” (Erdrich 76). While Damien does not initially understand the spiritual stakes of land dispossession, his evolving awareness reflects Erdrich’s broader commentary on the colonial misunderstanding of Indigenous cosmology.

For Ojibwe leaders like Nanapush, land is not a commodity but a sacred inheritance. His resistance is linguistic, spiritual and cultural. Though his name appears in the baptism register, he never relinquishes his beliefs. When Damien visits him, he is overcome by the strange atmosphere—the woods alive with voices, shrieking and laughter, filled with the invisible presence of ancestors. The moment marks a confrontation between the colonial archive—the baptismal record—and the living archive of Indigenous memory and resistance. Nanapush and Fleur, surrounded by spirits, are visualised not as primitive or demonic, but as figures of endurance, embodiments of a landscape steeped in ancestral presence.

Through layered portrayals, Erdrich critiques the colonial project of cultural homogenisation. The spiritual life of the Ojibwe—expressed through sweat lodges, drumming, medicine bundles and oral tales—resists flattening. It offers a different ontology, one where identity is shaped by land, memory and collective story. In the novel, the landscape is not a backdrop but a co-narrator. It shelters spirits, remembers violence and echoes with laughter and lament. And in this sacred geography, characters like Nanapush and Damien must navigate their conflicting loyalties, evolving beliefs and enduring ties to the land.

Father Damien's experience in the sweat lodge, under the guidance of Nanapush, reveals a deeper engagement with Native spiritual traditions. Despite being a representative of Catholicism, Damien begins to recognise the sweat lodge as a sacred space. For the Ojibwe, the sweat lodge is 'church' in its own right. It represents a womb-like enclosure symbolising the earth, and the healing smoke serves both physical and spiritual purposes. Though Damien initially arrives at Little No Horse to "help, assist, comfort and aid, spiritually sustain, and advise the Anishinaabeg," it is Nanapush who provides him spiritual comfort in return (214). In a moment of profound humility, Father Damien accepts this reversal of roles. Nanapush lights a pipe, blows smoke over Damien and conducts the healing rite: "With his pipe lighted, blowing the smoke over Father Damien in a faint and fragrant drift" (214). This ritual act reinforces the Ojibwe belief that healing, prayer, and the earth are interwoven. When Father Damien lies in the lodge, surrounded by heat, water, air, and the shape of the earth, he feels part of a spiritual whole: "close upon earth and intimate with fire, with water, with the heated air that cleaned their lungs, with the earth below, and with the eagle's nest of the sweat lodge over him" (215). Through this embodied, immersive experience, he gains a tactile understanding of Ojibwe religiosity, challenging the rigidity of Catholic worship spaces.

This moment in the sweat lodge exemplifies how Ojibwe spirituality emerges from an intimate, reciprocal relationship with the land. Unlike European religious systems, which often position God above and beyond, Ojibwe cosmology locates spiritual presence within the land. Louise Erdrich, through Father Damien's transformation, illustrates how indigenous identity is deeply rooted in rituals that honour both land and spirit. Damien's healing is not just physical; it is epistemological – he begins to learn through the land.

Erdrich employs multiple symbolic episodes to convey indigenous values and challenge colonial impositions. When Damien rediscovers his piano skills, animals, particularly snakes, crawl towards the church, drawn by the music. While others fear the spectacle, Nanapush interprets it as sacred: the snake is "a deeply intelligent secretive being," and "the great snake, wrapped around the centre of the earth, who kept things from flying apart" (220). The snake, as spirit, becomes a metaphor for subterranean indigenous wisdom. Father Damien, formerly repulsed by the snake as a Christian symbol of sin, begins to see it as a guardian spirit: "he had acquired a very powerful guardian spirit" (220). These cross-cultural meanings associated with the same natural element demonstrate Erdrich's commitment to religious syncretism, not to obliterate one system in favour of another but to show their simultaneous and contested coexistence.

Father Damien's position within this hybrid cultural landscape is further challenged when he opposes the canonisation of Sister Leopolda. While the Catholic Church valorises her miracles, Damien critiques her violence and religious perversion. He accuses her of murdering Napoleon and corrupting the Kashpaws, pointing out her "complicated love for Catholicism" (238). In contrast to the rigid religiosity represented by Leopolda, Damien's spirituality is fluid, rooted in compassion and understanding. When asked to convert as redemption, Damien boldly replies, "Oh no, I believe we were wrong" (239). His conviction stems from years of living with and learning from the Ojibwe—listening to their stories, observing their ceremonies and witnessing their resilience. For Damien, the role of a priest is redefined: not to convert or colonise but to mediate, care and learn.

The hybridity of Father Damien's identity and belief system reflects the broader thematic concern of Erdrich's work. As James Ruppert notes in *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, the Native writer occupies a space between two audiences – "non-Native and Native American" – and must negotiate multiple cultural codes (15). Ruppert insists that Native writers do not merely "stand between two cultures" but actively "utilise the different cultural codes simultaneously" to generate meaning and critique (15). Erdrich exemplifies this mediational position in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Her work does not simply juxtapose Catholicism and land-based Ojibwe belief systems; instead, it explores their entangled negotiations within lived experience.

James Clifford, in *The Predicament of Culture*, argues that indigeneity is not a fixed remnant of the past but a dynamic articulation, shaped by the pressures and interactions of history, politics and social change. In Erdrich, identity is performative, strategic and, above all, responsive. Cultural hybridity – far from being a dilution of tradition – is portrayed as a vital means of survival and resistance. Characters like Father Damien and Nanapush embody this hybridity. Damien's priesthood is not invalidated by his gender performance or his openness to Ojibwe practices; rather, his capacity for empathy and adaptability makes him an agent of spiritual mediation. Nanapush, too, resists erasure not by isolating himself from external influences, but by strategically adopting, rejecting, or retelling what serves his community.

This negotiation is particularly visible in Nanapush's storytelling. His tale about Nanabozho converting wolves and foxes to Christianity satirises colonial missionary activity. Nanabozho fools the animals, telling them, "if you take on this religion, no one can kill you" (84), and feeds them poisoned pellets to obtain their fur, which he then uses to repay the French trader. This allegory critiques the false promises and exploitative tactics of colonial religion. Damien protests, asserting that "the Anishinaabeg" are not as gullible as the animals and that he would never "skin them to pay his debts" (85). Yet the very need for this reassurance highlights the violence inherent in the colonial mission, no matter how benevolent it may appear on the surface.

The battle for Indigenous identity is not waged solely through overt resistance to colonising forces but also through the subversive act of storytelling. Stories, for the Ojibwe, are epistemological tools – they preserve knowledge, history, and spiritual codes. As Johnpaul Jones observes in *The Land Has Memory*, "There is no place without a story. Every plant, every animal, every rock and flowing spring carries a message" (1). Stories anchor people to the land, carry generational wisdom, and articulate relationships with the non-human world. They are, in Clifford's terms, a means of articulating indigeneity in a globalised world. Through Nanapush's tales and Fleur's silences, through the symbolic acts of rituals and ceremonies, Ojibwe characters assert their belonging to a land continually under threat.

Erdrich's project in the novel is both political and poetic. It critiques the colonial mechanisms that try to erase Indigenous connections to the land. The privatisation of territory, the institutionalisation of religion, and the denigration of Native healing practices all serve to sever Native peoples from their spiritual geographies. The entry of businesspeople, missionaries and cheats disrupts traditional lifeways. "Into this complex situation walk[s] Father Damien, with only the vaguest notion of how the ownership of land related to the soul" (Erdrich 76). As

Damien learns, land is not property – it is presence, spirit, and narrative. His growing awareness of this truth positions him as both participant and observer in a complex intercultural dialogue.

Environmental consciousness is not framed in modern conservationist terms but emerges through an Indigenous cosmology that sees land as animate, relational, and sacred. Damien's growing awareness of the land's spiritual dimension—its seasons, its silences, its sufferings—mirrors his inner transformation and decolonial awakening. His bond with the environment deepens not through domination or detachment, but through attentive presence and ethical engagement. Nanapush and Fleur, too, articulate their resistance not through armed rebellion but by aligning themselves with the rhythms of the earth—trapping, healing, farming and dreaming in ways that affirm continuity with ancestral wisdom. In this context, environmental stewardship is inseparable from cultural survival. The novel thus positions land not only as a contested political resource but as a spiritual geography that sustains Indigenous worldviews. Reclaiming the land, therefore, becomes an act of environmental re-inscription and ontological recovery—a reclaiming of narrative space where Indigenous voices, values and ecosystems coexist in mutual reciprocity.

Conclusion

Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* offers a profound meditation on Indigenous identity as inextricably tied to the land—conceived not as property, but as a living presence imbued with memory, spirit, and healing. Through the spiritual journey of Father Damien and the enduring resilience of characters like Nanapush and Fleur, Erdrich reveals how colonial forces—land dispossession, religious conversion, and cultural marginalisation—sought to sever Native peoples from their ancestral geographies. Yet, rather than framing Indigeneity as a nostalgic loss, Erdrich presents it as a dynamic, adaptive force that continually reshapes itself through ritual, storytelling and lived experience. This reclamation of land-based identity emerges as an act of epistemological resistance. As theorists like Anibal Quijano and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argue, decoloniality requires dismantling colonial systems of knowledge and power, and restoring Indigenous frameworks rooted in reciprocity, relationality and land. Erdrich enacts this vision through Father Damien's transformation—not as a figure of conversion, but as one converted by the land itself. In embracing Ojibwe cosmology, he embodies the possibility of intercultural understanding grounded in humility and spiritual harmony. In short, Erdrich's novel becomes a literary act of decolonisation—where memory, ceremony and narrative resist colonial erasure and reassert Indigenous sovereignty. As James Clifford and Johnpaul Jones remind us, indigeneity is not a fixed essence but a continuing act of survival and reinvention. In giving voice to that process, Erdrich reclaims the land not only as a physical space, but as a sacred ground of cultural continuity, spiritual resilience and political resistance.

References

- Clifford, James. "Among Histories." *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013. 13–49. Print.
- Erdrich, Louise. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009. Print.
- Jones, Johnpaul. "Introduction: Remembering the Experience of Past Generations." *The Land Has Memory: Indigenous Knowledge, Native Landscapes and the National Museum of the American Indian*. Ed. Duane Blue Spruce and Tanya Thrasher. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution P, 2009. 1–10. Print.
- Porter, Joy. "Historical and Cultural Contexts to Native American Literature." *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*. Ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 39–68. Print.
- Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality." *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*. Ed. Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar. London: Routledge, 2010. 22–32. Print.
- Ruppert, James. "Mediation." *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1995. 3–21. Print.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3.3 (2014): 1–25. Print.

Industrial revolution as the harbinger of climate crisis – The Anthropocene epoch in Edasseri Govindan Nair’s “Kuttipuram Palam”

Aswathi K R¹ and Prof. B J Geetha²

¹Research Scholar

Department of English Studies,

Central University of Tamil Nadu.

Email: aswathi.lfc@gmail.com | Orcid id: [0009-0005-8243-4324](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8243-4324)

²Professor and Head

Department of English

Studies, Central University of Tamil Nadu.

Email: geethabj@cutn.ac.in | Orcid id: [0000-0002-4281-6572](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4281-6572)

Abstract

This article examines the role industrial revolution plays in the epoch of Anthropocene by analysing the technological, cultural and geological counterparts by grafting the future as past memories in poetic form. It investigates the way the poem, “Kuttipuram Palam” (Kuttipuram Bridge) by Edasseri Govindan Nair guide us to rewrite, and renegotiate, how a bridge emerges as a level III technology and rework the relationship between level I, level II and level III technologies. The poem demonstrates the destructive power; a level I technology holds in the geological scale as a harbinger of Anthropocene. Edasseri through his poem “Kuttipuram Palam”, challenge the readers to interrogate their understanding of simple technologies in everyday life as a beginning of Anthropocene in a geological scale as opposed to the impact of the very technology’s implication in the linear time. Here the “Kuttipuram Palam” advice the readers to revise their perspective and asks to retrieve the Anthropocene nature of the seemingly innocent and simpler technologies of past. The “Kuttipuram Palam” explores the past of ‘Kuttipuram’ and testify to its ongoing effects as the Bridge (palam) is built across Bharathapuzha, the river and envisages the Anthropocene nature of the technologically transformed future.

Keywords: *Technology, Nature, Bridge, Anthropocene, Climate Change*

Research Questions

Does the Industrial Revolution act as the harbinger of the Anthropocene epoch?

Objectives

1. The article aims to analyse the role of the Industrial Revolution in the Anthropocene epoch, taking “bridge” as a symbol of technological effervescence.

2. Furthermore, the study also aims to renegotiate the impact of technological symbols in temporal, cultural, and geological aspects.
3. Moreover, the research paper intends to examine how smaller technologies, used in everyday life have a larger role to play in the climate crisis bringing out the Anthropocene nature of this 'everyday tech'.

Theoretical Framework

The article aims to rework the impact of the Industrial Revolution on environmental degradation and climate change from the perspective of Anthropocene studies by Timothy Clark in his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Timothy Clark characterizes Anthropocene epoch as an indisputable certitude that human activities has inevitably played a decisive and irrevocable role in changing the ecology and geology of the Earth. According to Clark rampant human actions, are so profound that they challenge the planet's natural phenomena and is driving the whole of Earth into a "Planetary terra incognita" (Clark 1)

The Anthropocene framework will be supplemented with the critical posthumanist framework proposed by Rosi Braidotti in her article, "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities". Rosi Braidotti's characterizes her critical posthumanist framework as a convergence of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism. Posthumanism critiques the centrality of man and the idealisation of the man as the "Universal measure" (Braidotti 2) of all things, whereas post-anthropocentrism comments on the human exclusivity and the subsequent notion of species hierarchy.

Literature Review

The article "'Kuttipuram Palam" Purushadyapathya chihnam" ("Kuttipuram Palam" - A symbol of Patriarchy") (2004) offers an eco-feminist reading of the poem but the article fails to examine several other aspects of the poem. In the Research article titled "Influence of Nature on Human in The Ecological Vision in Edasserri's Poetry" (2021) by Dr.K.Mini, "Kuttipuram Palam" is discussed alongside several poems of Edasserri. This article provides an anthropocentric analysis of Edasserri's poetry. The present article presents a non-anthropocentric analysis of the poem, "Kuttipuram Palam" using the theoretical frameworks of Anthropocene and Posthumanism. Several News articles varying from print, broadcast and digital media have conducted studies on the depletion of the river Bharathapuzha. Different from a reporter's perspective of presenting the truth as seen now, this article investigates and dig into the past, and looks for the reason for the Anthropocene epoch, that has resulted in the river's apparently significant decline.

Introduction

Climate change gives us no choice but to discuss and to do so from multiple perspectives, bringing in several variables. As Menga and Davies put it, we are fighting against an inevitable and imminent future that has already happened on a geographical scale, as a result of what we have done on a linear scale, and Anthropocene discusses the same. Hence my objective is to bring in this idea and discuss it from an Indian perspective. "Kuttipuram Palam" written in 1954 is a prime example of the Anthropocene epoch as the poem features the fears of the poet for the future. Seventy plus years after the poet expressed his anxiety, the inhabitants of the planet behold the Anthropocene epoch manifesting, proving that the poet's fears for the future has

come true, made apparent in the news paper articles and documentaries. The analysis also looks at the posthuman aspect of the poem by characterizing the poet as a spectator and the river, bridge and collapsing ecosystems placed in the centre.

About “Kuttipuram Palam”

The Text

“Kuttipuram Palam” is a poem by Edasseri Govindan Nair, a prominent Malayalam poet First Published in Mathrubhoomi Weekly, on February 21, 1954. The main theme of the poem is the construction of a bridge named Kuttipuram palam, (Kuttipuram bridge) above the river Bharathapuzha (also mentioned as Nila and Perar in the article). Seventy-one Years later, the poem brings out the first prophecies of Anthropocene, justifying its role as a geological epoch.

The Geography

Kuttipuram palam aka the Kuttipuram bridge is one of the major stand points of industrial revolution as it was built across the second longest river in Kerala. As one of the largest and oldest bridges in Kerala, the bridge is a part of National Highway (NH 17, during its time of construction, later NH 66). In addition to linking the Malabar region to the Travancore-cochin region, the bridge unites Kuttipuram town with Thavanur-Ponnani regions of the Malappuram District.

Analysis

Anthropocene in the “Kuttipuram Palam”

Finished construction in the year 1953, the Kuttipuram palam (Kuttipuram bridge) is one of the oldest bridges over the river Bharathapuzha. The bridge as a part of National Highway (NH 17), gave a huge boost to the transportation needs that came with urbanization. Written in the year 1954, the poem encapsulates Edasseri's feelings as he walks over the bridge for the first time. As an age-old poem, the text brings in predictions for an unprecedented future, and in certain cases bordering on hyperbolic. Unfortunately, seventy-one years after the publication of the poem, many of these predictions runs with the clarity of truth. The poem stays true to the prediction of Anthropocene epoch as Menga and Davies states, “as far as geological time is concerned, this mass extinction has already happened; it just hasn’t happened yet.” (Menga & Davies 6)

As the name of the Poem indicates, “Kuttipuram Palam” or Kuttipuram Bridge is prophesied by the poet as a symbol of the Anthropocene. The poem's first four lines talk about ecology in opposition to three different factors. The poet simultaneously arranges economy, technology, and humanity side by side with a dwindling river, - nature. This brilliant cohesion and scepticism, of the three factors and their relation to the environment in a poem written in 1954 is an exemplary example of the thoughts on the epoch of Anthropocene even before the introduction of the concept. As Edasseri foretells, despite the mounting climate crisis and ecological destruction, humanity has constantly chosen to place economy and technology above nature. Edasseri's repetition of these lines twice indicates his anxiety for the future of human and their activities in the environment.

In the first four lines of the poem, Edasseri paints a picture of Anthropocene as we know of. The first line of the poem talks about the money spend on the construction. In the next line, the poet

continues to talk about the newly constructed bridge, a symbol of industrial revolution, for which the money was spent, and in the third line he talks about the man who is standing on this bridge that is a symbol of both technological and financial prosperity. Finally in the fourth line, the poet talks about the "dwindling river", called by many names. Here, Edasseri paints a picture of economy towering over technology, and the human proudly utilizing these two as he stands above the river. These lines indicate that as a part of urbanization, we have put economy, technological progress and the human needs above the nature and its sustainability as a whole. The repetition of these four lines once again emphasises the poet's desire to communicate with his readers on the idea that human actions, in the advent of progress, is changing the face of earth and these changes are often irrevocable.

The poet further talks about the games which he played as a child, - Poothamkole (Edasseri), in which a stick is hidden in the sand and the playmates is to find out. The child's play is also the adult's play, when it comes to the depleting river. The same sand is mined without any further thought into what will happen to the river. The poet here inadvertently depicts the image of sand mining, corroborating it with the event of children playing in the sand. In the 2000s, two decades after the warnings on sand mining and the fear of the river dying, Edasseri's predictions has become the truth. Illegal and legal sand mining is still happening in the river, with no thoughts for the future of the human and non-human who depends on the river Perar.

Analysing the poem, one could see Edasseri's memory of the river, which flows vigorously in the rainy seasons of Kerala that tends to start from late May and happens till Mid-October. The river's flow in the rainy season has collapsed several temporary bridges built above it and has capsized many boats. The strong bridge according to Edasseri will finally put a stop to the grandeur appearance of the river as expressed by Edasseri in his lines - "Ini nee paalathil naatanoozhum" (Edasseri) - (now you will, / 'crawl' to flow below this bridge! (Edasseri and Jayasree)). Seventy-one years after this poem was written, the river has started to trickle down under the bridge waning each year, save for the 2018 floods.

Edasseri's confession that an unknown pain haunts his conscience, - "Enkilum marthya vijayathinmel/ en kazhaloonni nivarnnu nilke" (Edasseri)- as he stands "on the glory of victory of mankind" (Edasseri and Jayasree) is the reality of human activities unprecedented effect on the nature despite them being seemingly harmless. As Timothy Clark states, Human action "have become so pervasive and profound" and they challenge the nature's great forces (Clark 1). Edasseri perceives the changing tunes of the world as he gazes into the bridge constructed over the river. He also witnesses the changing landscapes, and the destruction of the village ecosystem, that is slowly dwindling as alarmingly increasing constructions encroach the green space. Edasseri also perceives the death of various flowering and fruit trees, hills and valleys, the darkness of night and various other things that are integral to the survival and balance of the nature. Edasseri wonders and ultimately prophesies that despite the inevitable nature of the various ecosystems in the environment, they are either wiped out or forced to the point of extinction as a result of human actions. The poet predicts a future where, - "Alarinmel vazhcha Thudangugayay/silayum kariyum cementurukkum" (Edasseri) - "Granite, coal, cement and steel/ start their reign over tender buds." (Edasseri and Jayasree). In the poem, the construction of bridge and consecutive sand mining is the activity that is annihilating several ecosystems and disintegrating multiple food chains. The bridge here stands as the agent of industrial revolution and subsequent urbanization that is changing the earth into a "Planetary terra Incognita" (Clark 1) in the long run.

Edasseri also hints at the growing light, and sound pollution that takes away the mysterious nature of night, and at the same time causes inevitable and unprecedented damages to various nocturnal species. Here again the sound and light pollution in 1954 is much less than that in 2000s. Yet despite studies that prove their effects on humans and non-humans, the activity that causes the pollution continues. Edasseri also beholds the levelling of hills by machines, hills, that provides home to various species and sustain several ecosystems, hills, that retain water and preserve the nature, are destroyed in the name of progress, and subsequent comfort that it offers to the human race.

Anthropocene enunciates that human actions cause irrevocable damage to the environment, and unlike the Holocene age, the consequences of the activities often does not manifest in a linear scale despite its effects already reshaping the planet's geology. The final lines of the poem "Kuttipuram Palam" are a testimony to this understanding of Anthropocene epoch. The poet in his agony of losing the environment he is close to pose the question, - "Amba Perare nee maripoomo/ aakulayaamorazhukkuchaalay?" (Edasseri)- "will you too mother 'Perar', change/into a canal of grief carrying sewage?" (Edasseri and Jayasree). Several newspapers report as discussed in the article stand witness to the line slowly becoming a reality. The river Nila in summer is mostly sand beds and water trickling down the bridge as sad memory of the once boisterous river.

Anthropocene and Sand Mining

Construction is one of the major themes of the Poem. The bridge symbolizes construction, sand mining, and the Industrial Revolution. The Kuttipuram bridge, which was constructed in 1953 is, for the poet the victory of humanity, using technology, over nature. Edasseri further hints at the changing landscapes such as vast paddy fields, groves, fruit-bearing trees, hills, valleys, an assortment of bloomed flowers and so on that are lost as part of constructions, and technological advancements. Edasseri perceives these advancements that are part of the Industrial Revolution with suspicion. He constantly brings together the symbols of technology and construction in contrast with that of putrescent nature. The nature in Edasseri's eyes is perpetually changing, and he predicts the Anthropocene nature of these anthropogenic enhancements.

The poem juxtaposes a shrinking river below the newly constructed bridge. The bridge just like its location reigns over river Perar controlling its fate from a higher place. The bridge gains its meaning and purpose by letting humans cross over the Bharathapuzha, which neither the boats nor the garuda was able to cross (Edasseri). Interestingly, there is one thing that seamlessly connects as well as contrasts both the river and the bridge - sand. Sand and rivers are inseparable. So is using sand as an ingredient in concrete for bridge construction.

The poet laments over the disappearing nature as construction takes hold of the greenery. Sand, which is part of the nature, is imperative for the riverbed. It also plays a huge role in protecting and sustaining the life of river ecosystem, as well as in water retention. Yet for the advancement of technology and amplification of economic benefits and human development, the sand is mined and a large chunk of it goes as raw material into construction. As defined by Rentier and Cammeraat, Indiscriminate river-sand mining directly influences the shape of the riverbed. Accordingly, sand mining often causes secondary and accumulated effects on the physical characteristics and the dynamic equilibrium of the erosion as well as sedimentation of a river (Rentier & Cammeraat 3). The dying river, caused by rampant sand mining is a victim of the

very bridge constructed using the sand, mined from rivers as well as the proof to mankind's inability to predict the Anthropocene epoch and to take measures to guard against the impending climate crisis and depletion of natural resources at large.

In 1957, the process of sand mining was legalized using the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, "Notwithstanding anything contained in sections 10B and 11, an exploration licence may be granted in any area by the State Government for the purpose of undertaking reconnaissance or prospecting operations or both in respect of any mineral specified in the Seventh Schedule" (The Gazette of India Extraordinary 3), and this led to a huge increase in sand mining, both legal and illegal during the mid 1990's. Despite several environmental studies and scientific articles that foretell, retell, and reaffirm the inevitable environmental problems that will occur as a part of sand mining, the mining in Nila continues.

Edasseri ties the 'Anthimahakaalan' hills with Bharathapuzha and weaves the narrative of nature being played in the hands of technology. This brings the imagery of man, in his arrogance of technological development and pride in economic progression leaving nature behind and playing with it as he wishes, despite overlooking a distant future where the profiteering of the environment will cause catastrophic elements to life on earth. The poem incessantly recounts Edasseri's anxiety over a diminishing environment, and warning to future generations as the changes brought in the geography, - the river, the hills, the fields - are already changing the world around us. As Edasseri mourns over the loss of the nature around him that was lost as a part of technological advancement and mounting construction, it serves as a warning gesture to the human beings who are immersed in their pride of the same. Here he becomes both the proud human and the prophet of the future. Yet, the focus on economic development made humans, focus on pride and neglect his prophesy.

Edasseri recollects the proud river, in its glory that put humanity and non-humans in awe. Despite its past glory, Edasseri reaffirms that the river will be anchored to the bridge in an act of human triumph over the Natural world. As a symbol of construction and sand mining, the role of the bridge in destroying the ecology is brought to the forefront here. The poet contrasts human pride, to the river's surrender to the bridge, construction, sand mining, and finally to the Industrial Revolution as the bridge, construction, and sand mining owes their roots to it. The Poet uses a method of bringing together various contrasting factors, which play a major role in the epoch of Anthropocene, and renegotiates the role of new technologies, construction, and the industrial revolution in the impending climate crisis. The poem was published in 1954 before sand mining was made legal, before the studies on the impact of sand mining came, before the encroachment of the riverbed happened, before the river turned into a small drain, nevertheless, the predictions were fulfilled in a far future. The poem successfully captured the anxiety of the former generations, and the frailty of the current generations, caused when the land was given a price.

The present scenario

A glimpse of Edasseri's Perar in the Hindu news report from July 11, 2016, Thiruvananthapuram Edition, titled "Sand-Mining Sound the Death Knell for the Bharathapuzha", indicates that sixty two years after the poem was published, not only has the illegal sand mining continues but it has also already affected the human and non-human population that depends on the river for their lives and livelihood. Moreover, humans have failed Bharathapuzha in more ways than one.

On top of the illegal sand mining, the dried-up riverbed has been used by the locals for both agriculture and construction, which results in floods as the river reclaims its path. (G Prabhakaran)

Human activities have constantly caused implications in the ways of nature. The simultaneous exploitation of nature alongside constant alienation is one of the major reasons for the current Anthropocene disaster we are facing. Yet various scientific studies and artistic concerns are constantly swallowed up in the economic banter, race to development, and human pride. The Anthropocene disaster at a planetary level is constantly debated as a question of whether it exists or not. Unfortunately, climate change is considered debatable. 62 years after the poem was written, the geographical epoch of the Anthropocene comes true as the river turns into a drain as proved in the Hindu News report on November 01, 2016, titled “Bharathapuzha is dry much ahead of summer” featuring a picture of the riverbed without water.

Anthropocene and the everyday technology

Bridge as a Level 1 Technology transcending into a Level 3 Technology

As outlined by Timothy Clark, Allenby and Sarewitz propose three varying levels of complexities in identifying different technologies. In the book, *The Techno-Human condition* (2011), they classify technologies as Level I, II, and III. Level I is classified as the crude traditional classification of technology as a basic tool, (Clark 6) whereas the Level II technology are part of a sophisticated network architecture that are mechanisms of social and technological control, with additional adherence to security, pricing systems, law and so on (6-7). Clark defines that Level III represents “complex emergent properties that defy our ability to model, predict or even understand them” (8).

Adhering to this classification Timothy Clark in his eco-criticism on the edge, Anthropocene as a threshold concept proposes the thought, that a transitional way to define Anthropocene is that several events and problems that are identified as Level I and Level II technologies are emerging as Level III technologies, equivalent to the Bridge in the poem. The Kuttipuram bridge as a means of transportation is a level I technology and as it plays a significant role in connecting various places on a socio-economic level, it transcends to Level II. The very bridge as it plays a huge role in changing landscapes and destroying ecosystems and disintegrating food chains, has exalted itself as a Level III technology. However more than often both Level I and Level II technologies are expected to be tackled using thoughts and resources conformed to their level. In Clark's words, “more and more events and problems are emerging at Level III, rendering obsolete modes of thought that are confined to Levels I and II” (Clark 9).

The bridge in its usability can be considered as a level I technology, as the main purpose of the bridge was to make transportation across the river possible, especially since the river tend to have violent fluctuations and several accidents in the rainy season. It was a method to make land transport over the river possible and reduce the distance of the journey as well as accidents. Nevertheless, bridge like several other technological advancements exceeded its expectations and played a major role in the economic growth of the surrounding regions as it made transportation easier, expanding into a Level II technology. Edasseri views the Kuttipuram bridge as a Level III technology as he sees the bridge bringing, social, economic, and geographical changes in just one year and the far future. He predicts the changing landscape of his village as the bridge brings new development and makes transportation easier. He sees the

loss of agriculture, and culture, as the Kuttipuram bridge connects the nearby villages to a wider world.

Posthuman Perspective of “Kuttipuram Palam”

“Kuttipuram Palam” by Edasseri Govindan Nair deals with two opposing factors, nature verses technology. The main focus of the poem is, as the name suggests, the bridge aka Kuttipuram palam in relation to the river, Bharathapuzha, over which the bridge was constructed. The poem constantly brings out a futuristic perspective of how the construction of the bridge is going to affect the river and the surrounding people. Simultaneously by juxtaposing nature and technology, Edasseri also reminds us that the process of urbanization and construction erased several non-human factors. As the discussions on the sixth mass extinctions comes into effect, it is important to note that the earth has gone through a minimum of five mass extinction events as we know of, and several species that are alive now on the earth, has lived through all the five mass extinction events. Mass extinctions affect the predominant species and in the sixth mass extinction, the predominant species is the anthropos. (Parham xiv)

Edasseri foretells the loss of several non-human factors, and species that would face extinction level event in the construction of a bridge. He leads this perspective by portraying a dwindling river, Nila. Later on, he recalls the memory of the sand, the same sand which is being mined endlessly despite the slow death of the river and the change in river's path. The post subsequently remembers the birds such as Kingfisher, stork, and eagle that fed on fish. The poet further brings in his perspective of a losing innocence of village and its non-human inhabitants such as vast green fields, the flower and fruit trees, the hills and valleys, the night and its inhabitants. The non-human species and attributes that make the earth complete, retain the balance of the environment and sustenance of the existing food chains. All these factors combined, make the existence of life on earth possible.

The vast green fields that are often filled in for construction, causes the destruction of several ecosystems. The absence of a single species of bird that feeds on amphibians will destroy the food chains that have the bird or the fishes as the connection link. The flowering and fruit trees are not only home to several species but also have their own unique ecosystems. Moreover, they are inevitable for the storage of water, retention of topsoil, and for providing oxygen. Despite the importance of trees for the environment, they are being cut down for a small step towards urbanization under the pretext of making our lives more comfortable. The cost of this comfort is a question that needs to be answered in the long run, as the deforestation has caused large scale problems in the climate change scenario.

The urbanization and industrial revolution as a whole have brightened up our nights. As Edasseri mourns for the death of mysterious nights that used to be dark and hide secrets, it also insinuates that the bright nights have caused the endangering of several species. Several species of owl and bat have faced various issues as the nights brighten. It is affecting the circadian rhythm of human bodies. Yet our nights are only becoming brighter and the species that are part of it are either evolving or slowly disappearing. The dead cement and stones have already started their reign over the flowers -the essence the nature. The petrol that stood as the major symbol of Industrial revolution is not only causing pollution but also depleting the Earth's resources without a care for tomorrow and slowly converting the Holocene earth, engendering changes that are impossible to revert back leading the planet into the Anthropocene epoch.

The poet paints a poignant picture of the child of technology, playing with the once majestic 'Anthimahakaalan hills', (machinery that is used for levelling hills, likely a JCB), near the river for construction purposes. The hills are a huge source of water; they are also home for a huge number of species and a self-sustaining ecosystem. Yet as the poet witness the destruction of 'Anthimahakaalan hills', it brings into perspective, how the single act of construction has caused the annihilation of several species and the destruction of multiple ecosystems. Here, as Edasseri sees, human beings have forgotten that they are part and parcel of the ecosystem, and that there is always a tomorrow where the destruction of any number of species that balances life on earth could adversely affect the entire planetary ecosystem of which, the man is simply a small part and not a major one.

Conclusion

Written in 1954, the foreboding of the poet for the future comes true on a geological and temporal scale. The future of Nila, as a drain due to sand mining was foreseen by the poet, as he watched the construction of the bridge. Simultaneously, his anxieties concerning a future regarding the loss of biodiversity, deforestation, and destruction of the hill areas have all come to fruition. Assigning the bridge as a symbol of construction, technological enhancement, economy, and development, the poem foretells the geological epoch of the Anthropocene as the future generations experience it. The poem also plays a major role in affirming the role of the industrial revolution, as a harbinger of the climate crisis using the symbol of the Kuttippuram bridge.

References

- Allenby, Braden R., and Daniel R. Sarewitz. *The Techno-Human Condition*. Paperback ed., MIT Press, 2013.
- "Bharathapuzha Is Dry Much Ahead of Summer." *The Hindu*, 1 Nov. 2016. Online, www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/Bharathapuzha-is-dry-much-ahead-of-summer/article14989576.ece. Accessed 10 Sep. 2024
- Braidotti, R. (2018). A theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 36(6), 31–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486>
- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. Bloomsbury, 2022.
- Craps, Stef and Rick Crownshaw. "Introduction: The Rising Tide of Climate Change Fiction." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 50 no. 1, 2018, p. 1-8. Project MUSE, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2018.0000>. Accessed 10 Sep. 2024
- Edasseri, Govindan Nair. "കുറ്റിപ്പുറം പാലം." പുലർക്കാല കവിതകൾ, 1 Jan. 1970. Online, pularkkaalam-pularkkaalam.blogspot.com/2012/04/blog-post_23.html.
- Edasseri, Govindan Nair. Translated by Asokakumar Edasseri and Jayasree, Kuttippuram Bridge, edasseri.org, June. 2018. Online, [www.edasseri.org/English/translations/Kuttippuram Bridge by Edasseri - Translation.pdf](http://www.edasseri.org/English/translations/Kuttippuram%20Bridge%20by%20Edasseri%20-%20Translation.pdf).
- G, Prabhakaran. "Sand-Mining Rampant in Bharathapuzha." *The Hindu*, 18 Jan. 2013. Online, www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/sandmining-rampant-in-bharathapuzha/article4322076.ece.
- "Heavy Rain: Bharathapuzha River in Full Glory." *Asianetnews*, YouTube, 19 Sept. 2017. Online, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeFspJT529s. Accessed 10 Sep. 2024

- Manorama, Staff Reporter. “ഭാരതപ്പുഴയുടെ തീരത്ത് അതീവജാഗ്രത; രണ്ടായിരം പേരെ മാറ്റിപ്പാർപ്പിച്ചു.” manoramaONLINE, Manorama News, 1 Aug. 2024. Online, www.manoramaonline.com/.
- Menga, Filippo, and Dominic Davies. “Apocalypse yesterday: posthumanism and comics in the Anthropocene.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 663–687, <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/87098/>.
- Parham, John. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene*. Cambridge university press, 2021.
- Rentier, E.S., and L.H. Cammeraat. “The environmental impacts of river sand mining.” *Science of The Total Environment*, vol. 838, 13 May 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.155877>.
- “Sand Mining.” EIACP (PC-RP) on Environmental Problems of Mining, Indian Institute of Technology (ISM), Dhanbad, Jharkhand, Sponsored by Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Govt of India, 25 Sept. 2014. Online, ismenvis.nic.in/Database/Sand_Mining_3817.aspx. Accessed 10 Sep. 2024
- Special Correspondent. “Bharathapuzha’s Post-Flood Course Worries Experts.” *The Hindu*, 8 June. 2020. Online, www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/bharathapuzhas-post-flood-course-worries-experts/article28452211.ece.
- Staff Reporter. “Sand-Mining Sound the Death Knell for the Bharathapuzha.” *The Hindu*, 11 July. 2016. Online, www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Thiruvananthapuram/sandmining-sound-the-death-knell-for-the-bharathapuzha/article3462733.ece.
- “THE MINES AND MINERALS (DEVELOPMENT AND REGULATION) AMENDMENT ACT, 2023.” *THE GAZETTE OF INDIA EXTRAORDINARY*, Ministry of Mines, 10 Aug. 2023. Online, mines.gov.in/admin/download/64dc579c4f9e31692161948.pdf. Accessed 10 Sep. 2024.

Aligning Women with Nature: An Ecofeminist Critique of Tagore's *Three Women*

Bhaktinath Barman¹ and Dr. Saikat Sarkar²

¹Research Scholar

Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, Cooch Behar. West Bengal.

Email Id - sitaibhaktinath1996@gmail.com | Orcid Id: [0009-0004-8303-179X](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8303-179X)

²Assistant Professor

Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, Cooch Behar, West Bengal.

Email Id- sarkarsaikat2025@gmail.com | Orcid Id: [0009-0007-0332-3680](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0332-3680)

Abstract

Women and Nature constitute two important discourses of Ecocriticism. The modernising projects of contemporary times shaped by the ethics of development and material progress are causing environmental degradation. The rhetoric of development is opening new frontiers of oppression on the basis of gender, caste, and location posing a serious challenge to sustainable life on earth. Ecofeminist project strongly advocates the notion of development as reductionist endeavour. Ecofeminists call for a revolutionary view of life in which Nature and Women take centre stage as they personify the perfect equality and sustainability. Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali polymath, is hugely celebrated for his undaunting desire for equality and women empowerment. The proposed article tries to examine Tagore's deep-rooted concern about women in connection with Nature with special reference to "Malancha", "Nastaneer" and "Dui Bon".

Keywords: *Women, Nature, Tagore, Ecofeminism*

Introduction:

Women and Nature constitute two analogous discursive constructs in Environmental philosophy. The discourse of Ecocriticism has been predominantly preoccupied with multiple discursive binaries since the last five decades. 'Nature' and 'Woman' both are systematically substantiated in the current academia with regard to ecology and environmental sustainability. Ecocritical scholarship in recent times has achieved a 'significant' momentum due to the perpetual conflict between the rapid growth of modern technological advancement and a desire for sustainable development. Ecocriticism as a critical theoretical foundation has outgrown into multi-faceted vistas of knowledge such as Deep Ecology, Anthropocene, Third World Environmentalism, Ecofeminism etcetera. The core subject-matter of this article pertains to the notion of Ecofeminism (in respect of Tagore's serious work titled *Three Women*) which concentrates on the recurrent drawbacks of patriarchal ideology which ignores "Women's work, knowledge and 'situatedness' (her immediate location in nature, where the relationship with the environment is far more intimate than that of man's" (Nayar 249). Rabindranath Tagore was a prominent Bengali Polymath and the first ever non-European Nobel Prize Winner. Tagore was

born into a noble Bengali household in 1861 at Jorasanko in Kolkata. Tagore's upbringing in an elite setting infused with Oriental and Occidental learning chores left a lasting impact upon his career. Tagore is esteemed highly among his critics for his noteworthy contributions in diverse fields of knowledge. Though his writings mirror 20th Century postcolonial Indian condition; his views on 'Woman Question' and 'Nature' move beyond any chronological categorisation. This is why Tagore remains both relevant and contemporary in this regard.

'Woman' occupies a very predominant thought in the major writings of Tagore. The magnus opuses of Tagore remain fragmented without his critique of the 'Woman Question' in the context of Bengal. The instances of such kind would range across various genres of writing. "Wife's Letter", "The Conclusion", *The Home and the World*, *Four Chapters*, *Chokher Bali* etcetera are referable. Women in Tagore not only represent the social reality of 20th Century Bengali Woman, but also embody the aspiration, engagement, experience, failure and fulfilment of their life with regard to their social, political and cultural contours. The roles of a mother, a sister and a wife have been depicted with an unending beauty of a character. Tagore delivered a lecture titled 'Woman' during his America tours in 1916-1917 in which he defines feminine nature with a deliberate focus on passivity of the feminine self to predicate this characteristic as a counterargument against the Western discourse on masculinity. Chandrava Chakravarty and Sneha Kar Choudhury in the introductory section of their book titled *Tagore's Idea of the New Woman* (2017) in respect of this suggest that "in Tagore's creative works 'woman' has become the site of conflictual positioning and perceptions, a battleground of the discursive and the realm, the sensual and the sublime, the gross and the ideal" (xiv). Each woman character in Tagorean oeuvre is furnished with an unending beauty of character. Women in Tagore professed a liberated self who are bound up with disintegrating the socio-cultural and socio-economic barriers for empowering themselves. Women exhibit the blend of tradition and modernity in their idiosyncrasies. Works by Tagore depict the emancipated selves of women who believed in gender equality and shattering the patriarchal norms. Mrinal in "Wife's Letter" is bold and assertive in her declaration about her husband's home in order to begin with a new life of her own devoid of any domestic clutches. Mrinmoyee in "The Conclusion" showcases the unconventional feminine urge to disrupt the conventional gender role. The character of Bimala from *The Home and the World* embodies the same spirit. Tagore, the poet, in his poem titled "The Gardener" also carries the same strong feminine voice who wishes to unite with her lover. Tagore, the playwright, is no exception either. In *Chitrangada*, Chitrangada, the protagonist avowedly declares that the world has to accept her as she is.

Research Methodology and theoretical framework

This paper aims to examine Tagore's understanding of the relationship between Women and Nature with special reference to *Three Women*. The tool of analysis will be critical textual analysis of select texts. Though the article draws inspiration from many philosophical stances, the primary research methodology would be ecofeminism as it captures the main motif of the article.

Ecofeminism as a theoretical stance evolved in the latter half of the twentieth century in the Western academia. Ecofeminism believes that any form of oppression on the basis of caste, creed, gender or race is directly connected to the oppression of Woman and exploitation of Nature. The Ecofeminist philosophy is deeply inspired by Feminism and Ecocriticism and it places Women and Nature in the same sanctum. Famous French feminist writer and critic Françoise d'Eaubonne is credited with the invention of the term 'Ecofeminism' in her book *Le*

Féminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death) in 1974. If ecocriticism is the “study of the relationship between literature and environment”, then Ecofeminism imagines Women as the direct representative of Nature with essential qualities like motherhood, care, affection, love, empathy and sensitivity (Glotfelty XIX). For Ariel Salleh “ecological feminist are both street fighters and philosophers” and thus it advocates the radical expression of women’s suffering and plight under patriarchal dominance (IX). Thus, ecofeminism is more a movement than a philosophical stance to counter the patriarchal domination exerted on both Women and Nature. Ecofeminism minutely examines the reductionist scientific and technological development and opposes them as they task against the feminine principle of harmony and universal brotherhood and kinship. Ecofeminist Vandana Shiva advocates for a radical change in the outlook regarding the binary relation between Nature and Culture. For her we should adhere to the “subsistence perspective” or “survival perspective” which destabilizes the so-called binary between Nature and Culture, between Male and Female, between “mechanical materialism and airy spiritualism” (Mies 297). This concept rejects all the dualistic worldview which is at the root of all modern ecological problem. Greta Gaard defines this concept in simple terms: “ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorises oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender sexuality physical abilities and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (I). Ecofeminists call for a paradigm shift into the ‘feminine principle’ which place Women at the heart of each endeavour. Ecofeminism in a very shallow manner can be divided into two components: one is the relationship of oneness between Nature and Women, and the other is how to resolve the binaries created by this draconian scientific advancement which creates boundaries with caste, creed and gender. This paper mainly focuses on the initial part of the spectrum.

“Malancha” (“The Arbour”) and Garden as Home

Originally published in 1934 “Malancha” deals with the multifaced layers of the human mind in its emotional capacity. Three key characters in “Malancha”: Aditya, Neeraja, and Sarala- are bound emotionally with a garden. The story, at first hand, revisits the human relationship with nature, particularly through a garden. Garden as a human space delineates human’s relationship with the nonhuman. From an anthropocentric view, garden is the miniature of the vast natural world where human can shape and reshape the wild with his own will. He becomes the master of that created world where everything happens according to the wish of the great master-Human. This is the Nature which is cut out of its uninhabited wilderness. Although the discourse of ecocriticism proffers a different outlook on the garden. For an ecological activist, garden symbolizes a sacred space where human recognises his symbiotic relationship with nature. Garden heals our emotional and mental injuries through its divine grace. Thus, garden is the system where the boundary between nature and culture, self and the other is shattered. Garden can also provide a space to recreate and reimagine reality. The garden, in “Malancha”, is placed at the centre of the plot and represents what is happening in their lives. The garden surpasses its value of just being a garden and becomes the epitome of the conjugal love between Aditya and Neeraja:

Her husband Aditya made a name for himself in the flower trade. In their marriage Neeraja and her husband had come together through tending to the garden. The flowers and blossom, with their ever-changing loveliness, had always renewed their joy in each other. Just as the émigré awaits letter from friends back home on the days when the

special post arrives, so too did they await, from season to season, the welcome of their flowers and plants (Tagore 140).

They were the love birds playing in the garden. They would work on their garden together. Neeraja and Aditya felt that fulfilment of love when they are in the garden. Neeraja became a true 'magician', as described by visiting friends, who could nurture magnificent and enormous dahlias, marigolds, jasmine or roses.

But after ten years of their marriage, all her happiness and productivity are turned upside down when she became the prey of an incurable disease. She was once so immersed in her love that she even envied their pet Dolly for sharing love of her husband. The death of Dolly in Niraja's lap foreshadows the imminent turmoil that awaited in her life. After many years of waiting, when everyone had lost hope of Neeraja having a child, she conceived. But she could not give birth to the child- "the scalpel had to be wielded and the baby killed to save the mother" (Tagore 142). This was the loss of her entire being- the loss of her productive self, the loss of feminine force which keeps the world alive. Maria Mies elaborately discussed this productivity of Women in relation to the productivity of Nature. Women not only produce biologically; they also provide sustenance to them through their service. In this process they simulate with Nature. They place their own bodies in accordance with Nature. But they do not claim the product as their own property; rather they 'co-operate' with the environment to 'to let grow and make grow' (qtd. in Shiva, 41). A woman mislays her essence in a patriarchal setting once she loses her fecundity. Here Neeraja, as a mother, is eventually reduced to the metaphor of a barren land which is infertile. She is now "like the river in summer reduced to a trickle on a bed of sand, she could only lie in her bed, anaemic, spent. She had exhausted her once plentiful life force" (Tagore 142). She is not a mother right now; she is erased of her 'motherly' essence. As a result, she, as well as the garden, starts to lose its charm and vigour.

Neeraja's mental and physical turmoil grows into the unending suffering with the arrival of Sarala, Aditya's distant cousin. Aditya, which literally means the sun, is the source of energy. The vacuum of Neeraja is very aptly filled up by Sarala. The garden itself becomes the symbol of the universe which is made of two aspects- masculine and the feminine. Sarala's presence in the garden reminds Neeraja of her 'barrenness'. Neeraja feels herself "like a fruit damaged by the beak of a bat, unfit for human consumption" (Tagore 143). As she identifies herself with the garden, she cannot tolerate anyone's authority in it. The garden is her own property and she should be responsible for everything happening there. She reminds her husband that the orchid room was started just after their marriage. It represents their love. She asserts, "we made that room together, the two of us, one day at a time" (Tagore 164). Any intervention in that room means the destruction of that personal space for her. At the same time, she understands her physical limitations which broke her spirit. At this critical juncture she cannot look after Aditya, nor has the energy to take care of the garden. She accepts that she cannot stand up against the 'amazing Sarala'. But her feminine self would cling to that garden because she believes that the garden was as precious as Aditya's heart. So, she considered the garden 'no different from myself ever since' (Tagore 168). She complains in the following manner: "I'd have quarrelled bitterly with your garden and I'd never have been able to bear it. It would have been my rival in love. You know how I have merged it within myself. How I have become one with it" (Tagore 168). Talking about the development in the Third World economy and its relation to Woman, Vandana shiva contained that sustenance is achieved through nature's capacity to renew its forests, rivers and other resources. Most of the cultures, who have achieved this deed of conserving nature, owe its

due to the women folk. Women in their natural ability transfer the fertility from the forest to the field and the animals. They become the custodians of Nature. Thus, the Women and Nature in the Third World “are associated not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life” (Shiva 44). Neerja maintains her garden. She is the guardian of the garden. Such is the intensity and passion of her love that she becomes the garden and merged with it. The garden is her body. She thinks the arrival of Sarala in the garden is like “slicing her body and planting someone else’s heart in it (Tagore 168)”. She thought the garden as her body and she would not allow anyone’s heart to be planted there.

Sarala, being another protagonist, understands Neerja’s emotion aptly. She understands compassionately that Neerja had been banished from her own garden which has also derailed her from the body. She understands this cruel separation of the childless mother. She is ashamed of herself for intruding Neerja’s garden. Sarala herself is ready to go to Andaman jail to hide herself. But she couldn’t deny the love that once she shared with Aditya in their childhood. Because “they dug in the garden, working side by side, trimming the plants (Tagore 172)”. Now it is brimming out again. When she asks about her mental intricacies to Ramen, he replied that this is “a love that you (Sarala) had buried, when you were young, flowing again” (Tagore 173). Aditya, on the other hand cannot restrict himself from asserting his rejuvenated love for Sarala at this vacuum- “I am in love with you, and my heart is overflowing tonight because I am able to tell you this so naturally and simply” (Tagore 176).

Tagore has masterfully linked Neerja’s wellbeing with her capacity to fertility and productivity. The ecofeminists categorically emphasise the role of Nature and Women as providers of proper resources to sustain a living. Neerja’s role has been the same. She is the motherly figure who is always there for her husband. This motherly Nature in Neerja along with her infertility may be the root cause behind the crack of their conjugal relation. Conversely Sarala is also a motherly figure with some different attribution. She is more mature than Neerja. She knows the reality and she have the guts to act accordingly. She embodies the feminine attributes which represent sacrifice, renunciation and surrender. She declares the universal truth that “what is one in the seed always splits when it grows...” (Tagore 174). She in her mellifluous tone invokes the universal truth, “you men fight unhappiness, but generations of women have only borne unhappiness. They have nothing to bank on besides their tears and endurance” (Tagore 174). Thus, these two great women along with Aditya complete one circle. Both women personify two aspects of a single feminine entities. They are not opposite but complementary to each other and represent a character which ought to be ideally complete which ecofeminists advocate. Neerja in her deathbed declares her right; she imagines to go to nurture the garden. She has no energy to spare but still wants to look after the plants, flowers and trees of the garden. She even declares a war against Sarala and promises that she will not die like a miser. She cannot sacrifice her property right away. She renounces Sarala as ‘she-devil’ before her death and declares that she will suck her blood. On the other hand, Sarala is ready to give up everything which she possesses and ought to have. But what unites them is their closeness and association with Nature.

“Nastaneer” (“The Broken Nest”) and the Concept of Home

“Nastaneer”, originally published in 1901, is another masterpiece in which Tagore has shown profound skill in character delineation with emotional intricacies and fragility of human relations. The plot revolves around a triangle relationship between Bhupati, Charulata and

Amal, Bhupati's younger cousin. Bhupati, an affluent educated newspaper editor is a loving husband; but he is emotionally far away from his wife, Charulata. At her home Charu leads a lonely life with boredom. Being a traditional woman, she tries to prove herself useful to someone; she is eager to accept the social boundaries and 'endure the happy oppression of affection'. She takes the centre stage as the plot carries forward. Her love and emotion become vital assets of the story. The creative woman in her is rejuvenated when Amal starts staying with them. He has been given the duty to assist her in lazy hours and give her company. Soon they develop a good relation and her spirit is uplifted with the touch of a male figure in Amal, the philosopher, poet and a university student.

A happy woman stands for a few qualities such as productivity, sensibility, creativity and nurturing. Hence the first endeavour Charu and Amal take on is gardening. They plan to make a garden of their own. Charu says to Amal, "You and I will make the garden together" (Tagore 8). She thinks that there would be no fun if the plan is revealed to her husband which correctly suggests a woman's perception of fulfilment. They would feel satisfied if the work is done; not in the declaration of the work. Her relations with Amal take her to another venture of writing developing in her a creative faculty. She likes to read all of Amal's writing as well. She even debates and criticises them with her creative sense. Her feminine being finds Amal as a home and now she desires everything that belongs to Amal. She has become a philosopher and poet in a male-dominated Indian society. The creative circle she has made with Amal is fulfilling for her and she is satisfied with that. She has even become jealous of anybody who aspires for Amal's company. Gradually she turns possessive about Amal. She wants to confine Amal with her love; she even does not like the idea of Amal's work being published as Tagore writes: "Amal's writings belonged to her as much as to him. Amal was the writer and Charu, the reader. The secrecy of their venture was its primary attraction for her. She could not comprehend why she should feel so upset at the thought of other people reading those pieces and praising them" (Tagore 14). She personally does not like the growing popularity of Amal in the literary circle and began thinking of herself as someone detached from him. When Amal proposed the name of 'Charu's Reader' about the literary circle composed of two of them, she denies the proposal. Charu turned him down with the proposed name "Amala". This is the perfect aspiration of her desire for a sustainable equality where male and female both assert their right. Amal with all his male passion, compassion and masculinity melts into the personality of Charulata, the perfect female- and the product becomes Amala. The name Amala perfectly epitomizes the concept of androgynous mind conceptualised by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*: an androgenous mind is what exhibits a balance between the male and female aspects of being (Woolf 76). Her feminine self is so absorbed with the will of equality that she competes with Amal in the philosophical arena. She even surpasses him and is acknowledged by the literary magazine *The Lake Lotus*. This defeat at the creative hand of Charulata hurt the male ego of Amal. He is shaken by this sudden defeat in the eyes of his disciple and starts acting unlikely of him. But the winner Charu is not happy with this accolade. She is still ready to surrender to Amal, the glow of her life. She thinks that "someone had let her favourite birds out of their cage" (Tagore 31). She has created her art only for Amal. She even considers that Amal has been treacherous with her when he revealed her creative pieces to the world through publication. She feels embarrassed that all the secrets that she kept for Amal are discovered by her husband and the world. But still, she retains her submissive nature and wants to reconcile with Amal.

Sensing Charu's emotional inclination towards him and the resultant impending danger, Amal decides to leave. This is an emotional violence he has committed to Charu. When he left a

great vacuum is created in Charu's life. Subsequently Bhupati also discovers the emotional bonding between Amal and her wife Charu. This causes him mental turmoil and emotional devastation. He feels like a plant which is uprooted from the ground. He wants consolation but there is no one to whom he can go. All he needed is "a concerned, loving enquiry from Charu, a show of tenderness... to salve his aching wound (Tagore 43)" which signifies the healing power of Woman and Nature. But she has now become empty. She has nothing left to offer after all these emotional violence committed to her. Her tenderness, her love, care, compassion or love have been banished from her first by Bhupati's ignorance and then by Amal. The more Bhupati tries to connect with Charu; he discovers the void inside her. Leaving all his dream and aspiration, he subscribes to the sustenance principle which advocates a life with "little flame of happiness, with things that were accessible yet beautiful, tangible yet pure (Tagore 55)". He now wants to return to Charu. He tries his best to go to Charu and pleases her. But she has now turned unresponsive to any stimulus of love. The emotional damage that has been done to her is irreversible. Her response these days has become very much like Nature as being exhausted by two patriarchal entities. Nature has the enormous power and resources that she gives us for our survival. We, very much like Amal and Bhupati, use and extract them as much as possible for us. But this kind of unrestricted and uncontrolled extraction often leads to the danger of exhaustion. Then we reach a point when nature responds in such a way which is beyond our imagination. Intolerable exhaustion and exploitation may result in some destructive response with flood, draught, landslide, earthquake or any other natural calamities. In the very same way Charulata has also become exhausted with her emotional and psychological turmoil and she has now nothing to offer.

"Dui Bon" ("Two Sister") and The Two Feminine world

"Dui Bon" was first published in 1993. Sharmila and Urmimala, the two sisters, bring with them the two sides of the same feminine essence: one is the world of responsibility, accountability, devotional love for the husband and another is individual desire and emotional fulfilment. Tagore has made it clear at the very outset of the story by stating that "one is mostly maternal. The other is the lover" (Tagore 75). Sharmila is a traditional woman who is happy with her role as a housewife and she is so immersed in that role that she almost appears to be a motherly figure before her husband, Shashanka. She finds herself fruitful if she can give any service to her husband. Each and everything of her life with its desires, compassion, love and care centres around Shashanka. She takes the role of the softest women before her husband; she also becomes the dangerous protecting woman when it comes to shield her husband- from emotional turmoil, physical ailment or external harm. Moreover, "Sharmila was as vigorously engaged in upholding her husband's honour in the outside world as she was tenderly protective of him at home" (Tagore 77).

On the other hand, Urmimala is beautiful, simple, alluring and lively. She is a progressive woman who is ready to share any stage with a man:

If she was interested in science, she was no less-possibly more- interested in literature. She was very keen on watching football matches but didn't ignore the cinema. When an authority on physics came to lecture at presidency College, she was present there too (Tagore 94).

Tagore characterizes her with sharp contrast with Nirod, the family physician and her expected suitor. Nirod represents reason, logic and all the bookish knowledge of the world. For Nirod, “Idiots earn success, but the deserving earn glory” (Tagore 91). He was expert in discussion but novice in heartily conversation. He possessed a youth without dazzle. On the other hand, the ‘extremely good humoured’ Shashanka shares a positive bond with her. Her stay at Shashanka’s home, during Sharmila’s ailment and in absence of Nirod, creates a space for them to explore emotional melting. Shashanka’s boredom aspiring to build a business empire gets a spicy kick in her presence. They are drawn to each other naturally and organically. Sharmila was ignorant of this emotional development because she thought Shashanka is busy with his enormous endeavours- “she gloried in Shashanka’s glory (Tagore 105)”.

Vandana Siva in her book *Staying Alive* wonderfully explains the relationship between Nature and Women with the help of Indian cosmology. Everything on earth survives on the dialectic principle of creation and destruction. The energy (*Shakti*) is at the root of this tension which runs this act of creation and destruction. The existence survives on this primordial energy which is nothing but the manifestation of Nature: *Prakriti* as “both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of *Shakti*, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (*Purusha*), *Prakriti* creates the world” (Siva 37). Nature or *Prakriti* creates, assimilates and enhance the act of production. Without *Shakti*, *Shiva* who is the primordial force of creation and destruction- is a powerless aspect. The creative force and the creative world are not separate from each other. *Prakriti* or Nature is the primordial vastness. All the forms of nature- animals, plants, insects- are the children of that Great Mother who is created from ‘creative play of her thought’ (Shiva 38). Thus, Nature is the manifestation of the feminine principle which is connected with creativity, productivity and sacrifice. Thus, Women and Nature are connected with a pure thread of creativity and sanctity. For the ecofeminists, Nature and Women are equal and they are the expression of the same entity. Sharmila and Urmimala bear with them two aspects of the Nature. Sharmila is like the season of monsoon- “she lets her gifts flow freely from the sky; bestows water, nurtures corps, quells the heat, dispels aridity, fulfils all wanting (Tagore 75)”. On the other hand, Urmimala is the season of spring: “her mysterious run deep, her magic is bewitching. Her vivacity makes the blood tingle, entering the very core of one’s being and bringing the expectant body to life, like the melody that awakens the silent veena” (Tagore 75). Tagore’s mastery is evident in his articulation of these female principles. Embodied in the figure of these two sisters the feminine principle goes strongly against the contemporary reductionist science. The science and technology project itself as universal and beneficial to all. But in reality, this developmental thought, which is ontologically a byproduct of Western male dominated endeavour, is at the root cause for the violence against woman and nature. Nirod, the doctor, is the epitome of this thought. He is a great man with all his medical and rational knowledge. But what he lacks is naturalness of a human being. He represents the reductionist scientific temperament. Hence, he can lecture on grave philosophical and theoretical concept; but he lacks the charm of common communication. He holds his reason and logic before what he desires. He thinks sentimentality is not for him. He cannot say a flattering word to Urmimala because those are ‘manufactured endearments. Though she deserves a little praise for herself she never got that from Nirod. He rather tries to trim Urmimala’s natural instinct of expressiveness, domineering personality and spontaneous emotional overflow which invite criticism from the ambassadors of patriarchy. Shashanka also does the same with Sharmila. He violates and decimates Sharmila’s emotion for Urmi. He even justifies his act of emotional violence thinking that Sharmila would be happy to bring him and

Urmi together as Sharmila is an extraordinarily motherly figure. Thus, he wants the shed of the tree of Sharmila; but he purposefully does not want to take any responsibility and accountability for Sharmila. Thus, Sharmila and Urmimala resemble two different entities- one is the good mother and another is the bad mother. Catherine M. Roach criticises these categorizations suggests that “this connection means that response to nature is necessarily shaped by the varieties of human identity and experience, by what it means to be human (Roach 6).

Conclusion:

Tagore has laid bare an extraordinary importance in the interconnectedness between Women and Nature. This is very much evident in the naming of these three texts with their characters. “Malancha” which literary means an harbour is not just an abstract idea. It represents the home which is a necessity for each of us. Neeraja means natural vitality, Aditya represents the sun and Sarala stands for simplicity. “Nastaneer” means a broken nest built organically by birds. But here Bhupati’s nest is broken because he fails to sustain a healthy relationship with his wife Charulata, the creeper the fundamental elements of a nest. In “Dui Bon”, the two sisters also represent feminine selves. Sharmila symbolizes shyness and Urmimala stands for a series of waves and both are representatives of Nature. The women characters discussed above are unique in their assertion of identities and clarification of thought-process. But what is common is their closeness with nature. Nature with all its variety of abundance is embedded in different characters. Tagore has dextrously explored and explained this kinship between Nature and Women.

References

- Chakravarty, Chandrava and Sneha Kar Chaudhury, editors. *Tagore’s Ideas of the New Woman: The Making and Unmaking of Female Subjectivity*. Sage Publications, 2017. Print.
- Gaard, Greta. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Temple University Press, 1993. Print.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl, Harold Fromm, editor. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. The University of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
- Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, 2014. Print.
- Nayar, P.K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Pearson, 2010. Print.
- Roach, Catherine M. *Mother/ Nature: Popular culture and Environmental Ethics*. Indiana University Press, 2003. Print.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Kali for Women, 1988. Print.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Three Women*. Translated by Arunava Sinha. Penguin Books, 2016.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own*. The Hogarth Press, 1992.

Wounded earth; Wounded bodies: Submerged Knowledge and Feminist Resistance in Oceanic Spaces

Catharinal Silvia M

Assistant Professor

Postgraduate Department of English

Women's Christian College, Chennai.

Mail id: catharinalsilvia@gmail.com | Orcid - [0009-0001-2543-1902](https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2543-1902)

Abstract

This paper examines the convergence of ecofeminist thought and the Blue Humanities to explore how women's bodies and marine environments are not only commodified under patriarchal and capitalist systems but also subjected to epistemic erasure and environmental dispossession. Drawing on the work of Françoise d'Eaubonne, Vandana Shiva, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and others, it investigates how colonial and extractivist regimes suppress the knowledge systems and lived experiences of coastal women and marginalized communities, treating both water and the female body as mute, extractable entities. Through literary analysis, environmental case studies, and cultural critique, the paper demonstrates that the marginalization of embodied and localized knowledges sustains broader ecological and gendered injustices. It ultimately argues that a fused ecofeminist and oceanic framework offers not only critique but a mode of resistance recovering submerged epistemologies and reframing both marine and female bodies as sites of memory, agency, and ecological insight.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Blue Humanities, Epistemic Erasure, Marine Ecology, Colonial Extractivism, Gendered Environmental Injustice, Submerged Knowledge Systems*

Introduction

Voyager, chief of the pelagic world...
Toward dawn we shared with you
your hour of desolation,
the huge lingering passion
of your unearthly outcry,
as you swung your blind head
toward us and laboriously opened
a bloodshot, glistening eye,
in which we swam with terror and recognition. (Kunitz, *Wellfleet Whale*)

To begin with the whale is to begin with loss. Stanley Kunitz's elegiac whale, bleeding, stranded, and staring with a "bloodshot, glistening eye" invokes not just ecological grief, but a recognition of silenced suffering. The whale, like the ocean it comes from, and like women's bodies across

histories, embodies a deep symbolic presence; powerful and persistently ignored. These bodies are not merely exploited; they are spoken over, reclassified as inert, and rendered epistemically illegible in systems that prioritize conquest and control. Both marine environments and feminized bodies have long been positioned as mysteries to be mapped, penetrated, or subdued thus justifying their dispossession.

In recent decades, ecofeminism and the Blue Humanities have offered critical tools for interrogating the co-constitutive oppressions of ecological degradation and gendered violence. Yet, alone, each field leaves epistemological gaps. Ecofeminism, as first articulated by Françoise d'Eaubonne, links the domination of nature with the subjugation of women under capitalist-patriarchal structures. Ynestra King extends this connection by arguing that "eco-feminism is about connectedness and wholeness... [and] the devastation of the earth and her beings... is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies" (King 108). While potent, much ecofeminist analysis remains rooted in terrestrial metaphors, often overlooking oceanic spaces and fluid ontologies.

This gap is where the Blue Humanities enters. A growing field of inquiry, it foregrounds the ocean not as backdrop, but as a dynamic site of trauma, memory, and resistance. Scholars such as Elizabeth DeLoughrey have extended ecofeminist concerns into maritime critique, showing how oceans, like women's bodies, have been cast as spaces of conquest, extraction, and epistemic silence. DeLoughrey writes, "the ocean is now understood in terms of its agency, its anthropogenic pollution and acidity, and its interspecies ontologies," a shift that opens space for imagining what has been submerged both literally and metaphorically (DeLoughrey 34).

Similarly, Vandana Shiva's critiques emphasize that violence against nature and women often operates by silencing ecological knowledge. "These engineering and technological feats," she writes, "are part of the Baconian vision of substituting sacred rivers with inert, passive water resources" (Shiva 176). Shiva's concern is not only the loss of ecological health, but also the displacement of women's traditional ecological epistemologies, particularly in the Global South. "One does not readily slay a mother," she notes, but once nature is reclassified as dead matter, the violence becomes culturally sanctioned (Shiva 16). Shiva further explains,

This transformation of nature from a living, nurturing mother to inert, dead and manipulable matter was eminently suited to the exploitation imperative of growing capitalism. The nurturing earth image acted as a cultural constraint on exploitation of nature. 'One does not readily slay a mother, dig her entrails or mutilate her body.' But the mastery and domination images created by the Baconian programme and the scientific revolution removed all restraint and functioned as cultural sanctions for the denudation of nature. (Shiva, *Staying Alive* 16).

This paper brings ecofeminist and Blue Humanities frameworks into dialogue to examine how oceanic environments and feminized bodies are not only materially extracted, but discursively erased their voices, knowledge, and rhythms overwritten by capitalist and colonial epistemologies. From myths that associate femininity with oceanic danger to development policies that erase fisherwomen's expertise, the stakes of this convergence are epistemic as much as ecological. Only by reading the ocean and the body together: as archives of memory, resistance, and relational knowledge can we imagine sustainable alternatives to systems built on conquest.

Ultimately, this paper argues that a blue ecofeminist framework is essential not simply for confronting exploitation, but for recovering what has been epistemically drowned: the submerged wisdom, histories, and agencies of both water and women.

Naming and Knowing

The Enlightenment era marked a pivotal shift in how nature and women were perceived and treated. Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature*, elucidates how the mechanistic worldview of modern science transformed the Earth from a nurturing mother into a machine, thereby justifying its exploitation. She explains that this shift in worldview enabled the legitimization of nature's exploitation, encouraged unchecked economic growth, and established a social system that placed women in a subordinate position.

This transformation wasn't merely metaphorical. Francis Bacon, a key figure in the Scientific Revolution, employed female metaphors to describe the subjugation of nature, asserting that nature must be bound into service and made a slave to human ends. Such language reflects a broader epistemic framework that sought to dominate and control both women and the natural world. Merchant further argues that the shift from an organic to a mechanistic worldview was instrumental in facilitating this domination. Prior to the Scientific Revolution, nature was perceived as a living, nurturing force, often associated with the feminine principle; Mother Earth which sustained life and required respect. However, with the rise of mechanistic science and capitalism, nature came to be seen as an inanimate machine, a resource to be dissected, controlled, and exploited for human gain.

This mechanistic view not only justified the exploitation of nature but also reinforced patriarchal structures that subordinated women. The same ideological framework that viewed nature as inert and passive extended to women, reducing them to reproductive and domestic roles. Ecofeminists argue that the exploitation of nature under capitalist systems is intrinsically linked to the oppression of women. In *The Second Sex*, French feminist Simone de Beauvoir articulates this connection, observing that

Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings nature inspires in man. He exploits her; and she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will; Nature is a vein gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and he is the supreme reality; she is contingency and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself (de Beauvoir 144).

While patriarchal systems often exercised dominance without explicit intent, the categorization of the environment facilitated its exploitation. The very act of naming and classifying played a pivotal role in this process. Enlightenment thinkers, by framing nature and women as passive and subordinate, constructed a hierarchical worldview that positioned white, European men at the top. This form of epistemic violence not only legitimized exploitation but also erased alternative modes of knowledge and existence especially those grounded in Indigenous worldviews and matriarchal traditions.

The legacy of this shift continues to influence contemporary environmental and gender discourses. Recognizing the intertwined histories of epistemic erasure and environmental dispossession is essential for developing more equitable and sustainable frameworks. By

challenging the dominant narratives that have historically silenced both women and nature, we can begin to reconstruct a worldview that values interconnectedness, reciprocity, and respect for all forms of life.

Gendered Cartographies

The act of mapping and naming has historically functioned as a tool of domination. Colonial cartography often depicted uncharted territories as *terra nullius*, or nobody's land, suggesting that these spaces lacked human presence, knowledge systems, or sovereign claims, and were therefore available for occupation. This rhetorical erasure not only legitimized colonial expansion but also constituted a broader form of epistemological violence that extended to bodies, particularly feminized bodies, which were similarly rendered mute, empty, and undefined. Both landscapes and bodies were reinscribed within imperial grammar and rewritten to reflect the desires of conquest.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray critiques the masculinist construction of women as defined by lack and absence. "The female sex has been traditionally defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the male," she asserts (Irigaray 796). Just as the "undiscovered" land is framed in colonial rhetoric as inert and available, so too is the female body represented as a passive terrain awaiting inscription by the masculine gaze. This spatial logic of conquest, penetration, and control is central to both patriarchal and imperial epistemologies.

Indeed, the metaphorical and literal mapping of women and oceans share common tropes: vastness, mystery, danger, and seduction. The feminization of the sea has long been a feature of Western thought and literature. From *Homer's Odyssey* to maritime exploration narratives, the ocean is both feared and desired, often portrayed as an untamable feminine force. In Greek mythology, sea deities such as sirens lure sailors to their doom with enchanting voices, embodying both erotic allure and mortal peril. During the Age of Exploration, European travelogues frequently referred to the ocean as a capricious mistress, unpredictable and wild, yet necessary to be conquered for imperial glory. Melville's *Moby-Dick* invokes the ocean's "mystical and unfathomable" nature, linking it to a feminine sublime that resists rational control. Similarly, Hélène Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, observes how Western discourse positions women as "the dark continent," a Freud-derived metaphor that echoes colonial fantasies about Africa and other colonized geographies (Cixous 875). Such comparisons collapse geographic and bodily spaces into feminized "others," subjected to the same controlling impulses. The ocean, like the female body, becomes a site of projection, fear, and desire; mapped, mythologized, and mastered within patriarchal and imperial frameworks.

As Elizabeth DeLoughrey explains in *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, oceans are often made legible through imperial and masculinist lenses that disregard Indigenous and matrilineal maritime epistemologies. She contends that the sea has traditionally been viewed not as a space of interconnected knowledge and cultural memory, but rather as an empty expanse, one that acquires significance only through imperial practices of traversal and designation. Framed as a "Blue Revolution," the Law of the Sea continues to reshape how we understand spatial and temporal boundaries, fostering an ongoing and vital conversation around ocean governance. As Hau'ofa suggests, it provides a vision of "oceanic identity [as it] transcend[s] insularity," yet this vision cannot be disentangled from terrestrial territorial claims.

While the sea is often celebrated as “our pathway to each other and to everyone else,” the frequent use of feminine fluidity as a metaphor can obscure the historical and ongoing violence associated with maritime crossings, including military surveillance of oceanic spaces. A fuller understanding of the ocean’s meaning must therefore reckon with its violences as well as its possibilities, recognizing that “the sea is our most powerful metaphor, the ocean is in us” (Hau’ofa 148). This mirrors how both the ocean and women’s bodies have been denied subjectivity until spoken for or through by patriarchal systems.

Furthermore, Enlightenment science, with its obsessive taxonomizing and mapping impulses, extended its reach into both geographic and bodily terrains. As the natural world was subjected to Linnaean classification and Baconian experimentation, so too were women subjected to gynecological scrutiny and regulation, increasingly treated as anatomical puzzles to be solved rather than holistic beings. The Cartesian separation of mind and body further entrenched this logic, as rationality became equated with masculinity, and corporeality with all its “messiness” with the feminine. As Silvia Federici notes in *Caliban and the Witch*, the rise of modernity and capitalism depended on the “disciplining” of women’s reproductive labor and the regulation of their bodies (Federici 94). This logic persists in contemporary global development practices, particularly in coastal and oceanic contexts. Policies that frame oceans as “blue economies” often erase the labor and ecological knowledge of coastal women. For example, in India, fisherwomen play a crucial role in post-harvest activities, yet government policies fail to prioritize their needs. As one study notes, “India’s draft blue economy policy hardly mentions women’s employment, despite them forming nearly half of the marine fisheries workforce” (Kowshik, 2025). These women, who sustain fishing communities through foraging, net-mending, and tidal knowledge, are often pushed into insecure informal labor when coastal commons are enclosed or access is restricted. A fisherwoman interviewed in Tamil Nadu remarked, “We work in the sun all day drying fish, but they [authorities] never count us when talking about fisheries development” (UN Women, 2020).

Similarly, research in the Indian Ocean Rim reveals that “despite their contributions, women are largely invisible in policy and governance frameworks” (UN Women, 2020). These technocratic, male-dominated models of marine governance reflect a broader trend. Capitalist globalization frequently disguises structures of domination inherited from colonial systems by presenting them as forms of neoliberal progress and empowerment. As a 2021 policy paper argues, “blue growth is often promoted as inclusive and sustainable, yet its implementation risks reproducing existing gendered power structures” (Bennett et al., 2021).

This process continues to sideline and silence communities that have long been excluded from dominant narratives, rendering their experiences and knowledge systems invisible within global discourse. Without intentional inclusion and recognition, the “blue economy” risks becoming a euphemism for blue injustice.

Gendered cartographies reflect more than metaphorical parallels; they reveal deep structural alignments between how bodies and territories are known, regulated, and erased. Feminist and decolonial critiques compel us to reimagine these maps not as fixed representations of truth, but as ideological instruments of power. To redraw these maps is to reclaim space, voice, and agency for both women and the oceanic worlds they are so often metaphorically and materially entwined with.

Oceanic Memory and Submerged Knowledge

Beyond their physical vastness, oceans harbor layered histories and intergenerational memories that have long been submerged beneath dominant historical narratives. Oceans are not blank spaces but archives, fluid and often unreadable within the frameworks of terrestrial historiography. Elizabeth DeLoughrey introduces the notion of “submarine memory” to capture these submerged histories, particularly the transoceanic experiences of colonialism, slavery, diaspora, and resistance. She argues that “the ocean is now understood in terms of its agency, its anthropogenic pollution and acidity, and its interspecies ontologies all of which suggest that climate change is shaping new oceanic imaginaries” (DeLoughrey 34). This shift allows us to think of the ocean not as an inert backdrop but as an active participant in historical and ecological processes.

The Middle Passage, one of the most traumatic events in the transatlantic slave trade is a stark example of what the ocean conceals. Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic*, describes the Atlantic as a “counterculture of modernity,” where identities and histories were forged in movement, violence, and resistance (Gilroy 1993, p. 16). The ocean in this context becomes both grave and womb: a space of death and origin. Yet mainstream historical narratives have largely despatialized these watery routes, focusing on land-based empires while overlooking the fluid geographies of pain and survival inscribed in the sea. To engage with submarine memory, then, is to re-read the ocean as a haunted, historical space saturated with silenced voices and fractured genealogies.

Parallel to this erasure is the marginalization of women's ecological knowledge, especially in coastal and Indigenous communities where women have traditionally served as vital custodians of marine and environmental wisdom. Vandana Shiva critiques the epistemic violence of development paradigms that reduce women's work and knowledge to invisible labor. In *Staying Alive*, she observes that “[these] engineering and technological feats are part of the Baconian vision of substituting sacred rivers with inert, passive water resources,” thereby displacing traditional ecological stewardship often held by women (Shiva 176). The violence here is not merely environmental but epistemological; it obliterates modes of knowing that are relational, embodied, and often gendered.

In many coastal societies, women possess intimate knowledge of tidal patterns, fish migration, and sustainable harvesting practices. This ecological literacy, developed over generations, is often transmitted orally and through practice forms of knowledge not easily codified or validated by scientific institutions. As such, it is frequently dismissed as anecdotal or folkloric. Yet scholars such as Barbara Neis and Marilyn Porter have documented how women's roles in fisheries, particularly in Atlantic Canada and Southeast Asia, are central to both ecological balance and community resilience. Despite this, global fisheries policies often fail to account for these gendered contributions, reflecting what Donna Haraway calls “the god trick” the illusion of neutral, objective knowledge that is in fact deeply situated and exclusionary (*Situated Knowledges*, 1988, p. 581).

Moreover, these submerged knowledges are not merely passive remnants of the past; they are active sites of resistance. As literary texts and oral histories increasingly reclaim oceanic and gendered archives, we witness a resurgence of counter-memories that defy dominant paradigms. For example, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* centers the brackish Sundarbans as a

site of both ecological precarity and epistemic resistance, wherein the protagonist Piya, a diasporic cetologist, must reconcile Western scientific methods with Indigenous knowledge systems carried by local boatmen like Fokir. The novel dramatizes the tension and possibility of epistemic cohabitation between empirical and embodied ways of knowing the sea.

Similarly, Caribbean and Pacific Island literatures reclaim maritime memory through myth, folklore, and oral storytelling. In her work on Pacific epistemologies, Teresia Teaiwa reminds us that the ocean is not only a route but also a root place of belonging, genealogy, and spiritual significance. "We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood," she writes, asserting a profound ontological connection between human bodies and marine ecologies (Teaiwa 1994).

These alternative epistemologies often dismissed or overlooked by patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist frameworks represent what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls "epistemologies of the South." They invite us to engage with knowledge systems that arise from lived experience, ancestral memory, and ecological reciprocity, rather than abstraction and control.

By attending to submarine memory and submerged ecological knowledge, we challenge the epistemic hierarchies that have historically privileged land over sea, and reason over relationality. A blue ecofeminist praxis thus seeks not only to recover these erased histories but to foreground them as vital for imagining just ecological futures ones that honor the voices of water, women, and the worlds they sustain.

Resistance in Representation

Despite systemic erasures and centuries of epistemic domination, both women and oceans have found persistent avenues of resistance particularly through literature, mythology, oral traditions, and cultural production. These forms of representation challenge dominant frameworks by re-centering relational, embodied, and ecological modes of knowledge that resist commodification and conquest.

Hélène Cixous, in her seminal essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, argues for *écriture féminine*, a form of writing that emerges from the female body and experience. She contends that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing... Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history by her own movement" (Cixous 1976, p. 875). For Cixous, the act of writing becomes a corporeal, political gesture, one that can dismantle patriarchal language and logic from within. When women write their bodies, they not only reclaim their voice but disrupt the phallogocentric ordering of knowledge itself.

This idea resonates with the sea as a metaphor and medium of resistance. Like the female body, the ocean in literature often signifies the unknowable, the excessive, the fluid qualities that refuse containment within the masculine structures of rationality and conquest. It is in this context that the ocean becomes a site not of absence but of potentiality, where submerged voices resurface in insurgent forms.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* exemplifies this convergence of gender, ecology, and resistance. The protagonist Piya Roy, a diasporic marine biologist of Bengali origin but raised in the United States, undertakes a scientific exploration of the Sundarbans. Her engagement with

the riverine ecosystem is initially framed through empirical observation. However, her growing alliance with Fokir, a local fisherman with no formal education, challenges her epistemological stance. Piya begins to recognize the value of embodied, vernacular knowledge that Fokir possesses, rooted in lived experience and intuitive understanding of the tide country (Ghosh 2004, pp. 194–198). The novel subtly critiques the authority of Western science and foregrounds the possibility of a hybrid epistemology, one that values both scientific inquiry and indigenous wisdom.

Moreover, Ghosh's portrayal of the mangrove landscape resists aestheticization and instead emphasizes the violence of development, displacement, and ecological disregard. The terrain is unstable, dangerous, and resistant to mapping qualities that mirror the unruly power of both the feminine and the marine. Oceanic and coastal spaces can be seen as powerful symbols that reflect the shifting dynamics of postcolonial identity, the movements and dislocations of diaspora, and the enduring strength of feminist resistance. In *The Hungry Tide*, the very structure of the tide becomes an allegory for non-linear, cyclical knowledge disrupting the teleological narratives of progress and conquest.

Other literary works similarly enact resistance by reclaiming silenced or submerged narratives. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* weaves myth and memoir to recover Chinese feminine figures like Fa Mu Lan, presenting them not as passive heroines but as warriors whose agency defies patriarchal interpretation. Similarly, in *Salt* by Nayyirah Waheed, the ocean recurs as a space of mourning, memory, and ancestral return: "you broke the ocean in / half to be here. / Only to meet nothing that wants you" (Waheed 2013). Waheed's minimalist poetry encapsulates the trauma of migration and diaspora through the image of the broken ocean, an act of resistance that reclaims oceanic space as both personal and political.

These representations are not merely literary tropes but are themselves epistemological interventions. They allow for the surfacing of submerged histories, the articulation of feminine agencies, and the decolonization of ecological and gendered narratives. In this sense, literature becomes not only a mirror but also a tool – a means of resistance against dominant cartographies of knowledge and power.

As Stacy Alaimo argues in *Bodily Natures*, "the materiality of the body and the environment are deeply entangled in feminist science studies, offering an important framework for ecological ethics" (Alaimo 2010, p. 3). This entanglement reveals how representations of women and the ocean are never neutral; they are sites of contestation, memory, and future-making. Through literature, film, and theory, new vocabulary and imaginaries emerge ones that prioritize care, relationality, and resistance to extractive paradigms.

In reclaiming the ocean and the body as interlinked domains of experience and expression, these cultural texts offer an alternative cartography: one drawn not by empire or capital, but by interdependence, fluidity, and memory. Resistance, then, is not always overt; it often takes the form of storytelling, myth-making, and poetic invocation, subtle yet radical gestures that restore dignity to what has been drowned.

Conclusion: Toward a Confluence of Epistemologies

The intertwined histories of epistemic erasure and environmental dispossession reveal not only a pattern of domination, but also the structural scaffolding of modernity itself. To name, map, and exploit be it a body or a coastline is to assert a particular kind of knowledge as universal. As this paper has argued, both ecofeminist and Blue Humanities frameworks expose how women and oceans have been rendered as inert, passive, and knowable only through the lens of patriarchal and colonial logics. Yet within this erasure lies the potential for resistance, resurgence, and reimagination.

Ecofeminism, with its insistence on relationality, embodiment, and interdependence, offers crucial tools for resisting anthropocentric and masculinist paradigms that reduce both women and nature to mere resources. When expanded through a Blue Humanities lens, this critique extends into the oceanic realm, a space often neglected in land-centric feminist and environmental theories. The ocean is far from being a void; it is layered with meaning, memory, and complex material interconnections. Much like the human body, it holds beneath its surface a dense archive of stories marked by suffering, defiance, and inherited knowledge passed down through generations.

Bringing these epistemologies into dialogue uncovers submerged archives of what has been termed the “residence time” of violence within the ocean, the notion that water retains the memory of trauma long after it has occurred, even when dominant historical narratives choose to forget. In this way, the ocean functions as both medium and witness, holding within it the traces of dispossession, migration, and ecological rupture. Similarly, women’s knowledge systems particularly those grounded in Indigenous, coastal, and agrarian lifeways have long been subjected to systematic erasure through the discourses of modern development, capitalist expansion, and technoscience. These are not parallel processes of marginalization, but deeply intertwined forms of epistemic violence.

The ocean and the feminized body are both treated as extractable resources; mapped, named, and instrumentalized for the benefit of patriarchal and imperial structures. Their rhythms and wisdom are overwritten by logic of productivity and control. The silencing of embodied, place-based knowledge reflects a broader pattern wherein colonial modernity has sought to universalize particular ways of knowing while rendering others illegible. This convergence of erasures is not accidental; it is co-constitutive. The suppression of maritime memory and the marginalization of ecofeminist epistemologies arise from the same impulse: to sever relationality, to impose mastery, and to desacralize the very systems that sustain life.

Recognizing these entangled histories demands a shift in both discourse and practice—a move toward revaluing submerged knowledges and reimagining the ocean not as a frontier to be conquered, but as a living archive of resistance and relationality. Only by centering those voices that have been historically silenced those of coastal women, Indigenous seafarers, and oceanic ancestors can we begin to dismantle the imperial grammars that continue to shape our understanding of the sea and the body alike.

This confluence of ecofeminist and oceanic thought necessitates not just intellectual synthesis but also ethical realignment. If domination operates by naming and silencing, then resistance must emerge through practices of listening, remembering, and relational knowing. As Stacy

Alaimo suggests, "trans-corporeality," the intermeshing of human and nonhuman bodies, offers a framework for ethical engagement that is materially grounded and environmentally just (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, p. 2).

Ultimately, a blue ecofeminist framework does more than analyzing the past, it gestures toward the future. It invites scholars, policymakers, and communities to reimagine epistemology itself: not as a conquest of knowledge, but as a collaboration with the living world. To center oceanic and feminine epistemologies is to acknowledge what has been drowned, to hear what has been silenced, and to recover what may yet guide us toward a more just and sustainable world.

References

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Bacon, Francis. *Novum Organum*. 1620. *The Works of Francis Bacon*, edited by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, vol. 4, Longmans, 1857.
- Barnett, Tricia. "Tourism and Sexual Exploitation." *Tourism Concern*, 2008, pp. 60–75.
- Bennett, Nathan J., et al. "Blue Growth and Blue Justice: Ten Risks and Solutions for the Ocean Economy." *Marine Policy*, 2021. ResearchGate, www.researchgate.net/publication/348279481_Blue_growth_and_blue_justice_Ten_risks_and_solutions_for_the_ocean_economy. Accessed 20 June 2025.
- Carson, Rachel. *The Sea Around Us*. Oxford UP, 1951.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93.
- d'Eaubonne, Françoise. *Feminism or Death*. Translated ed., Verso, 2022.
- . *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. Éditions Pierre Horay, 1974.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage, 1973.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. U of Hawai'i P, 2007.
- . "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2017, pp. 32–44.
- Gaard, Greta. "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2011, pp. 26–53.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. HarperCollins, 2004.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1993.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–99.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Cornell UP, 1985.
- Martin, Emily. *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Beacon Press, 1987.
- Mentz, Steve. *Ocean*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.
- . *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719*. U of Minnesota P, 2015.
- . "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature." *Literature Compass*, vol. 6, no. 5, 2009, pp. 997–1013.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. HarperOne, 1980.
- . *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. Routledge, 1996.
- Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, 1993.
- Neumayer, Eric, and Thomas Plümper. "The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 97, no. 3, 2007, pp. 551–66.
- Salleh, Ariel. *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*. Zed Books, 1997.
- . "Climate Strategy: Making the Choice between Ecological Modernisation or Living Well." *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, no. 66, 2010, pp. 124–49.
- See, Lisa. *The Island of Sea Women*. Scribner, 2019.

- Shiva, Vandana. *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. South End Press, 2005.
- . *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, 1988.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.
- Smith, Zadie. *Swing Time*. Penguin Press, 2016.
- UN Women. *Women's Economic Empowerment in Fisheries in the Blue Economy of the Indian Ocean Rim: A Baseline Report*. UN Women, 2020, www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/10/womens-economic-empowerment-in-the-indian-ocean-rim. Accessed 20 June 2025.
- United Nations Development Programme. *Gender Equality in Climate Action*. UNDP, 2021, www.undp.org. Accessed 20 June 2025.
- Vora, Kalindi. *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor*. U of Minnesota P, 2015.
- Wang, Xiaoyue. "Gender, Displacement, and Environmental Injustice in the Pearl River Delta." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2018, pp. 210–26.
- WECAN International. *Women Speak: Stories, Case Studies and Solutions from the Frontlines of Climate Change*. WECAN, 2021.
- Kowshik, P. "India's Fisherwomen Getting Left Behind by Blue Economy Policies." *Mongabay India*, 2025, <https://news.mongabay.com/short-article/2025/02/indias-fisherwomen-getting-left-behind-by-blue-economy-policies/>. Accessed 20 June 2025.

Decoding the Unthinkable: Cultural Dynamics and Mythical Representations of Nature in Verrier Elwin's Select Tribal Folklores

Dr Manish Prasad

Assistant Professor

Department of English, St. Xavier's University Kolkata.

Mail id: drmanish.asansol@gmail.com | Orcid: [0009-0006-4034-6091](https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4034-6091)

Keywords: *Climate, Verrier Elwin, Myth, Nature, Tribal Folklore*

Abstract

The present paper aims to elucidate the representation of nature and climate, as well as the cultural and mythical dynamics, concerning verrier Elvin's tribal folklore. In a personal attempt to understand such folklore in the present context, it is established that they are competent in suggesting the 'unthinkable' as Amitav Ghosh uses this meticulous term in his book the great derangement: climate change and the unthinkable (2016). A call for the preservation of these tribal myths and folklore is implied in the paper. It is a matter of great fortune that in folk literature the presence of such tales as documented by verrier Elwin would ensure for us a culture of long-lasting and sustainable environment on this beautiful bluish-green planet.

Introduction

How pertinent is TRIBAL FOLKLORE in the context of climate change could be vividly elaborated by an instance - the folklore concerning the MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA which was published in 1949. The present tribal folklore is a DHULIA myth from Karondi, Madhya Pradesh that deals with trees: The wife of Mirchamal Dano, Buchki Rakasin, was a strange woman. She never bore a child; she did not even have a monthly period. The Dano got her a lot of medicine and called many medicine men, but it was no use. One day Dano went to visit his father-in-law and on his way home picked up a dead crab. He gave it to his wife and said, 'Your father has sent you this for supper.' Buchki roasted and ate it, and that very night she began to menstruate. In a week she washed her head; that night lay with her husband and conceived. And in due time a child was born. He was Bakrenda Dano. Mirchamal Dano took the placenta and cord to the Tehardongri jungle and there made a peacock trap with it. The next day there were three peacocks caught in the trap. But when the Dano went to see what had happened the following morning, he found that the trap had turned into a camel's creeper; the cord was the stem, and the placenta had turned into great broad leaves. (Elvin, 2009) Verrier Elwin's MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA was written in the days when anthropology was still sourced in folklore and literature. There are various tribal folklores written by Elwin concerning the Natural World such as the metals and minerals; grass, flowers, trees; arthropods; reptiles; fish; birds; and mammals.

At the very beginning of this paper one needs to note that there is an unmistakable defiance of realistic narration to be found in the tale; for the tribal folklores are most often fantastic stories. But in this tale, this defiance is not so much visible in the portrayal of human

characters as in the depiction of nature. Taking clues from the tribal myths creates a bond between the mother and nature. Buchki Rakasin is a mature woman seeking to perform her mother's duty by giving birth to her baby. This all happened because of eating a dead crab, whereas the very use of the placenta to make a peacock trap became a futile attempt on the part of Mirchamal Dano. Thus, nature is always there to provide plenty, but one has to take care of nature as well. One of the key essences of this particular representation is that human beings are the masters of nature as well as the dependent. The tribal folklores thus consider the utter neglect of nature on the part of human beings as a sinful act. It is a well-known fact that to be a mother is observed chiefly as the greatest blessing for human wish-fulfillment. But the tale confirms strongly, that no fulfillment of human wish be allowed at the cost of the non-humans on earth.

Here one may note that tribal folklores are not given their due acclaim as literature-proper by any literary historian of reputation. Scholars in the discipline of postcolonial studies restate that the colonialists' hypothesis was to consider age-old customs, beliefs, rituals, and also folklores related to tribal myths as instances of something very primeval in the traditions of the colonized, probably best appropriate for ethnographic more willingly than literary studies. The nationalist literary historians were concerned with creating a magnificent past that could rationalize their actual apprehension of modern fictitious creations in the native languages. Neither the literary and traditional pasts nor the resultant present of the erstwhile colonized country are to be treated by them as mediocre to the colonialists. Although the current period of the nation is more vital than the past, the precedent in nationalists' thoughts is rather a way to legitimize their present which they consider either superior or at least equal to the present of their erstwhile rulers. On the other hand, the Marxists focused mainly on the struggle of ordinary human beings in literature considering that they were more progressive than their nationalist equivalence. They accepted the culture and worldview of the past docile to their archetypal historical-materialist concern. Probably, the tribal folklore for them is part of agrarian and feudalistic socio-economic formation not fit at all for the savour of the industrialized contemporary society. In this context, an Indian Scholar Dr Santanu Banerjee opines that as a result of this conflict between the narratives and the literary minds, there has been a downgrading to the margin, this very imperative corpus of narratives which is most often concerned with sustainable relation between the human and the natural world. (Banerjee 43)

The present paper tries to explicate the climate crisis along with cultural and mythical dynamics with reference to Verrier Elwin's tribal folklore. In a personal attempt to understand such folklore in the present context, it is established that they are competent in suggesting the 'unthinkable' as Amitav Ghosh uses this meticulous term in his book *THE GREAT DERANGEMENT: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE UNTHINKABLE* (2016). A call for the preservation of these tribal myths and folklore is implied in the paper. It is a matter of great fortune that in Folk literature the presence of such tales as documented by Verrier Elwin would ensure for us a culture of long-lasting and sustainable environment on this beautiful bluish-green planet.

Argument I

Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) who often calls himself a 'self-made anthropologist' (Elwin, 1964), was a public intellectual-cum-reformer of his era. He was an ethically grounded and committed

institution-builder and an iconoclast, who translated the real voices of the tribal communities to both the academic and administrative discourses in post-independent India. Later, in January 1954 he took Indian citizenship. In the same year, he was appointed as the anthropological adviser to the Indian Government, with special administrative responsibility to work on the hill tribes of the northeast frontier. Moving to Shillong for this administrative project, he served for a decade as the leading campaigner of what he liked to call 'Mr. Nehru's gospel for the tribal communities inhabiting those regions. Elwin passed away in February 1964, a greatly esteemed public anthropologist in his adopted land. He received the most prestigious Padma Bhushan and numerous other medals and awards. Here, it is important to note that Elwin accepted the forests in India as his home and treated tribal communities of those habitats like his own kin. He occupied administrative and official positions pertaining to the growth of tribal communities dispersed in different parts of India and actively contributed to the process of nation-building. This can be understood from a significant instance of his life:

In 1932 Elwin came to a remote village of the Gond tribe where he and his friend Shamrao Hivale opened a school and a dispensary. The place had been recommended to him by the Anglican bishop of the region who added the information that of the last five Europeans to stay in that part of the country, four had died within a year. The work with tribesmen had been recommended by quite a different character. Elwin had decided that he had to be in closer contact with the people than he could be in the Order in Poona, and he consulted with one of the chiefs of the nationalist movement, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, about working among untouchables. Patel dissuaded him; it was for Hindus, he said, to make reparation to the untouchables, and many social workers and missionaries were doing so. He advised Elwin to work among tribal peoples. So he did for the rest of his life. To the religious drive to make reparation, Elwin soon added the urge to make tribal peoples known as real people, rather than tiresome savages, and their cultures as worthy of respect. This was the impetus from which flowed the rich stream of his ethnological writing (there was an earlier, not inconsiderable, output of theological and nationalist writings). As he became increasingly engrossed in his work with tribal villagers, he became less and less comfortable with his role as a clergyman and his formal faith. He came to "a dramatic conversion but in reverse." He renounced his membership in the Church of England both as a priest and as a communicant. Thenceforth he continued his work on his own, living at the simple village level of subsistence, putting most of the donations that came to him into the welfare work. (Mandelbaum 1965: 448-449)

Historian and writer, Ramachandra Guha sketches Verrier Elwin's multifarious presence in distinct arenas of public discourses in India: "This Englishman, missionary, Gandhian, social worker, activist, bureaucrat, and Indian was always and pre-eminently a writer, a man whose richness of personal experience illuminates an oeuvre of truly staggering proportions... Elwin worked in a whole range of genres. He wrote and published poetry, religious tracts, polemical pamphlets, novels, anthropological monographs, folklore collections, official reports and manuals, reviews, editorials, and travelogues. His last work, an autobiography, is generally regarded as the finest of all his books" (Guha 1998: 326).

Moreover, as mentioned above Verrier Elwin is known for his extensive study of tribal culture and community. Some of his main writings are focused on tribal life and identity. His approach and method of research have inspired many anthropologists and sociologists. Treated strictly as literary outputs, Elwin's two most famous books are *Leaves from the Jungle* (1936) and *The tribal world of Verrier Elwin* (1964). In both these works, the author's experience is foregrounded, and he becomes a character in the narratives. On the other hand, his ethnographic accounts, representing other cultures and contexts, carry a large store of information and description, presented with less coherence and scientific temper.

Between 1936 and 1939 the London publisher, John Murray, brought out each year a book of Elwin's. *Leaves* was followed by *Phulmat of the Hills* (1937), a novel about a tribal beauty stricken by leprosy and abandoned by her lover. The narrative is replete with poems, riddles, and stories from tribal folklore, interspersed with straight dialogue. This is an early 'ethnographic novel', its plot held together by the focus on the fate of its central character. (Guha, 328) It was, as Elwin notes, an aboriginal Purana, "a compendium of tribal stories about natural and human creation, rich in expressive imagery, with stars flashing and gods appearing and disappearing, tales of magic and wonder impossible to summarize or condense" (Guha 207-8). It contains 537 myths in story form dealing with 23 large topics, which are classed into four broad divisions:

1. Man and the Universe (the creation of the world and mankind; sun, moon, and stars; air and water; fire)
2. The Natural World (metals and minerals; grass, flowers and trees; arthropods; reptiles; fish; birds; mammals)
3. Human Life (the human body; the invention of implements; food; tobacco; mahua spirit; disease; psychopathology: the vagina dentata legend; the coming of death)
4. Human Institutions (some aspects of religion; witchcraft and magic; custom and taboo; festival, dance, and song)

Argument II

Amitav Ghosh, a renowned social anthropologist and literary figure, argues that contemporary literary imagination largely fails to acknowledge the intensity and extremity of today's climate events. Climate change, he notes, is similarly oversimplified in historical narratives. Adding to this oversight, the present political discourse tends to frame the climate crisis not as a matter of urgent collective responsibility, but rather as an individual moral or ethical choice. According to Ghosh, what the Anthropocene urgently calls for is a deep and sincere quest for alternative ways of human existence. This call is rooted in the growing realization that placing human beings at the center of all thought and action is no longer tenable. What Ghosh emphasizes throughout his work is closely tied to another issue – one he does not explore in detail, but which remains significant. Scholars in literary studies are well aware that numerous texts exist that re-imagine the human-nature relationship from perspectives that do not see nature as inert, passive, or merely a resource for human exploitation. In these alternative narratives, nature resists being silenced or dominated. Perhaps the most critical shortcoming lies in the literary world itself; these alternative voices are often excluded from mainstream literary canons. Despite sharing many formal features with established literary works – as in the case of the tribal folklores – such tales are frequently relegated to a liminal space between literature and non-literature. They are categorized as para-literature. G N Devy remarks in this context, "... the distinction between

literature and para-literature is not a distinction between two different fields, but a distinction within a single field as the one between totems and taboos within a single culture, or as between the self and the non-self within a single field of consciousness. The political dispossession of linguistic and social margin is the root cause of the creation of such categories.”(Devy 150)

Thus, to understand the regime of climatic effect more deeply with reference to desirable literary representation of the relation between the human and the non-human mythical world one may easily turn towards the wealth of tribal folklore. This relation can be understood more explicitly by following some tribal folklore as given in the divisions mentioned above:

1. Man and the Universe:

This is an Agaria myth from Kareli, Madhya Pradesh which deals with the creation of the world and mankind:

Bhagavan initially tried to create the world by laying a great lotus leaf on the face of the water, but the sun arose and withered that leaf with its heat. He then used the leaf to make the world, but when he tried to climb on it, it broke. Then, using the dirt of his breast, Bhagavan made a crow, and allowed it to suck his milk two-and-a-half times and said: ‘Now you’ve drunk my milk, you’ll never hunger nor thirst; you and I will search for the earth together.’ The crow flew further and further until it was so tired that it collapsed, and fell on the body of the great crab, Kakramal Kshattri. Kakramal also got involved in the search. He went underwater and woke up Nal Raja and Nal Rani, who had been sleeping for twelve years. Nal Raja said, ‘Nizam Raja has the earth, not me.’ But Kakramal squeezed Nal Raja’s throat till he vomited up the earth in little balls. The crow took the earth back to Bhagavan, who then made the world.

Five years later, Nanda Baiga and Nanda Baigin were born out of a crack in the ground. Nanda Baiga asked Mother Earth, ‘Mother, where is my fiddle?’ She replied, ‘Child you are you but a navel and a cord. What need is there of a fiddle?’

So said Mother Earth, but on that day Basin Kaniya (the Bamboo Maiden) was born, and Nanga Baiga went to cut the bamboo, in one breath, above and below. And he made his fiddle with his hair for strings, and played it, and Bhagavan’s seat shook with the sound. Then Bhagavan knew that the Baiga were born, and sent to call them. But his messenger found Nanga Baiga asleep in a winnowing fan. Mother Earth said, ‘Don’t go, my son,’ but Nanga Baiga took his fiddle and went. Bhagavan said to him, ‘Drive your nails into the earth to make it steady.’ But Nanga Baiga had no nails, so he cut off the little finger of his right hand and drove that into the ground. But Bhagavan was not satisfied. “I want strong pillars,’ he said.

So, Nanga Baiga called Agyasur and worshipped him, and Agyasur flamed up with great flames, and from the fire, an Agaria was born. Since the Agaria were born from fire, they never fear it and can beat the slag from the glowing iron with their hands. Then Agaria made twelve pillars of virgin iron and set them at four corners of the world, and it became steady, and Bhagavan sowed seeds everywhere. (Elwin, 2009)

2. The Natural World:

This is a Bhaina myth from Kenda Zamindari that deals with birds:

At first, birds could not fly; they used to walk or hop about. One day there was a Raja's wedding. Everyone was invited. Among the guests were a Baiga Guru and a Bhaina Gunia. They tried to prove who the greater magician was. First, the Baiga turned the guests into horses and asses. But the Bhaina turned some into water, and some into fire. When they had been turned back again into men, they came to the angry magicians and fell at their feet saying, 'Trouble us no more; we have seen what great power you have.'

The Baiga was going home. He saw many birds who had been invited to the wedding following him. Across the path he set birdlime. A bird was caught in it and began to weep. The Bhaina saw it and by his magic gave the bird wings. It flew into the air and escaped the Baiga, who was very angry. But since that day birds have been able to fly.

This is a Maria myth from Lakhopal, Bastar State that deals with mammals:

Long ago, before the Rebellion, when a man died, and the soul (jiwa) left the body, it was chased by the village dogs. In those days Maria could understand dog language, and the dogs would inform the people, barking. 'It has gone to Mahapurub; we watched it go.' Then the people would not bury the body. After a while, the soul would come down to earth to see what had happened to its body, and the dogs would bark, 'The soul has come; it has gone into the corpse.' The relatives would rush to the corpse and catch the soul and the dead would return to life. In this way, Mahapurub lost all the souls from his kingdom and he was very worried, for there were not enough people to live in the Upper World. Mahapurub said, 'From today when you bark no one will understand your language.'

Yet even now when a dog barks we know why; it sees a dead man's soul going about the world. Once Mahapurub had many souls in his kingdom, he turned them into Duma and these live in their old homes and help their descendants. Should the Duma get angry and leave the house, many disasters follow. (Elwin, 2009)

3. Human Life

This is a Kahar myth from Khuria, Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh that deals with the human body:

At first, men had nothing inside them; when they ate any food it went straight down – bhang – onto the ground. Sankasur and his wife Sirbhang called mankind to a feast, but they found that however much food they provided it went straight out of their bodies. Sankasur thought in his mind, 'What can we do about this?' He said to his wife, 'Give me the cord round your waist.' When he got it he wound it round and round and round and stuffed it into a man's belly. For a liver, he took the seven leaves of the karowan-sok tree. For kidneys, he got leaves of the Takla tree, and with its flowers he made teeth. With a stick, he made a hollow in the middle of the man's chest fixed the ribs in place and made the backbone. He put everything right; all men and

all animals were repaired – except the camel and the tortoise. To this day the tortoise has no liver or teeth, and the camel's back is not straight.

A man breathes because of the trembling of his liver.

Sirbhang took a bell in her hand and worshipped. But Sankasur troubled his wife. He took the bell from her and stopped her worshipping. But she made him open his mouth and tied the bell inside his throat. When the bell rings we say that a man is coughing.

This is a Chokh Agaria myth from Thanakar, Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh that deals with the birth of children:

From the head of the fish, Raghuman bloomed a lotus and bore two fruits. One day they broke open and from one came Mahadeo, and from the other Parvati. When Mahadeo grew up, he could not control his desire for his sister, so he turned his back on her and refused to see her face. But when Parvati became mature, she also was filled with desire and begged her brother to look at her. At last, he turned round and as he did so his seed sprang from him. Parvati caught it in her hand and held it in her clenched hand. Soon she was pregnant and after that children were born in the world. (Elwin, 2009)

4. Human Institutions:

This is a Muria myth from Palari, Bastar state that deals with the coming of death.

At the beginning of the world, men were very small; they plowed with rats and had to pull down brinjals as if they were getting mangoes. The ground was so soft that you could fall through it down to the Lower World. In those days men could remove the tops of their heads, examine them for lice, and put them back again.

When the first men died, their neighbours took them out to burial, but the corpses got up and came back and sat in front of their houses. When the neighbours came in, they asked, 'What sort of folk are you? We were just sleeping, and you carried us here and there. When we awoke we returned home.'

When Mahapurab heard of this, he wondered how he was to get lives for his kingdom. He thought, 'I must stick the tops of their heads on; then they will certainly die.' His ground floor mixed it with water into a paste and hid it. Then he went to see the first man and woman. 'What have you got inside your heads?' he asked. 'Do show me.' They removed the tops of their heads, and Mahapurab quickly smeared the edges with paste, muttering, 'Never come unstuck again.' When the first man and woman put the tops of their heads back, they stuck and soon afterward people began to die. (Elwin, 2009)

And now for fear that the dead might come back again to their houses, the neighbours burnt their bodies, and they never returned to life.

Thus, by following the given stories, one may understand the co-relation between the human and the natural world. It is always nature that comes to suffice with the human world, in this way the existence of the one depends on the other. The tribal myths play the role of a

needle that stitches the two worlds together. However, because of the climate crisis in the present period, which has taken its course because of human self-interests and scientific venture, the relationship between the two worlds – the human and the natural – is in crisis. Moreover, Elwin never tried to represent tribal cultures only in terms of religion and ritual-- a reductionist viewpoint, which was characteristic of many of his counterparts. On the contrary, his writings exhibited an uncommon interest in representing the material culture of tribal life. This includes a detailed description of clothing, housing, utensils, agricultural tools, food materials and cuisine, hunting and fishing implements, and so on. It is important to note that it was Verrier Elwin who made women's lives visible for the first time in Indian anthropology, by studying the themes of clothing, food, and sexuality. Along with the focus on women and nature, Elwin also explored the topics of crime, disease, and art, all hitherto ignored subjects of research in Indian anthropology (Elwin, 1964; Guha 1994).

Elwin's effort to document tribal communities is based on a conceptual category used by the colonial government to classify what they considered "the primitive faction of the Indian society" (Devy xv). His unique literary proficiency in translating the life worlds of the tribal people in minuscule ethnographic details contributed towards the making of thick descriptions in the actual sense of the term. Elwin's simultaneous engagement with different worlds of experience, west and east, literature and science, religiosity and social work, modern and the pre-modern, equipped him to transcend the conventional boundaries of doing anthropology, and more precisely, practicing it in a more meaningful way.

Conclusion

Ramachandra Guha's statement that Verrier Elwin was "unquestionably the most colorful and influential non-official Englishman to live and work in twentieth-century India" (215) is no exaggeration. Elwin's most significant contribution to documenting the lives of India's tribal communities lies not in anthropological precision but in his empathetic portrayal. His work resonates with a deep, intuitive understanding, offering insights not only into tribal life but also into the challenges they face. In *Myths of Middle India*, Verrier Elwin presents narrative versions of hundreds of tribal myths that explore themes such as human existence, social institutions, deities, the cosmos, and natural forces. These myths reveal common narratives shared among various tribal groups, focusing on the creation of the world, as well as the origins of humans and animals. Through this collection, Elwin illustrates his belief that such stories are more than folklore – they are a "living reality vitalizing and to some extent controlling the present". (Elwin, viii, 1964) Thus, the present paper is an attempt to make the readers value the dynamics of Man, Nature, and the mythical world as presented in the tribal folklore, with a prayer to safeguard them and understand their culture.

References

- Banerjee, Santanu. "Translating the Unthinkable in Bengali *Bratakatthas*: A Study on the Cultural Dynamics of Climate Change". *Culture, Adaptation and Resilience: Essays on Climate Change Regime in South Asia*. Bangladesh Climate Change Trust (BCCT), edited by Islam, Zahidul, et al., editors. Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2017, pp. 41-48.
- Devy, G N . *The G N Devy Reader*. Orient Blackswan India, Hyderabad. 2009
- Elwin, Verrier. *The Oxford India Elwin: Selected Writings*. New Delhi: OUP, 2009.

- Elwin, Verrier. *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography*. London: OUP, 1964.
- Goody, Jack. *Myth, Ritual and the Oral*. Canbridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* Penguin India, Gurgaon. 2016
- Guha, Ramachandra. *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*. New Delhi: OUP, 1999. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/578901>. Accessed 14 May 2025.
- Hivale, S. Scholar Gypsy: A study of Verrier Elwin. Bombay: Manor, James, 1996.
- Ethnicity and Politics in India in *Ethnicity and International Relations*, July.
- Mandelbaum, D. Review of *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography*, *American Anthropologist*, 1965, 448-452.

Disclosing the Double Discourse of Terror and Tradition of the North-East: A Selective study of Robin S. Ngangom's Poetry

Dr. Masoom Islam

Independent Scholar

E-mail: masoomudislam@gmail.com | Orcid id: [0009-0005-2854-4899](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2854-4899)

Abstract

Writing poetry in English from North-East India is relatively a new literature which provides an insight into a region that has a different culture zone in comparison to mainland India. The area is full of multi-ethnic people with multi-layered cultures and customs, trends and traditions, myths and methods of living. The poetry of this area reflects the tradition, multi-ethnicity and diversity of the region. On the other hand, the multi-ethnicity and multi-layered status of this region tend to create a clash amidst peoples on regional and hegemonic cause which brings a tremendous regional challenge – from insurgency to state sponsored terrorism and negligence which also reflect in the poetry. Thus, poetry from the North-east India reflect two opposite worlds – the world of myth and tradition in one hand and the world of terror and bloodshed on the other. These paradoxical representations and double discourse of terror and tradition have been skillfully delineated in his poetry by Shillong based Manipuri poet Robin S. Ngangom. This paper examines the things and thoughts behind the discourses based on the select poetry of the concerned poet.

Keywords: *North-East India, Discourse, Hegemonic, Regional, Terror, Tradition, Robin S. Ngangom.*

Introduction

The Northeastern part of India comprising eight states is characterized by its ethnic, linguistic, literary and cultural diversity which makes the entire Northeast region a homogenously heterogenous. It is homogenous in respect of its geographical location, forests' flora and fauna, indigenous life and lifestyle, the rootedness to the soil and the pristine past of its populace. On the other hand, it is heterogenous in respect of its land, locality and livelihood which is marked as per the variety of ethnicity and ethnic culture, customs, rites, rituals, belief in myth and mythology, language and dialects. The poetry of the poets from this region are heterogenous in nature but homogenous in notion. Poetry may be variant in respect of composition and content but echo the same tone and context of rootedness and rootlessness, the cultural loss and recovery. Thus, Tilottoma Mishra in his "Introduction" of his poetry anthology writes: "An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the seven north-eastern states." (xiii). Along with that, the identity crisis and a sense of alienation are some of the dominant features that make room in the contemporary poetry of India's Northeast raising altogether the voice of anguish and aspirations.

The poets of this peripheral zone who are writing in English and their own regional languages about the 'recurrent feature' and the overall scenario of this region, are hailing from the multifarious ethnic groups representing their land and society. This is why these poets have been called 'ethnic poets' (Guha 119). They are generally known as multi-ethnic poets and their poetry as multi-ethnic poetry. Their poetic credos intend to destabilize the existing images of occasional and dispersed violence and to establish the rich cultural pristine past and tradition. The search for halcyon days thus echoes in *The Strange Affairs of Robin S Ngangom*, where Ngangom writes in lamentation,

Our past, we make believe, is pristine

even as we reaped heads and took slaves. (Ngangom 68).

However, it is for the search of roots and rootedness that these ethnic poets committed in their writings so interconnectedly with the existing intricacies and emergencies that they seek a way out from the unwanted happenings as a part of conflict resolution so that a peace-making process could be resumed with all sorts of dialogues and delegations. The main motto of all that is to recover the lost culture and tradition, replacing the separatist tendencies and terrors that used to be accompanied by it. K. Satchidanandan in his article *Voices from the Hill* writes: "The poets from the north-eastern region have to meet the double challenge of truth and liberty, of identity and unity, of cultural loss and recovery, of ethnic specificity and aesthetic universality." (Frontline online). With the quotation, the addition of the catchwords from this paper title 'disclosing the double discourse of terror and tradition' perfectly matches the sole intention of the poetic outputs from this 'trouble-torn zone'. Again, tracing the root of the trouble and tension, eminent north east poet and critic Ananya S. Guha says: "North East Indian poetry is marked by the kind of tension that generates all great poetry; it may be at one level the poetry of violence, of torpidity and fear but it is also the poetry of searching, soul searching for peace." (Verseville).

Thus, the initiation of disclosing the double discourses of terror and traditions and many other such paradoxical flickering issues take its origins from the practical experiences and naked expositions emerging out directly from the marked tensions and turbulences generated amidst the feverish apocalyptic fragmented moments of eighties and nineties of the past century. The longed negation and neglectful attitude towards this peripheral zone from the center and from the mainstream politics take an abrupt and uncontrolled turn in the cursed eighties and nineties that brought about a drastic change in the socio-political and ethnic lives of the people. In this period, the violence and insurgency as well as secessionist and militant activities reached atop in the region which completely marred the social harmony as well as the co-habited co-existence between peoples from different beliefs and backgrounds. As a result, the community culture, tales and traditions irrespectively received a decaying and deadening effect replacing the glorious pasts and possessions. On the other hand, the violence, bloodshed, insurgencies, counter-insurgencies and all sorts of unrests take a deep intensity with its roots imprinted in all life forms unleashing manifold troubles and traumas around the region thereby transforming the whole region into what Rana Nayar called it in his essay *Poetry from the Troubled Zone* as a hotspot of "troubled zone, 'a seething cauldron' torn by ethnic crisis, economic failures, terrorist violence and mounting claims of regional autonomy and separatism. (Kavya Bharati 125). Besides, the clash of cultures and hegemonic invasion due to massive infiltration since pre-

colonial to post-colonial period led the orientalist in a state of fear and psychosis of being cornered and marginalized. It did more damage to internal ethnic politics and positions only to polarize the populace in different ethnic groups. Some of those groups were actively indulged in extreme militant activities and insurgencies in the name of autonomy and separate body aggravating the internal ethnic clash and conflicts to the top and fueling more on to the demands of separatist and radicalistic ideologies only to secure each ethnic group's identity assertion and their ideologies within the targeted territories of the region. Mishra's observation in his "Introduction" narrates:

The clash of cultures has often led to the loss of traditional forms and the adoption of new cultural icons that threatened the existing ones. While there have been attempts at reviewing and critiquing one's own society and culture in the light of the new ideas that have invaded the region from time to time, yet whenever the xenophobic fear of the 'outsider' has seized a community, a tendency to retreat into the cocoon of cultural isolation has been quite evident." (xiii-xiv).

It is in this backdrop of series of events and the existential precedence of essence that a group of young writers and poets emerged out as a dissenting voice of the situation disclosing the double discourses of terror and traditions and decoding the deformed, distorted version of mal-practices and mal-cultures that so far have been ripping through the region towards deterioration and dismalness. The new poetic lines dedicatedly and deliberately delivering a sort of practical writing driven by a demanding force that hearkens back to the ennobling and refreshing past with the uniformed amalgamation of the present for a certain and certified future. Tilottoma Mishra's line again seems relevant in this regard: "People whose history and civilization had been pushed to the margins... took up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future." (xvii).

However, with the passing of time and with the pressing situation, North East Indian poetry as well as the overall writings from this region started arresting attention to the rest of the nations and mainstream readers, writers, anthologists, publishers altogether by virtue of the poets-writers practical realistic writings with universal theme of oppression and alienation as well as the search for roots and identity assertion that to a large extent goes with practical writings of the Third World hard-edged modernists. The literary circle of poets that originated in Shillong city during the pressing and pessimistic times of the mid-eighty and nineties by a handful of pioneer poets including Robin S Ngangom, have accepted warmly by all and sundry and garnered new interests widely nationally and internationally beyond the region. Their fearless and bold depiction of 'eye of witness' of both terror and traditions in their poetry make them a staunch realist and pragmatist that distinctly differs them from the mainstream poets and their writings. Thus, in the 'Introduction' from the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East*, Ngangom and Nongkynrih write:

The writer from Northeast India, consequently, differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun does not permit him to indulge in verbal wizardry or wooly aesthetics, but is a constant reminder that he must perforce master 'the art of witness'." (NEHU xi).

Though it would be a great opportunity to write in details about the entire North East Indian poets who play active role in constituting the Shillong literary circle and their influence on nation-state politics for restoring normalcy, due to constraint of time and space, this paper will set to focus on only one such influential poet, Robin S Ngangom and his practical writings on the commitments of minimizing terror and maximizing traditional installation in the North East India's overall socio-political scenario.

Robin S Ngangom (1959-) who was born in Imphal, Manipur, is actually a bilingual poet writing in English and in Manipuri dialect, Meitei. It was due to some unwanted happenings in his birthland, Manipur, he comes to reside at the capital city of Meghalaya, Shillong and settled there permanently. He has been living in Shillong from 1980s onwards and teaching in NEHU in English language and literature. In 1988-89 at the tough times and under the pressing need of the hour, the 'Shillong Poetry Circle' was established by Ngangom and his contemporary Desmond L Kharmawplang, along with like-minded poets and writers who include Kynpham S Nongkynrih, Ananya S Guha and Anjum Hasan. These poets write fluently on the themes and motifs of contemporary burning issues and happenings in and around the entire Northeast region. They started publishing a little magazine 'Lyric' after two years of the formation of their literary circle. Their sole purpose was to make awareness to the common people of their rights and legalities and to arouse a sense of unity amid ethnic diversity and through cultural legacy.

Ngangom understands well about the bitter experience of alienation and dissociation as he himself had to face the same in his life when he parted permanently from his homeland, Manipur. Instead, he has a special attraction and dedication for his native birthplace which occasionally finds space in his writings. His moods and expressions swing as per his native place's status and in respect to its goodness or badness. His complaining mode of lamentation features in his autobiographical essay, *Poetry in the Time of Terror* where he writes:

Manipur, my native place in Northeast India, is in a state of anarchy, and my poetry springs from the cruel contradictions of that land. Manipur boasts of its talents in theatre, cinema, dance and sports. But how could you trust your own people, when they entrust corruption, AIDS, terrorism and drugs to their children? (422).

Though it is a fact that Ngangom starts his career in his teens by writing poetry about "the gentle hills and folk traditions of yore" (52) which by tone and form follow the English romantic traditions of lyricism and aestheticism. But over the years, the real scenes of brutality and insurgency that continue to exist in the region only to deteriorate and damage things with more intensity and leave a bizarre mark of deep scars in everything could not but bring the poet back to stark reality from his trance like state of romanticism. Under these sorry circumstances and surroundings all around, Ngangom driven by an inner force, is bound to write poetry of his homeland and its contemporary issues. He dismissed such romanticism as artless and inoffensive without shocking any sensibilities. Ngangom confesses later in his autobiographical essay *Poetry in a Time of Terror*, stating:

I wrote my first faltering line in the relative innocence of childhood. I was about eleven or twelve years old then and caught as I was in the flush of youth, I wanted to explore the world by writing ornate and sentimental poetry. Since life was ignoring me, I thought I could engage the attention of kindred hearts through friendly and softhearted verse. Naturally, my poems were mostly inspired by romance and adventure stories, especially

The Thousand and One Nights, but it was essentially dreamy-eyed adolescent stuff. I still haven't grown out of it. (422).

Today when any of Ngangom's friends ask him to write poetry in romantic trends, the words of Latin American poet, Pablo Neruda echo with him, "Come and see the blood in the streets." (qtd in Dev and Bhalla 52). With the passing of time and as per the pressing need of the hour, Ngangom's poetry becomes 'an outlet of pent-up feelings and desires.' (423). He could no longer remain in his ivory tower of airy thoughts and throngs but becomes an active observer of the daily affairs and occurrence linked with the common peoples and their reactions. These all serve as the important tools and subject matters of his poetry along with his contemporary counterparts. Preeti Gill writes while discussing about the contemporary Northeast writers, "Having grown up in a shadow of the gun, their desire to analyze the common peoples' reactions to insurgency is as strong as ever." (Wikipedia, Literature from Northeast India).

It is due to the reactionary response from the common peoples of the entire region against the existing violence and terror and for the restorations of rich traditional pasts that Ngangom depicts in his poetry which in turn arouses a sense of awareness about their ancestral traditional cultures and heritage that have been facing random exploitation almost to the extinction by the ongoing destructive damages and devours. The lamentation and angst of common peoples generalize in the last lines of his *Poem for Samir* where he says,

I come from a country where they took our past and
returned them as terrible dreams. (Ngangom 34).

Almost all the poetry of Ngangom in some ways or others delineates with the theme and reflection of declining past in comparison to the dreadful and dwindling present. The recollections of the region's illuminating bygone days which left an enriching legacy to the historical, anthropological records thereby enriching the traditional and cultural reservoir help to knit a binding grip to the respective ethnic communities for their roots from generation to generation. A sea difference and dissimilarity are painfully felt when comparing and reckoning the 'get and lost' perspectives. The intermediary internal conflicts and clashes for numerous issues related to power and politics totally shaken and shattered the pattern of thoughts and understandings. So has been done to the social structure also. At the end, when realization and self-explanation occur in nerves and sensory organs, it is found that an uncompensatory 'loss' is experienced in respect of almost nothing 'gain'. The poets-writers now seem to be taking charge in reviving and relocating the 'lost' spirits amidst the disorders and dismality. The oral ancestral folk traditions and folktales and other boosting ingredients seem to be making inspiration to the poets-writers in this regard. Thus, poetry from India's Northeast reflects two opposite worlds – the world of myths and traditions in one hand and the world of terror and bloodshed on the other. Shillong based Manipuri poet Robin S Ngangom very judiciously and skillfully applies these paradoxical worlds in his poetry. While talking and writing with the harsh issues of the region like insurgency, militancy, violence, unrests, curfew, corruption, military torture and the overall terror and turbulence as well as ethno-political turmoil and troubles, his poetry also reveals his love and longing for his homeland, its culture and tradition – past and present, myth and legends, folklore and folktales. The synonymous depiction of both terror and tradition, traumas and transition in one breath about his homeland and the homely affairs is what make him a poet of staunch realist-sensitivist. Rajlakshmi Bhattacharaya in her review article about

Northeast poetry in the twentieth century discusses Ngangom's evolution as a poet and analyses his poetic credo under the light of his pragmatist approaches. She mentions Ngangom's reaction to contemporary Manipuri poetry from his autobiographical essay *Poetry in a Time of Terror* where Ngangom plainly comments that it has a preponderance of bullets and he is surprised to see the young poets of the region talk of "blood, bullets and flowers all in the same breath." (The Telegraph, Sep 19, 2003). But Ngangom eventually justifies the stand of the poets in choosing to write about the 'gun and bullets' rather than the 'breath-taking landscape and the sinuous dance' (qtd. in Sanjeeda Aheibam 110) saying that it is all pervasiveness and prevalence of violence and vehemence in everyday lives in the society that a poet cannot but depict the grim pictures of mayhem and mindless acts in their poetry. The condition is so traumatic and tensioned that 'red remains a favourite colour with the new generation of writers.' (Rajlakshmi). In the case of Robin S Ngangom and his poetic styles, he deals with the contemporary subject matters of both his native land, Manipur and his invented land, Shillong from where he observes the entire scenario of the Northeast and writes profusely only to cast a reformatory, recreational-revival spell on life and society. While talking about his Manipuri connection and his responses to the concurrence of events from the same, Rajlakshmi again says:

When life for the Manipuri poets gets too oppressive, he takes refuge in self-directed irony, satire and parody. What emerges is a brand of black humour to portray, what Robin calls, "an absurd picture". But it is not as if all poets talk of violence. Some of them tend to explore myths and their own mindscapes. (ibid).

In this connection, Ngangom's poetic style in depicting myth, traditions and his own mindscapes is unique and uniform as well. His uses and applications of satiric devices and oblique narratives in his poetry in narrating and recollecting the 'pristine past' amid the prevalent troubled torn scattered images are explored in such a way that the interface and interpretation of history, polity, anthropology of the entire region – all blend altogether resonating and reverberating the very existential essences of human lives and values in the preceding as well as the practical context and contours. Ngangom intermixes the past with the present and laments for the land's present disjointed and disputed state under the devastating insurgency and militancy. Besides, some corrupt people's black marketeering tendency and mad chase for currency earning in whatsoever means make matters worse which in other way corrupt the 'once prime land' and its legends. Ngangom reiterates the same in his poem *I am Sorry to See Poetry in Chains*.

Once prime land, beneficent and fabled
and now playground of black-marketeers,
haven for future hunters where
none misses a heartbeat
as you feed money, sell honour, peddle justice.
My love, night upsets us however,
heightening the day's fears. (qtd. in Raju Ta 206 'Unmasking Terror...').

Mammon, the god of money is, according to Ngangom, the root cause of all corrupt mal-culture and malpractices in the region. It destroys peace, panorama, patriotism and breaks the past traditional legacy bringing forth only terror and racial enmity. Money seems to play the active role in finalizing things howsoever it opposes the community's sentiment or sanctity or whatever method it applies. The peace-loving community is subjected to accept the distorted and disfigured things under the calculated and tricky strategy of outside force which are intentionally employed only to procure power and possessions and which brings nothing except damages and devastations. Ngangom's resentment is felt in *The Strange Affairs of Robin S Ngangom* where he writes:

With cargoes of sand and mortar
Mammon came to inspect the city.
He cut down the remaining trees
and carried them away
like cadavers for dissection.
Morning papers like watered-down milk
hawk the same bland items:
rape, extortion, ambushes, confessions,
embezzlement, vendetta, sales, disappearances,
Marriages, obituaries, the usual. (69-70).

Again, the mad rush for money and power of 'the enemy of the people' (Strange...70) and the miseries and insecurities of the peace-loving people can be understood through the lines of Ngangom's yet another ironical poem, *Racial Progression*.

here everything is bought and sold
to the highest bidder.
the gunpoint, the hypodermic needle, and currency
notes: these are the only languages we know.
Brothers buy brothers and fathers sell sons as a way of life. (qtd. in Raju Ta, 207).

The same sense reiterates again in *The Strange Affairs of Robin S Ngangom*.

Nothing is certain:

Oil

Lentils

Vegetables

Food for babies

Transport

The outside world.

Even

Fire water and air

Are slowly becoming commodities. (ibid)

Ngangom tries to show through these lines how people under the fabricated impressions of money and power become puppets of external malicious ominous forces and act totally opposite to traditional bindings and benign. He laments man's deviated path of becoming commodities and bringing monopolies remaining oblivious to the glorious past or denying their ancestral rich legacy and legitimacy. Remembering the generations of ancestors and their rich traditions, the poet is worried about the lost heritage. Thus, he says,

What is tradition and our history

But death with a long memory?

For how long will we make

Our forefathers walk as ghosts?

To-day with grief sitting on our hearts.

We will sing of clouds that do not come home;

We will sing the songs of those

Banished in the mountains,

We will drink deep from bamboo mugs

And wipe memory from our lips. (qtd. in N. Das, 111)

Restoration of lost culture and tradition as well as the ramification/assertion of original history and ethnic identity is believed to be the central concern of Ngangom's poetry. At the same time, the rapid replacement of traditions with terror, violence and 'make believe history' from the hitherto peaceful, harmonious and community living with myths, beliefs and their historical legacy, too, seem to be haunting his memory and conscience which nostalgically finds space in his poetry. The displacement and in some cases wiping out of indigenous tribal race and

civilization at the hand of modernization and outsiders' infiltration very painfully get depicted in his poetry which altogether help to arouse a collective consciousness among the peoples for their land and legends. Ngangom resentfully alleged that their history is intentionally distorted and deleted. They are altered and modified for harmful purposes by barbaric forces and hence their placid past obliterates quickly. He states,

When we write make-believe history
with malicious intent,
memory burns on a short fuse. (Strange Affairs...68).

But it does not obstruct Ngangom to ruminate over the glorious past of his land. The sweet old tales and memories thus resonate in one of his poems mentioned in Nigamananda Das's seminal essay *Many Worlds of Robin S. Ngangom*.

Let us only speak of what reached our ears
In Kangleipak once upon a time
the royal beast of Kangla bit his tail
and the land lay snug within his coils
and there was no dearth of mundane things
fish was as cheap and in the fields
ears of rice danced to the rhythm of the soil
From the minstrel's song at the dead of night,
we heard winter yearns of warrior kings,
men who assumed the land and the women no fear,
of mwn with untiring sword-arms
We were sung of extra-terrestrial maidens
descended to earth and lost: *Ingallei* and *Kombirei*
elusive wild flowers, falling before anyone
Could wear them, telling all in destroying love
We destroy ourselves. (qtd. in N. Das 107).

Time and again, Ngangom tries to warn the stakeholders that the paths they have taken could bring nothing but enmity and insurgency which would destroy everything including the coming

generation. His warning and prophecy turn into real when the armed forces and the local militants-insurgents of his homeland, Manipur and some parts of the Northeast region is at its most violent and bloody. The entire region gets shaken and shuttered at the enforcement of cursed AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) at Manipur and parts of the region to curb and counter militancy and insurgency operations. But in reality, it is alleged that it aggravates the situation towards deterioration which brings the reign of terror into every aspect of life and livelihood. Ngangom is sheer against violence throughout his life as he sees closely the stormy aftermaths and havoc of such violence. He addresses these issues in his poetry with fierce passion and moral outrage. His poetic persona transcends his own self and irrespectively of time and space depicts the bitter truth of man's suffering and groaning amid havoc and hostility. At the same time, his inability to do anything solid with immediate effect for them makes him remorseful and repentant. He says ironically:

Not once can I say

I am the captain

behind the wheel of fire. (The Strange Affairs...55)

Ngangom's heart gets heavy and horrified when he sees people stand totally opposite to each other and always daggers down with desperateness. He feels no solace finding himself at the labyrinth of death and devastation all around amid heavy boots and bullets.

When I turn with a heavy heart

towards my burning land,

the hills, woman, scream your name.

Soldiers with black scarves

like mine artists

turn them in seconds into shrouds.

For the trucks carrying

the appliances of death and devastation. (The Strange...69)

Now the newly turned chaotic and cancerous social order with the discomfoting and draconian law seems to unbox all sorts of unrests, disbelief, intolerance and the broken images of society and surroundings. They freshly open up the long-suppressed ethno-racial clash and conflicts and other life complexities which bring about the racial and communal enmity and animosity among the communities. Besides, the civil disobedience movements against the forced imposition of armed forces and their special power to roam freely anywhere at their will in the region and arrest, detain, destroy or kill anyone they suspect, literally impact heavily on life and society which costs heavy toll on them at intervals in the name of death and devastations. In the poem *Native Land*, Ngangom brings forth the crude picture of such entanglements.

First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church...
As the days crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
until I lost my tenuous humanity. (84).

The bitter harvest of violence and terror last long with manifold implications on future generations who, according to the poet, would reap distorted and deviated history and stories of their past as a result of the suspicion and hatred that the present generations have been sowing. He writes in one of his poems quoted in Das's *Many Worlds of robin S Ngangom* about how the discourses of both terror and tradition get entangled and intermixed under the aegis of rampant corruption and convulsion that forcefully converting the generations of groaning men and slaves forgetting all about the lands past heroic deeds and history.

Instead of pages of heroic deeds or undying love,
We read parchments written in blood, our history
stained by illicit love and betrayal;
We found our alphabet buried with the shrunken heads
Of enemies, ghosts who died long ago laughing
at the attempts at civilization.
Just outside the ramparts of the city of arts,
not dances, music or literature
but generations of groaning men and slaves. (107).

The strength of Ngangom's poetry lies in the fact that they are anchored with the roots of his homeland and its traditional past. His poetry repeatedly verbalizing the same. His earnest desire for roots and harkening back to the shadowy past strongly arouses especially at the time of terror and precarity that make him nostalgic as well as patriotic from his inner self and that he feels to be in prison like state unable to move on either side. It disclose his mind's double

discourses of terror and tradition for the time being – one for the sake of tradition and heritage that his heart and soul is inextricably linked with and that hold him fixed in his viewpoint and position reminding him repeatedly his love and liability for his homeland; and the other is for the ongoing terror and fear in his homeland and across the entire North East region that he feels he could never slide away alone or cocooned himself selfishly in a safe zone ignoring all the frontier intricacies and hostilities and making his fellow citizens in utmost trouble and in tragedy. It is out of such love and hatred for both tradition and terror that he helplessly but exhortingly questions,

But where can one run from the homeland,
where can I flee from your love?
They have become pursuing prisons
which hold the man
with criminal words. (The Strange Affairs...73)

To sum up, it needs to be stated that Ngangom focusses particularly on the fact of Northeast poetry being directly connected to the past and plainly statemental to the present irrespectively. He also discloses the distinguishing discourses and the recent traits and trends of the corpus of Northeast poetry writing in English which is actually steeped with a plethora of images and motifs drawn from nature and culture, folklore and folktale, myth and mythology in contrast to the broken and bespattered images of contemporary beleaguered events and fallout of violence. Ngangom, being the represented poet of the entire Northeast India relates and relocates the same in his poetry. Besides, his quest for roots, essentializing for an identity, establishing normalcy and destabilizing all the intricacies and uncertainties in the peripheral Northeast - all set to make his poetry truly autobiographical and unashamedly apologetic, if not confessional. Ngangom himself describes his poetry as “mostly autobiographical, written with the hope of enthusing readers with my communal or carnal life – the life of a politically-discriminated-against, historically-overlooked individual from the nook of a third world country.” (qtd. in Subramaniam). In this case, Ngangom draws inspiration from the practical writing of the pragmatist-realist poets such as Neruda, Lorca, Sefaris, Arghezi, Milosz and other hard-edged modernist poets of the Third World countries. Thus, by birth and by choice, considering the whole North East India as his homeland, Ngangom writes his poetry profusely and painstakingly disclosing the double discourses of terror and tradition of the region and decoding all the troubles in attempting to restore and reinvigorate the past with a long-lasting impact of what Nigamananda Das exactly calls the “social and personal costs of terrorism and violence”. (Muse India).

References

- Aheibam, Sanjeeta. "Poetry as Witness to Terror, Life (and Death) in the North East". (Ed.) Mitali P. Wong and M. Yousuf Saeed. *The Changing World of Contemporary South Asian Poetry in English: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Maryland, USA. The Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. 2019. P- 110. Print.
- Bhattacharaya, Rajlakshmi. "North East/ Poetry in the time of terror". The Telegraph Online, 19 September 2003. Web. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/poetry-in-the-time-of-terror/cid/1549660#>. Accessed on January 19, 2021.
- Das, Nigamananda. "Many Worlds of Robin S Ngangom". (Ed.) Nigamananda Das. *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic English Literature from North East India*. New Delhi, Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2011. P- 104-118. Print.
- Das, Nigamananda. "Contemporary English Poetry of Meghalaya and Mizoram". *Muse India*, Issue 47, January-February 2013.
- Dev, Anjana Neira and Bhalla, Amrita. "Robin S Ngangom". *Indian Writing in English: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry Selections*. New Delhi. Primus Books Publication, 2013. P- 51-55. Print.
- Guha, Ananya S. "North East Indian Poetry: 'Peace' in Violence". VerseVille (formerly The Enchanting Verses Literary Review) @2008-2020. Web. <https://www.verseville.org/north-east-indian-poetry-lsquopeace-squo-in-violence-by-ananya-s-guha.html>. Accessed on June 15, 2020.
- Guha, Ananya S. "Poetry and the English Writing Scene". *Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities in North East India*. Shillong, 2000. P- 119. Print.
- Literature from North East India. web. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literature_from_North_East_India. Accessed on July 8, 2020.
- Mishra, Tilottoma. "Introduction". *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi. Oxford University Press, 2011. P- xiii-xiv, xvii. Print.
- Ngangom, Robin S. "The Strange Affairs of Robin S Ngangom". *The Desire of Roots*. New Delhi. Red River, 2019. P-67-73. Print.
- Ngangom, Robin S. "Poem for Samir". *The Desire of Roots*. New Delhi. Red River, 2019. P- 33-34. Print.
- Ngangom, Robin S. "Native Land". *The Desire of Roots*. New Delhi. Red River, 2019. P- 84. Print.
- Ngangom, Robin S. and Nongkynrih, Kynpham S. "Introduction". *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. Shillong. North-Eastern Hill University, 2003. P- xi, Print.
- Ngangom, Robin S. "Poetry in the time of Terror". *Sarai Reader 2006: Turbulence*. P-422-427, pdf. Web. <https://sarai.net/sarai-reader-06-turbulence/>. Accessed on 6th August 2019.
- Nayar, Rana. "Poetry from the Troubled Zone". *Kava Bharati*, Number 15, 2003. P- 125-131. Pdf.
- Satchidanandan, K. "Voices from the Hills". *Frontline*, June 14, 2013. Web. https://frontline.thehindu.com/columns/K_Satchidanandan/voices-from-the-hills/article4742386.ece. Accessed on June 14, 2020.
- Subramaniam, Arundhati. "Robin S. Ngangom". *Poetry International (Archives, India)*. web. <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poet/11771Robin-Ngangom/en/tile>. Accessed on August 7, 2019.
- Ta, Raju. "Unmasking Terror and Politics in Manipur: A Study of Robin S Ngangom's Words and the Silence". *Language in India*, Vol. 18, 8 August 2018. P- 202-208. Pdf.

Nature Narratives in Northeast Indian Literature: Eco-Discourse and Cultural Perspectives

Subrata Barman

PhD Scholar

Department of English

Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, Cooch Behar

Email: subratabarman@cbpbu.ac.in | Orcid Id: [0009-0000-5038-4733](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5038-4733)

Abstract

This paper examines how recent literary texts from Northeast India function as *Eco-discourses* by integrating ecological themes with cultural worldview and resistance to dominant paradigms. Focusing on Tamsula Ao (Nagaland), Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh), Easterine Kire (Nagaland), and Dhruva Hazarika (Assam), it analyzes fiction (short stories, novels, poetry) that foregrounds nature not merely as a backdrop but as a living agent. Employing Ecocriticism, Postcolonial theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ecofeminism, and Indigenous knowledge frameworks, the study shows how these writers draw on tribal cosmologies (animism, folklore, myths) and narrative strategies (symbolism, personification, magical realism) to challenge anthropocentric and development-oriented discourses. Through a close reading of key texts; Ao's "*Laburnum for My Head*" and "*Death of a Hunter*"; Dai's *River Poems* and *Escaping the Land*; Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and *Don't Run, My Love*; Hazarika's *Luck*, it is argued that Northeast Indian literature actively cultivates environmental awareness and counters hegemonic "green development" by prioritizing community-land relations. The paper also integrates secondary scholarly sources throughout.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Eco-Discourse, Northeast Indian Literature, Nature Narratives, Environmental Humanities*

Introduction

Northeast Indian writing in English has often been misunderstood as dominated by political conflict and insurgency. However, to look closely we find a strong ecological consciousness embedded equally as a prominent feature in their literature. Critics note that authors from Northeast India often "(...) portray the land through a wide range of images of rivers, trees, hills, tradition, culture, myth, and legends," making *ecology* a central concern of their literature (Dumenil 1296). Cheryl Antonette Dumenil also observes that northeastern poetry, for instance, has a "significant characteristic," as they portray a profound sense and concern of ecology and that "the poems of this region consciously employ ecology as a means for an assertion of identity" (1297). Thus, this paper builds on that insight to examine how selected Northeast authors use fiction as "Eco-Discourse," a literary narrative that not only depicts nature but actively shapes environmental awareness and challenges dominant (i.e. colonial, patriarchal, or anthropocentric) ideologies. The core focus will be on four prominent voices from Northeast India: Tamsula Ao (Naga writer, poet, essayist), Mamang Dai (Adi poet and novelist), Easterine Kire (Angami Naga novelist and poet), and Dhruva Hazarika (Assamese short story writer). They often draw on indigenous ecological knowledge and cultural cosmologies to frame nature

as an active participant in their fictional works. Their works contrast traditional wisdom like animism and folklore with the intrusions of modern development like dams, hydroelectric power projects, etc. thereby questioning the human-centered worldview of mainstream development discourse.

An interdisciplinary theoretical framework has been used here with Ecocriticism as a foundation. Ecocriticism, as Cheryll Glotfelty defines it, is fundamentally about “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). This includes examining how texts reveal ‘ecocentrism’ which values nature itself, as opposed to ‘anthropocentrism’ which centres only on human interests. Shurhonuo Tsurho, a research scholar from Nagaland University, notes that Northeast writers frequently signal this divide between ecocentrism “a nature-centred system of value” versus anthropocentrism where “humanity is placed at the centre of everything” by expressing “grief over nature’s eroding state” and depicting ecological exploitation and ecological depletion along with cultural change (35). This paper will also incorporate ‘Postcolonial Ecocriticism’ to address how colonial and developmental legacies shape environmental discourse. Through this lens we can observe how “colonial legacies” of resource extraction and land dispossession have produced today’s crises, and hence how indigenous narratives work to *reclaim* marginal voices. ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ complements this by highlighting how texts challenge hegemonic power. It is explicitly “concerned with the ways in which discourses act to produce and change the world” (Griffin 98). In addition, ‘Ecofeminism’ and Indigenous knowledge perspectives remind us how gender, folklore, and traditional epistemologies are integral to eco-critique. Ecofeminists link the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women. This connection is portrayed in the works of Ao and Kire as they foreground the female protagonist’s relationship with the land. Indigenous ecological knowledge that views humans as part of nature permeates these narratives. Nilanjana Chatterjee notes that Naga folk tales and “people stories” are “treasure-troves of indigenous eco-ethical knowledge systems” that inform contemporary writing (30). In a nutshell, these authors do not merely describe nature, they treat the environment as a subject with agency. They weave myths and rituals into fiction so that the narrative *itself* becomes a force for environmental consciousness.

Ecocriticism, Discourse, and Worldview: Theoretical Context

Ecocriticism has grown into a diverse field over decades but at its core, it “calls for a universal concern” for nature (Tsurho 35). It critiques *Anthropocentrism*, the human-centred worldview, and advocates *ecocentrism*, which places nature’s well-being above human utility. In this context, literature becomes a vehicle for ecological values. As Cheryll Glotfelty succinctly puts it, ecocriticism “is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). Northeast writers exemplify this by embedding landscapes, forests, mountains, animals, and rivers into their narratives as more than mere settings. Shurhonuo Tsurho observes that Ao, Dai, and others focus on “ecological depletion and exploitation... and the glorification and might of Nature,” arguing that their native lands are portrayed as “ideal places” whose threats provoke alarm and response (35).

Postcolonial ecocriticism, on the other hand, examines how colonial histories have led to environmental harm and how formerly colonized peoples articulate resistance. The Northeast has a specific history of colonial exploitation (British resource extraction, and later national infrastructure projects) and marginalization. Postcolonial ecocritics note that colonial regimes

imposed “Western environmental norms” on colonized regions, often exploiting natural resources without regard for indigenous rights. In this view, Ao, Dai, Kire, and Hazarika are writing *back* to empire and state: they emphasize subaltern and tribal perspectives that were suppressed. Through Postcolonial ecocriticism, we see that under colonialism the exploitation of nature was accompanied by the oppression of the people who lived off that nature. Similarly, Northeast texts often depict how human and ecological liberty (and their denial) are intertwined.

Critical Discourse analysis focuses on ideology and power in language. Environmental Critical Discourse specifically looks at how public and literary texts frame nature. It tries to engross critically “to show how the texts ... produce (re)create particular versions of the world” (Griffin 98). In practice, we use this to interpret Northeast Indian fiction as a counter-discourse. Mainstream “development” rhetoric in India like dams, highways, hydroelectric power projects, etc. is often anthropocentric and it treats nature as a resource to be maximized for human gain. By contrast, Northeast authors often subvert that rhetoric by showing the destructive impact of development on indigenous communities and ecosystems. Ao’s contrasting stories, for instance, explicitly set up “radical environmentalism” versus “reformist environmentalism” or “green development,” inviting readers to question whose interests such development serves (Ghosal 20-27). Through Critical Discourse analysis, we see how these narratives encode local norms such as sustainability, respect, and reciprocity in opposition to hegemonic ideologies of progress. They give voice to communities typically silenced in policy discourse, thus broadening the environmental debate.

Ecofeminism is central because most Northeast authors are women who often link women’s status with nature. Ecofeminists often linked the degradation of the environment with the subjugation of women. For instance, Tamsula Ao’s heroines frequently rebel against patriarchal taboos by seeking communion with nature. As we see Lentina in the short story “Laburnum for My Head” attends her husband’s burial rites among graves rebelling against the patriarchal gender norms. Easterine Kire’s novels, on the other hand, frequently feature female shamans, witches, or werewolves, using folklore to parallel gender and ecological marginalization. Scholars of Kire have noted that her use of mystical female figures like Therianthropes and Otherkins is explicitly ecofeminist as these stories “teach us about ecological sustainability” while also revealing how “social injustice... go hand in hand with atrocities” against the environment (Yasmin 37). In brief, ecofeminism helps us see that concerns for women’s empowerment and the Earth often coincide in these texts.

Finally, the concept of indigenous ecological knowledge is woven throughout. Northeast communities possess rich oral traditions about the forests, rivers, and animals around them. These range from taboos against overhunting to stories of river spirits that preserve water sanctity. The authors under study explicitly draw on this heritage. Mamang Dai, an Adi tribal writer, frequently mines traditional customs such as those of her grandfather’s village as symbols. Tamsula Ao, a Naga from the Sema tribe, includes rituals and dances in her stories that centre on nature. Easterine Kire’s Angami Naga background appears in her reverence for ancestral spirits and landforms. By infusing their fiction with these tribal worldviews, these writers not only enrich their narratives aesthetically but also model an eco-ethical perspective grounded in place-based knowledge. This technique resists the Western epistemology that often underlies development discourse; instead of seeing land as a space for capital, these authors portray it as a heirloom, myth, and teacher.

Temsula Ao: Eco-Conscious Tales and Female Agency

Temsula Ao, a poet and novelist from Nagaland, has emerged as a leading eco-conscious voice in Northeast writing. Critics praise the “ecological richness” of her imagery and her critique of the “ugliness of modernization” (Samaddar 97). Her 2009 short story collection titled *Laburnum for My Head* exemplifies these traits. The title story and “Death of a Hunter” (the first two tales of the collection) are often cited as deliberately paired to stage a debate over conservation versus exploitation. An ecocritical study by Abhisek Ghosal notes that Ao “incorporates two contrapuntal tales, “Laburnum for My Head” and “Death of a Hunter” (...) to project the long-standing tension between radical environmentalism and reformist environmentalism” (19). In other words, Ao uses her narrative contrapuntally to question “green development” by exposing how policies that claim to help the poor can collide with the demands of nature. In “Laburnum for My Head,” Ao entwines nature with gender. The protagonist Lentina is an educated woman who yearns to plant a golden *laburnum* tree in her garden. She is captivated by its yellow blooms, which “denoted womanliness” to her (Kumar 1). Ao writes, “The way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture” (Ao 2). Lentina’s empathy with the laburnum contrasts sharply with the apathy of her conservative family; she is “inwardly hurt by their seeming insensitivity to beauty around them” (Ao 3). Here Temsula Ao links feminine agency to care for nature. The laburnum becomes a surrogate for Lentina’s freedom and humility. Her refusal to abandon her dream of the tree, even after widowhood, and till the end of her life, signifies a quiet rebellion. The story critiques anthropocentric attitudes in two ways. First, by valuing a modest flower in the face of human indifference, and secondly by defying the patriarchal norm that a widow should stay within domestic bounds. As we see, Lentina insists and attends the funeral rites of her husband in the village, breaking customs, and challenging societal norms.

“Death of a Hunter,” by contrast, dramatizes retribution of nature against reckless exploitation. The story follows an ageing hunter, Imchanok, on his final expedition. Each beast he encounters gives him a lesson on restraint. The culmination is a confrontation with a tiger that has eluded him for decades. Without revealing the entire plot, suffice it to say that Ao makes her hunter’s downfall a moral about humility before natural forces. Through this frame, Temsula Ao enacts postcolonial ecocriticism where colonial-style fearlessness (the hunter’s bravado) is punished by the indigenous-animal agency. She indicts the colonial “sport hunt” attitude as a throwback. In the final scene, Ao hints that some things in nature (the wild, the tiger’s will) or nature itself, are beyond human control. Throughout these stories, Ao’s narrative voice harmonizes with local traditions. The Naga worldview often sees animals and plants as part of the community. Ao frequently adopts that stance. Critics often observe that her work is steeped in Nagaland’s cosmology, reviving folk songs and chants in her text. In “Laburnum,” Lentina’s love for a humble flower is itself an exercise in eco-ethics as she treats the laburnum as a companion. While in “Death of a Hunter,” Imchanok converses with animals who are nearly wise interlocutors. This animistic narrative technique enacts an ecocentric stance where nature is a subject, not an object. Such portrayal contrasts sharply with any anthropocentric “development” ideology. Ao’s explicit framing invites readers to weigh modern progress against tradition. Thus, Abhisek Ghosal in the paper “Appraising Green Development: An Ecocritical Reading of Temsula Ao’s *Laburnum for My Head*” emphasizes that Ao’s stories ask us to reconsider development by “paying adequate heed to the necessary requirements of impoverished human beings” while not sacrificing the environment (19).

Ao also weaves ecofeminist undercurrents through Lentina's gender and her bond with the laburnum, which suggests a feminine affinity with the earth. Feminist ecocritics would note that Lentina's empowerment comes through nature. She asserts herself by pursuing the planting of the laburnum, even when family pressures mount. The betrayal she feels at her family's indifference resonates with the sense that both women and nature are often marginalized. This accords with the general Ecofeminist insight that the dilapidation of the environment and the subjugation of women are connected. The story dramatizes both a woman's struggle and a flower's vulnerability. Even through Critical Discourse analysis, we find Ao's prose works against the dominant discourse. She refuses the colonial trope of Nature as "wild" to conquer. Instead, her human characters learn respect or humility. Even the title metaphorically states Lentina's wish for a laburnum in her head (graveyard), even after death. It evokes ownership and belonging that transcends mere property rights. It inverts the idea of land as a commodity by making it personal and emotional. Tamsula Ao's refusal to let the laburnum flower be uprooted, at the end of the story, is a quiet victory for ecological ethics. Thus, Tamsula Ao's fiction articulates an ecological message through symbolism and character. Here Nature acts as both a mirror and a mentor. The very act of blending everyday life with natural imagery centres on environmental awareness. Therefore, Debasis Samaddar rightly observed that Tamsula Ao has been recognized as "one of the major eco-conscious voices" in Northeast writing (97). Her tales explicitly juxtapose development narratives with indigenous ecological wisdom which makes her literature a catalyst for eco-centric reflection.

Mamang Dai: Animism, Rivers, and Sustaining Culture

Mamang Dai, from Arunachal Pradesh's Adi tribe, is another writer whose oeuvre exemplifies the Northeast eco-discourse. A former bureaucrat turned poet and novelist; she has long championed her people's deep ties to the land. Her poems and fiction consistently integrate nature, rivers, mountains, and forests as living presences. Ishita Halder observes that "the North-East region's captivating scenery, mystic experiences, colourful ethnography, mythology, folklore, and myths collectively make up [Dai's] nature of fiction" (139). In other words, Dai's landscape is not a mere setting but the very fabric of meaning in her narratives. This reflects an indigenous worldview. Mamang Dai herself has said in interviews that the Eastern Himalayas' geography – the continuous forests, mountains, and "big rivers" – creates a "common shared culture and a relationship to the land" (The Hindu 2010). We can see this in her work *Escaping the Land* (2021), a mythic novel that tests its characters' bonds to nature through giant cockroaches and shape-changing birds. According to Ishita Halder's study, *Escaping the Land* "demonstrates the ecocritical aspects of the landscape" and "projects the ecological values of the environment" (139), to show how Dai consciously weaves ecology into plot and symbolism.

Mamang Dai's poetry collection *River Poems* (2004) is a clear example of her approach. In these poems, rivers are often used as metaphors for life and tradition. Critics note that Dai personifies natural features to evoke a lost harmony. She "culls out the significance of natural resources... from her River Poems" and thus laments the "consequences of human beings' violence towards nature" (Sudha 84). For example, in "River Poems" the river might speak or sing, giving voice to the tribe's collective memory. Essentially, Mamang Dai's verse conveys ancestral continuity as waterways carry not only water but the stories of forebears. Dr. S. Sudha thus points out that Mamang Dai's poetry "brings out the life of her homeland, its tradition and culture and the heritage of her land..." (87). She also observed that "as a representative of tribes, she (Mamang Dai) foregrounds the consequences of people in this modernity" (87). In simpler

terms, Dai writes as a tribal elder lamenting how modern life disrupts indigenous ways. These poetic narratives revive an animistic consciousness where streams are alive, hills are kin, and to damage them is to damage one's soul.

Mamang Dai's narrative strategy often fuses myth with contemporary issues. In *Escaping the Land*, the protagonist is a journalist who flees the city only to be mythically shrunk to the size of an ant to confront the world from the ground. This literal plunging into the microcosm of nature serves as a strong discourse device where the reader sees human arrogance collide with insect society. The mythopoeic quality like using a folk motif of shrinking, makes political points about warfare and development in Northeast India. Importantly, Dai frames the perspective of nature not as a problem to be overcome but as a treasure. As in *Escaping the Land* the non-human narrator (an insect queen) repeatedly speaks of how "greatly have we suffered" under the errors of humankind. Through such narrative, Dai inverts human-centred narration where the Earth and its creatures tell the story. This aligns with an ecocentric approach and a postcolonial one since it lets the formerly voiceless, whether it is from nature or indigenous perspective, speak back to the colonizer; modern society.

Another important text by Mamang Dai is the novel *The Black Hill* (2014) which parallels William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by having children lost in a district of Arunachal, encountering a lost Adivasi community and jungle. Again, the jungle and its survival customs become central. Critics note that Dai often assumes the role of a kind of tribal spokesperson as her fiction undertakes that the land and its nonhumans have ethical agency. In an interview, Dai herself emphasized that "with the landscape comes a common shared culture" (The Hindu 2010), which means that ecology and community identity are inseparable. Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury remarks that Dai "gives much prominence to nature and holds it as a common link that binds all [Northeastern peoples] ... together on a common platform" (2021). Dai thus effectively frames her literature as an eco-nationalistic platform, where reverence for land underpins cultural unity. In narrative terms, her technique is often lyrical and meditative. She uses first-person reflections that read like a conversation with nature. In her autobiography-styled *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh* (2004), she includes recipes for jungle herbs alongside stories of traditional festivals by blurring the line between culture and ecology. Similarly, her fiction frequently invokes omens and rituals. An example of cultural cosmology is her use of the Adi community's beliefs in forest spirits and mountain deities. These are not just ornamental details; they serve to *naturalize* environmental ethics. When Dai describes folk rituals to appease a god of fertility (so the rice will grow), she is not romanticizing; she is encoding an ecological code of respect. This reflects the ecofeminist insight that Indigenous matrilineal practices, like Adi women's leadership in festivals, often go together with earth stewardship.

Ishita Haldar notes that in *Escaping the Land* Mamang Dai "weaves together history, myth, and contemporary politics" (140), situating her ecological critique within the very fabric of Arunachali life. It stresses that Dai and her characters do not treat Indigenous customs as quaint relics but as living wisdom. The story includes a tribe that conducts a cyclical communal service to honour insects and soil. It implicitly critiques wage labourers' exploitation of nature. By juxtaposing such tribal scenarios with modern news reports of dam projects and wars, Dai's narrative satirizes how modern "progress" disrupts ecological balance. Therefore, we see that Mamang Dai's eco-discourse is characterized by reverence for the environment as culture. She draws explicitly on Adi's indigenous knowledge. Forests and rivers teach and heal, just as

spiritual leaders do, in her works. Her work is often compared to *bioregional ecopoetry*, aligning with Vandana Shiva's ideas of "staying alive" through harmony and diversity (Chatterjee 30). The literary act of Dai is a form of activism, it alerts readers that development which ignores "the old ways" of tribal life risks destroying "the old ways" of nature. By poetically depicting rivers as moral agents and mountains as ancestors, Dai's fiction and poetry make the natural world a co-narrator of history by challenging anthropocentric narratives of progress.

Easterine Kire: Mythic Forests, Witches, and the Naga Soul

Easterine Kire is a Nagaland-born novelist whose works often blend Naga folklore with contemporary life. Her Angami heritage and journalism background inform her stories which frequently take place in lush mountain and jungle settings. Kire's approach is deeply animistic where animals, spirits, land, and the river itself participate in the plot. In *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and *Don't Run, My Love* (2017), protagonists venture into the forest on mystical quests. In these novels, the forest is not an inert backdrop but a dynamic presence. One critic remarks that the protagonist Vilie in *When the River Sleeps* sees the forest as his "wife," a living partner, and the river as a possible god. Kire thus literally casts nature as familial by undermining the human-nonhuman divide. In the novel, Kire also explores the healing and nurturing aspects of nature. The young hunter Vilie travels with a stone that might grant wishes; an image drawn from Naga legend. Along the way, tribal villagers extend him hospitality under open skies. Women collect nettles for bark cloth and men catch fish, all without expectation of reward. This vivid scene is more than scenic, it "illustrates the cultural richness and communal harmony embedded in the Naga people's everyday life" (Roy 723). Kire is saying that in the traditional Naga world, nature and community are inseparable. The forest provides food and medicine; the villagers, in turn, honour the forest through rituals. The story emphasizes nature's generosity. As we see, when Vilie breaks his leg, a herbal healer (a villager woman) uses "bitter wormwood and rock bee honey" (724) as remedies which validate indigenous botanical knowledge. Throughout the narrative, as Rajendra Prasad Roy notes, nature "assumes a position of utmost significance and is not subservient" and it is "perceived as a bestower of sustenance and refuge" (723). Thus, Kire explicitly rejects anthropocentrism by portraying Nature as an active agent and saviour.

Don't Run, My Love published in 2017 further develops Kire's eco-discourse through folklore. Set in contemporary Kohima, it interweaves legends of witches, werewolves, and forest spirits with a modern love story. Critics have specifically applied an Ecofeminist lens to this novel. They point out that Kire "juxtaposes the natural and the supernatural to understand the ecofeminist message" (Yasmin 37). Her stories present mystical female figures and malevolent spirits not just as fantasy but as symbols of nature's power and social taboos. In Kire's narrative, a woman accused of being a witch is also a symbol of nature's untamed aspect. The tropes of "therianthropes and otherkins" are used to implicate humans in the natural cycle, rather than to demonize the forest. These mystical beings teach us about ecological sustainability. They also illustrate how human social injustice is often accompanied by environmental injustice. Easterine Kire thus makes the forest haunted by its own, suggesting that disrespect of nature brings curses as real as any werewolf.

In close reading, both novels show nature shaping character. For instance, Vilie in *River Sleeps* is driven by dreams of a magical river, while in *Don't Run* the heroine is nearly consumed by the legend of a plant that punishes violence. Kire often has her characters confront their own mistakes in the context of the wilderness. One passage in *River Sleeps* has Vilie reflect under a

“cobalt sky” on how humans, animals, and spirits might share the same fate. Kire’s lyrical style makes nature an almost sentient narrator. Thus, we see across her work, that Kire’s eco-discursive goal is to make the reader empathize with the voice of the forest. The communal scenes in *River Sleeps* like villagers chanting work songs under trees, singing chants to the river, these altogether create a discourse of belonging. At the same time, the violence lurking in both novels, like poaching, envy, and modern greed, is counterpointed by nature’s resilience: the forest outlasts each generation. The narrative insists that the characters learn humility. By the end of *River Sleeps*, the reader sees that the river’s stone will only grant wishes to those who understand balance. Likewise, in *Don’t Run*, the village’s eventual reconciliation with the forest creatures suggests a restored harmony when human and non-human boundaries are respected.

Dhruba Hazarika: Country Stories and Human-Animal Bonds

Dhruba Hazarika’s fiction, notably the short story collection *Luck* (2009), similarly uses narrative to confront human-nature relations, though with a somewhat different tone. Hazarika is Assamese, and his stories often take place in Meghalaya’s hills or Assam’s countryside. A key characteristic of his work is empathy with wildlife. Critics have remarked that he “moves away from” stereotypical Northeast violence tropes and instead emphasizes “man’s essential connection to the world of nature” (Chowdhury). In *Luck*, he does this through episodic tales in which urban or disillusioned individuals have meaningful encounters with animals. According to Payel Dutta Chowdhury, *Luck* reads like “a breath of fresh air” in Northeast literature, because it portrays “empathy with all creatures great and small.” The title story, for example, follows a solitary shopkeeper who befriends a wounded pigeon. Through this humble bird, he learns the patience and compassion he had lost. Other stories feature a caged sparrow, a jealous elephant, and even a buffalo’s perspective. Importantly, Hazarika presents no violent polemic; no one is lectured. Instead, he “presents an intangible, almost mystical connection between humans and the other species” (Chowdhury). This narrative strategy is almost fable-like. By humanizing animals by giving the pigeon a name, thoughts, or songs, he invites readers to see animals as kin. Chowdhury further notes that Hazarika “carries on Dai’s feelings further and presents man’s relationship with nature from the perspective of someone who is familiar to the natural world of the North-East.” Indeed, Hazarika’s narrators are often fellow tribal villagers or rural people whose lives are still intertwined with the forest. In many stories, the initial conflict arises from a modern ignorance of nature and is resolved through a moment of insight. For instance, in the story “Luck,” the protagonist’s loneliness is highlighted by his desire for pets. The bird’s independence and beauty eventually soften him as he learns “a thing or two about patience and caring in the company of a pigeon” (Chowdhury).

Underlying these narratives is a discourse of comfort and belonging. As Payel Dutta Chowdhury has rightly observed “In almost all the stories... Hazarika explores the comfort and soothing effect that man draws from the relationship he shares with nature”. In other words, the stories frequently end on a note of warmth and reconciliation rather than tragedy or confrontation. This is not to say he ignores environmental harm; but rather, he suggests remedy through empathy. Hazarika’s approach can be contrasted with more activist or tragic ecocritics. He opts for small, personal connections where a child cries when a snake dies, and an old man weeps for an injured monkey. This evokes eco-ethical sentiment as every creature has intrinsic value. Hazarika’s perspective is essentially indigenous. His characters routinely consult village elders or recall folk proverbs about animals aligning their worldview with ancient wisdom. In *Luck*, the natural world is a kind of teacher and family. By rescuing animals or simply

acknowledging them, characters often find a sense of redemption. The implied message is that modern alienation can be healed by returning to a more harmonious worldview – one akin to that expressed by Dai and Kire. In Hazarika's fictional universe, nature is not merely a victim of exploitation; it is a partner in recovery.

From a postcolonial angle, Hazarika's focus on rural life implicitly critiques the detachment of urban modernity. Assam, despite its lush Brahmaputra valley, faces rapid urbanization and resource development like oil drilling and dam construction. Hazarika's calm country stories act as a subtle counter-narrative, reminding readers of their cultural roots. By framing animals as keepers of memory, he enshrines ecological knowledge. For instance, one character in *Luck* recalls stories of his grandfather about respecting forests; by the end, he treats a wild stray as a grandson. This narrative foregrounds Indigenous kinship with all beings. His tales also have a quiet ecofeminist undercurrent. Women in *Luck* often play healing roles like a grandmother treats a bird's wound, and a teacher loves all animals as "her kids." This is less explicit than in Kire or Ao, but it resonates: empathy, often coded as feminine in literature, becomes the cure for ecological imbalance. Even the title *Luck* hints at fortune derived from humility: those who respect nature find luck.

Common Threads: Resistance and Reinterpretation

Across these authors, several common narrative strategies and themes emerge, which function as discourse tools. First is the portrayal of nature as living and agentic. Whether it is Ao's sacred trees and sagacious beasts, Dai's sentient rivers and insects, Kire's anamorphic spirits, or Hazarika's talking animals, nature in Northeast fiction is imbued with voice. This narrative technique invites readers to consider nature as a participant in the story's meaning. It challenges the Western development narrative where nature is often just an inert "background." In each case, literature itself becomes a form of environmental advocacy. By anthropomorphizing or spiritualizing the nonhuman, these texts teach respect implicitly. Second, all four authors root for ecological awareness in culture and cosmology. Their fiction is replete with indigenous rituals, songs, myths, and proverbs. For example, Kire often quotes folk chants about the forest, Dai recounts Adi harvest festivals, and Ao includes Naga folk songs. These elements function discursively to validate indigenous knowledge. By doing so, the authors resist the notion that development is culture-neutral. They imply that losing folk practices or lore (a byproduct of modernization) is tantamount to losing an ecological guidebook. Critic Shurhonuo Tsurho captures this by noting how Northeast poets' works reflect grief over nature's erosion and glorification of nature's might – these writers are mourning the loss of ancestral wisdom even as they celebrate it (35-38).

Third, each writer embeds a critique of development and anthropocentrism in subtle narrative form. Temsula Ao's explicit "green development" debate, Mamang Dai's allegories of ecological collapse, Easterine Kire's moral fables, and Dhruba Hazarika's parables all signal opposition to unexamined progress. Importantly, none frame modernity as entirely villainous, but they do insist on balance. The critics note that Northeast authors observe how human violence against nature yields disharmony. Researching Northeast poetry Dr. Cheryl Antonette Dumenil thus declares that its writers often seek ecological balance and sentimentalize a harmonious past (1296). Similarly, Ao's protagonists feel alienated by modernization (the "ugliness of modernization" in her poems (Samaddar 97)), and Hazarika's characters feel lost in alienating cities. By recovering traditional land ethics, these texts offer counter-discourses.

Finally, the collective effect is an environmental counter-narrative that addresses policy and ideology by way of story. Through critical discourse analysis, we see that these literary works articulate alternatives to prevailing development language. For instance, while the media might call a dam “progress,” Ao’s story might make it a point of grief; while the government might tout deforestation as job creation, Dai’s novel might depict the spiritual crisis it causes. The discursive agents here are the texts and characters themselves: a healer who curses deforestation, a hunter humbled by a tiger, and a child taught by a forest spirit. Each narrative element functions like a small persuasive speech. Summing up, eco-critics assert that literature can salvage nature by reshaping public imagination. These Northeast writers fulfill that role by their works which teach sensitivity and model eco-friendly worldviews.

Conclusion

By analyzing these texts through ecocritical, postcolonial, and ecofeminist lenses, we see that Northeast Indian literature constitutes a vibrant eco-discourse. Ao, Dai, Kire, and Hazarika are not mere novelists or poets of nostalgia; they are literary activists. They rebuild village cosmologies on the page so that readers cannot easily ignore the nonhuman world. This paper has shown that their narrative strategies function as forms of resistance to anthropocentrism and blind development. Each writer’s work invites us to “belong” to the land: Ao’s Naga protagonists insist on evoking ancient kinship with nature; Dai reminds us that the Himalayan peoples have a shared culture of ecology; Kire demonstrates that a river or a witch can act with as much agency as a politician; Hazarika conveys that an injured bird can be a teacher. In practice, these texts have shaped environmental awareness. By turning pages, readers participate in sustainability. The stories can stir empathy and solidarity with forests and rivers as if they were neighbours. It is not too much to say that they write environmental ethics. Thus, Northeast Indian literary texts act as discourses of ecology. They expand the parameters of Indian English writing to include tribal voices and ecological thought. Thus, their works remind us that literature does not just reflect the world: it can reimagine it.

References

- Ao, Temsula. *Laburnum for My Head*. Penguin Books, 2009.
- . *These Hills Called Home*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- Chatterjee, Nilanjana. “Ecological ‘Self’ vs the Ecological ‘Other’: Indigenous Naga Ecotopia for the Dystopic World.” *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2022, pp. 29-47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2022.14.03>.
- Chowdhury, Payel Dutta. “Exploring the Relationship Between Man and Nature in Dhruba Hazarika’s *Luck*.” *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 28 Sept. 2021, <https://www.the-criterion.com/exploring-the-relationship-between-man-and-nature-in-dhruba-hazarikas/>
- Dai, Mamang. *River Poems*. Writers Workshop, 2013.
- . *Escaping the Land*. Speaking Tiger, 2021.
- . *The Black Hill*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.
- Dumenil, Cheryl Antonette. “The Voices of the Rivers and Mountains of the Northeast: An Ecocritical Reading of Mamang Dai’s Poems.” *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1296-1305.
- Ghosal, Abhisek. “Appraising ‘Green Development’: An Ecocritical Reading of

- Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 2, no. 6, 2018, pp. 19-27.
- Glottfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis". *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glottfelty and Harold Fromm. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Griffin, Gabriele. "Discourse Analysis". *Research Methods for English Studies*. Edited by Gabriele Griffin. Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
- Haldar, Ishita. "The Ecocritical and Ecological Outlooks in Mamang Dai's *Escaping the Land*." *Creative Flight Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2023, pp. 139-150.
- Hazarika, Dhruba. *Luck*. Penguin India, 2009.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.
- Jevan, Subash N. "Negotiating Change with Memory". Interview of Mamang Dai. Source: THE HINDU, 3rd January 2010.
<http://www.hindu.com/lr/2010/01/03/stories/2010010350130300.htm>
- Kire, Easterine. *When the River Sleeps*. Zubaan Books, 2014.
- . *Don't Run, My Love*. Speaking Tiger, 2017.
- Kumar, Kailash. "Role of Women and Environment in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*". *Bulletin of Advanced English Studies (BAES)*, vol. 5 no. 1, 2020, pp. 1-7.
- Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, 2014.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Roy, Rajendra Prasad. "Ecocritical Reading of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol. 11, no. 12, 2023, pp. 720-724.
- Samaddar, Debasis. "Tracing Eco-consciousness in Temsula Ao: The Voice from the Northeast." *Creative Flight Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2020, pp. 95-106.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive*. Zed Books Ltd, 1989.
- Sudha, S. "Promulgating Environmental Awareness in Mamang Dai's *River Poems*." *Creative Flight Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2022, pp. 84-90.
- Tsurho, Shurhono. "Literature and Ecocriticism: A Study of Selected North-East Indian Poetry in English." *International Journal of Advanced Research*, vol. 11, no. 3, Mar. 2023, pp. 35-38.
- Yasmin, Nawab Tabassum. "The Tales of Therianthropes and Otherkins: A Study of The 'others' in Nature as Represented in Easterine Kire's novel *Don't Run, My Love* and *When the River Sleeps*". *Drishti: The Sight*, Vol. IX, no. I, 2020, pp. 37-41.

Storied Lands and Silenced Voices: Reading Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* through the lens of *Terristory*

Prajnaa Ananyaa¹, Amarjeet Nayak²

¹Research Scholar

National Institute of Science Education and Research, An OCC of Homi Bhabha National Institute, Bhubaneswar 752050, Odisha, India.

E-mail - prajnaa.ananyaa@niser.ac.in | ORCID id: [0000-0002-9723-1715](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9723-1715)

²Associate Professor

National Institute of Science Education and Research, An OCC of Homi Bhabha National Institute, Bhubaneswar 752050, Odisha, India.

E-mail - amarjeet@niser.ac.in | ORCID id: [0000-0001-9857-5184](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9857-5184)

Abstract

Indigenous epistemologies, shaped by deep, reciprocal relationships with the land, have historically been marginalised under colonial regimes, a pattern that persists in many post-colonial contexts. In Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, India, the exclusion of the local Idu Mishmi community from decisions related to wildlife conservation exemplifies the ongoing erasure of Indigenous perspectives and territorial claims by dominant state and scientific discourses, demanding immediate critical interrogation. Situated within this critical imperative, the paper examines Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014), a novel set in the nineteenth century in the region now known as Arunachal Pradesh, home to several Indigenous communities, including the Idu Mishmis of the Dibang Valley, through the lens of *terristory*, a concept rooted in Indigenous relational ontology that understands land and narrative as inherently interconnected. It argues that *terristory*, disrupted by colonial and post-colonial forces, finds powerful expression in Dai's novel through its privileging of oral traditions, animistic worldviews, and the dissolution of boundaries between myth and history. These narrative strategies resist hegemonic epistemologies, reaffirm Indigenous sovereignty, and articulate alternative ecological ethics. In doing so, the novel emerges as a vital intervention in ongoing struggles over land, identity, and knowledge.

Keywords: Land, Oral traditions, Terristory, Epistemic violence, *The Black Hill*

1. Introduction

When conservation scientist, Sahil Nijhawan went to the Dibang Valley in March of 2012 to assess the presence of tigers beyond the boundaries of the formally designated Protected Areas of Northeast India, he was advised by an elder¹ hailing from the Idu Mishmi community inhabiting the region, to "go high up in the mountains" if he wanted to find "a lot of tigers." The elder said, "In our culture, tigers live on tall mountains." However, Nijhawan's understanding of tiger ecology, at that point of time, grounded in scientific education and backed by "hard-data," suggested that "a lot of tigers didn't and couldn't 'live on high mountains'", because "tigers were a conservation dependent species that (only) survived when governments and NGOs...put in active measures to protect them." Since there existed no such facilities to protect

tigers in the high mountains, Nijhawan recalls receiving the Idu elder's suggestion with a courteous nod, "as you do when dismissing someone, politely." He concluded that "the 'tigers' that the Idu elder was talking about were either fictional or unfortunate remnants of a past population." However, his initial assumptions would be challenged by subsequent studies, prompted by the discovery of tiger tracks in "the tall mountains" just days later, precisely as the Idu elder had claimed. This not only validated the elder's ecological knowledge but also revealed the limitations of Nijhawan's "scientifically-backed" assumptions (Nijhawan).

Nijhawan's initial scepticism towards the Idu perspective on the presence of the tiger in the "tall mountains" exemplifies a broader pattern of systemic devaluation of Indigenous voices and epistemologies by dominant state and science discourses. This tendency to dismiss Indigenous perspectives is most apparent in the conservation strategies employed by both state and non-state actors in Dibang Valley. Much like Nijhawan's initial disbelief in the Idu elder's cultural assertion, these conservation interventions have been widely criticised for alienating the voices of the Idu Mishmi community in decisions that directly affect their lands. The exclusion of Idu Mishmi voice from conservation policymaking is a striking example of this marginalisation. Ebbo Mili, an advocate from the Idu Mishmi community, highlights the arbitrary and illegal nature of the declaration of Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary's (DWLS) in the past. Pointing out that the decision violated provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act and the Forest Rights Act, which require formal consultations with local communities, Mili explains:

"As Idu Mishmis are forest dwellers, FRA (Forest Rights Act) was applicable here and a meeting should have been arranged chaired by the Gram Panchayat. However, the DC (District Controller) wrote a letter saying there were no claims or objections by the villagers despite them being given 8 month's time. They arbitrarily declared it as Wildlife Sanctuary and didn't entertain the claims and objection" (Guha).

Such dismissal of Indigenous perspectives and epistemologies stems from colonial biases that privilege written traditions over oral ones, reinforcing hierarchies that have historically regarded orality as inferior within the written/oral binary. Colonialist discourses framed the written word as the primary site of epistemic authority, endowing it with the power of "presence," civilisational prestige, and legitimate, institutional knowledge. Valorised for its perceived permanence, fixity, and capacity for exact reproduction, the written word was symbolically aligned with the apparatus of colonial governance and cultural superiority. In contrast, the spoken word, within colonial discourse, was seen with suspicion owing to its inherent adaptability and contextual fluidity.

Reflecting on the entanglement of writing with colonial regimes of power and epistemological superiority, and the simultaneous ascription of a sense of lack to orality in colonialist discourse, Tilottoma Misra argues:

"the colonial ethnographer often represented the colonised as being bedazzled by the superior technological advancement of the colonisers, and the written records were considered to be the most potent emblems of power" (Misra 26).

While the written word in the colonial discourse, thus, represented more than just a means of documentation and became a performative marker of colonial authority, orality, in the colonialist discourse, Temsula Ao notes, was "identified with the illiterate and even the uncivilised" (Ao 104).

The dominant state and science discourses in post-colonial India, similarly shaped by colonial hegemonic notions of “modernity” and “progress,” that valorise the written word as a superior form of technology, continue to perpetuate the colonial dismissal of orally transmitted Indigenous knowledge as irrational and deficient. Consequently, rich and complex oral epistemologies are relegated to the realm of superstition, obscuring their intellectual depth and cultural legitimacy.

The post-colonial perpetuation of colonial epistemic hierarchies, as evidenced in the preceding discussion on Nijhawan’s experience with the Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh and the alienation of the Idu voice from conservation decisions, underpins the tension between Indigenous and Institutional understandings of the tiger in Dibang Valley. Elaborated by Ambika Aiyadurai in her article, “Tigers are Our Brothers’: Understanding Human-Nature Relations in the Mishmi Hills, Northeast India,” the Idu Mishmi’s relationalⁱⁱ and culturally embedded knowledge of the tiger, whereby the tiger is perceived to be a brother to the Idu Mishmi, stands in stark contrast to state and science constructions of the tiger as a national asset and an endangered species.

This epistemological conflict lies at the core of the Idu-Mishmi resistance to the National Tiger Conservation Authority’s (NTCA) proposal to convert the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary into a designated tiger reserve. Concerned about potential displacement and the severance of ties with their ancestral land, an outcome which would critically disrupt their livelihood and relational ontology, the Idu Mishmis have actively challenged the proposed conversion of the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary (DWLS) to a tiger reserve. Central to their resistance is the invocation of the story of Idu-tiger brotherhood, which, tracing the origin of tigers and Idu-Mishmis to a common ancestral mother, underpins an ethical worldview in which the tiger is regarded not merely as wildlife, but as kin, rendering the act of killing a tiger a grave moral transgression, akin to homicide. This deeply rooted ethical relationship is poignantly articulated by Angeche, a 45-year-old Idu Mishmi, in a conversation with Aiyadurai:

“Why a tiger reserve here? We don’t hunt tigers, they are our brothers! Tigers and humans were born to the same mother. We kill tigers only as a last option, when they become a human threat or when they are killed in traps accidentally. We are protecting them anyway” (308).

As both Nijhawan and Aiyadurai demonstrate in their respective works, the dominant conservationist narrative, which frames the reconstitution of the DWLS as a tiger reserve as essential for the protection of the species, is challenged by the reality on the ground. Dibang Valley already functions, in practice, as a culturally protected habitat for tigers:

“Dibang Valley indeed acted like a well-guarded tiger reserve, except that there were no forest guards, systematic patrols, government funding, Tiger Conservation Plans, eco-resorts or tiger tourists. The tiger, its prey and its habitat were protected in Dibang Valley by Idu culture, which in turn has been safeguarded by Arunachal’s Inner Line Permit, a legal instrument that prohibits the influx of non-locals” (Nijhawan).

These critical studies, while validating the Idu Mishmi perspective on their tiger sibling, reveal the profound relationship between Indigenous expressions, historically rooted in orality and infused with Indigenous knowledge, and the landⁱⁱⁱ they emerge from. This connection between land and Indigenous expressions constitutes the cultural and ontological foundation for many Indigenous communities across the world. In the context of the Idu Mishmi community, it is this

relational bond with the land and its constituent members that shapes their knowledge of the presence and movement of their tiger kin.

This intrinsic unity of land and narratives is conceptualised by Warren Cariou through the neologism *territory*,^{iv} a portmanteau of “territory” and “story.” Challenging the representational model of signification dominant in Western critical traditions, which frames stories and narratives as mere mimetic depictions of land, and informed by works of Indigenous thinkers such as Jeannette Armstrong, the lens of *territory* reorients this relationship. Rather than viewing land as the passive object of narrative, Armstrong (1997), in “Land Speaking,” emphasises that land itself communicates through stories, and that indigenous narratives can emerge from the land. Building upon this notion, *territory* centres the interrelation between land and narrative, treating them not as separate entities but as an interwoven force, as “aspects of the same thing or not thing, but action, relation, energy, location” (Cariou 8).

Within the framework of *territory*, thus, Indigenous land and narrative form a dynamic, living, and nurturing relational medium that Cariou describes as “the ground of culture” in which Indigenous communities not only survive but flourish. This medium also includes entities or beings from whom Indigenous peoples learn their responsibilities, reinforcing an ethics of care, accountability, and reciprocity. *Territory*, thus, signifies not a single bond but a plural and ongoing network of relations rooted in the connection between land and narratives constituting the very mode through which Indigenous peoples are rooted in both community and land.

Further, suggesting that “the distinction between story (oral tradition) and land is itself part of the colonial process of commodification and separation that has disrupted so much of Indigenous culture and philosophy,” (Cariou 2), he foregrounds the practice of *territory* as a means of reasserting the relationality between land and Indigenous expression, offering a decolonial framework against the separation caused by colonial contact between Indigenous expressions and land-based identity. Viewed through the lens of *territory*, the Idu Mishmi claims of human-tiger brotherhood in the Dibang Valley, in response to dominant narratives that risk severing their connection with the land, can be understood as an affirmation of the enduring Idu Mishmi relationship with a fellow member of the land, the tiger, and by implication, reinforcing their claims to their land. *Territory*, thus articulated, through the story of Idu-tiger brotherhood, operates as a mode of asserting territorial and cultural sovereignty, grounded in a relational epistemology that has historically structured Idu lifeworlds. By foregrounding this interspecies kinship, *territory* functions as a counter-discursive framework that challenges both the hierarchical logics of colonial epistemologies and the reductive conservation paradigms of the post-colonial state, which often silence Indigenous voices and disrupt the relational ethics at the heart of such knowledge systems.

In light of the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous voices within the post-colonial Indian nation state, as evidenced in the preceding discussion, it is imperative to interrogate the dominant discourses that sustain and perpetuate these exclusions. This paper, situating itself within this critical imperative, offers a close reading of Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill* (2014) through the lens of *territory*. It pays particular attention to the ways the novel, set in the mid-nineteenth century in the region now known as Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India, the same state in which the Idu Mishmi conservation conflict discussed above unfolds, engages with the literary practice of what Temsula Ao terms “writing orality,” by articulating specifically Abor and Mishmi relational epistemologies embedded in land and narrative. In doing so, it delineates how the novel resists dominant discourses that delegitimise Indigenous knowledge systems as

illegitimate, a form of epistemic violence which has tangible, material consequences, as illustrated by the tensions between state-led scientific conservation agendas and Indigenous Idu perspectives in the Dibang Valley.

2. *The Black Hill through the lens of Terristory:*

In an early section of the novel, titled “Kajinsha and Gimur,” set in 1850, during the initial period of British incursions in to the Abor territory, a village elder responds to the British incineration of an Abor settlement with a powerful statement: “The British may conquer the world but they will never take our land. The words of the milguns^v are like a fleabite” (Dai 25).

While acknowledging the global reach of British imperial conquest, the elder’s statement, implying the lack of potency of the coloniser’s words to claim Abor land, articulates a striking epistemological opposition to colonial authority. This resistance is rooted in the worldview that is cardinal to Indigenous traditions, whereby language, particularly oral language, is deeply intertwined with the land. What renders the coloniser’s “words” ineffective, no more consequential than a “fleabite,” in terms of making claims to Abor land, is their grounding in a predominantly chirographic (writing-based) culture, one that remains disconnected from the land and the living, relational modes of knowing which are sustained through orality.

Unlike the words of the Abor, which are grounded in centuries of cohabitation with the land, and derive strength from that embeddedness, the colonisers’ words—whether spoken or written—are dis-embedded from such relations. Produced within a culture where writing has eclipsed orality, these words are alien, abstract, and unmoored from place, and thus incapable of establishing a legitimate claim to land. The statement, therefore, does more than merely dismiss the authority of the British colonial presence through a rejection of the power of their chirographically rooted discourse; it simultaneously affirms the Abor people’s place-based claim to their land by foregrounding their enduring connection to the land through their oral tradition.

This positioning of orality as a form of sovereignty, implying that the power to claim and inhabit land lies not in imperial documents or declarations (symbolised by “the words of the milguns” here), but in the sustained relationality of Indigenous narrative practices, constitutes an instance when terristory is asserted in defiance of colonial advances into Abor land. This moment encapsulates the novel’s broader exploration of the deep interconnection between land and orality within Indigenous communities as a mode of resistance to colonial epistemic violence.

2.1 Disruptions and Reassertions of terristory in *The Black Hill*

While the Abor elder’s statement affirms terristory, it simultaneously reveals a need for such an affirmation, suggesting conditions of disruption in the relational order that necessitated its reassertion in the first place. As Cariou observes, while terristory constitutes the cultural ground upon which Indigenous entities live and relate, the imperative to assert the relationality between Indigenous expressions and their land arises primarily in moments when that continuity is disrupted by external forces:

“There is no need for the stories (narratives) to make a claim to the land when their connection to the land is not contested by an outside agent-when terristory exists in its full strength and unity. The need for a land claim comes at the moment when terristory has been disrupted, and the land claim can be understood as an attempt to re-assert the primacy of terristory” (5).

One way in which disruption of terristory unfolds in the novel is through internalisation of the colonial gaze,^{vi} resulting from colonial epistemic violence, which is symbolically encoded

through the recurrent motif of the written/oral binary in the novel. One of the prominent characters in the novel, Gimur, situated within a predominantly oral epistemological framework of the Abor community, following her encounter with the chirographic culture for the first time through a spelling book scripted by the colonisers, is seen mimicking the act of writing. This moment marks the beginning of her internalisation of the colonial gaze, which surfaces in a later exchange with her friend Lendem. Feeling cornered on being confronted by Lendem's uncomfortable questions about her relationship with a man from another tribe, she reflects to herself, "Now he's trying to lecture me...just because he can speak Assamese and read a few words, he thinks he knows everything" (Dai 32). In this moment, Lendem's ability to read and his command over the script-based Assamese language signify for Gimur, a form of power, while simultaneously ascribing a sense of lack to her non-chirographic self, even as she resists that authority.

This internalisation of the colonial gaze leads to the gradual erosion of epistemic worth, triggering a rupture in Gimur's relational connection to the land. Caught between oral Indigenous knowledge systems and the written, chirographic order of the colonisers, she struggles to locate herself in territory. This crisis becomes evident when Gimur is seen reflecting on the significance of land after her bond with it is fractured in the wake of her encounter with chirographic culture:

"What is land? Why is it so precious? Even her mother had agreed that land was everything, throwing up her hands at her daughter's insistent questions. 'It is where you were born!' She had said. And how important was that?" (Dai 70).

While Gimur's internalisation of the colonial gaze following colonial epistemic violence precipitates a rupture in her relationship with land, reflecting a disruption in territory, the reverse holds true too. When the land is subjected to colonial violence, its connection with speech is severed too, thereby signalling a disruption of territory from the other end.

In a deeply poignant moment in the novel, that marks a rupture in territory, and captures the significance of the title of the novel, "The Black Hill," Gimur lapses into a state of permanent silence after having endured a series of traumatic experiences following the violent attack by the colonisers on the hill she and her husband, Kajinsha lived on, rendering it "black," "strewn with ash and blood." (Dai 267) These cumulative experiences, following the attack on their land, leave her unable to form coherent, meaningful sentences. Rendered incapable of doing anything more than "uttering sounds like unintelligible prayers" (Dai 282), her ability to engage with language in the way she once could, that is, through speech, collapses. In other words, the physical violence inflicted on the land that once held Kajinsha and Gimur's home, followed by further acts of colonial aggression, including Kajinsha's death at the hands of the colonisers, marks a moment that takes away Gimur's ability to speak, to practice orality, reflecting an interruption in territory. This moment, once again, reasserts the profound connection between Indigenous expressions and the land the community lives with.

The hierarchical written/oral binary, as structured by colonial discourse through which epistemic violence is encoded in the novel, however, provokes its own undoing as the novel performs a symbolic subversion of the binary by overturning the motif to centre orality and reclaim its epistemic value. When Gimur, on being introduced to the chirographic culture through the spelling book, pretends to record words and events on it, in a moment that foregrounds the epistemic tension between orality and literacy, her mother reprimands her for

“wasting time with these white, dead leaves!” as she sarcastically asks her, “What kind of magic are you expecting by doing this?” (Dai 33).

In a parallel gesture, when the French Jesuit priest, Father Krick, emblematic of a culture steeped in chirographic traditions, presents a letter of safe conduct issued by the Tibetan authorities to the Mishmi chief, Zumsha, he rejects the letter. Rather than serving its intended function as a legitimising instrument ensuring the priest’s safe passage through Mishmi territory, the letter instead provokes sentiments of anger. Zumsha, located within an oral epistemological framework, threatens to “throw it (the letter) into the fire” (Dai 158).

While these acts of overturning seemingly appear to echo the traditional privileging of speech over writing in Western philosophy, a hierarchical binary construct that Derrida effectively deconstructs in *Of Grammatology*, they assume a distinctly counter-hegemonic character in the colonial context of the narrative of the novel. For Indigenous communities anchored in oral epistemologies and subjected to chirographically-informed colonial regimes of dominance, the privileging of speech operates not as a philosophical return to the traditional binary construct privileging the oral over the written, but as a counter-hegemonic intervention, a symbolic act of resistance against the self-serving colonial hierarchical structuring of the written/oral binary.

In this context, Zumsha’s refusal to accept the letter, emblematic of the written word and its institutional weight, becomes a figurative act of resistance, enacted through speech, symbolising the reclamation of orality as an instrument of agency and dissent. In a similar gesture, when Gimur’s mother urges her to “speak the words you mean” instead of imitating the act of inscription, she privileges vocal expression over the act of writing, thereby subverting the colonial logic that historically aligns meaning and authority with the written word.

In the face of colonial epistemic violence, affirmations of orality, central to Indigenous relational epistemology, function as assertions of territory. However, territory is most powerfully asserted when Indigenous connection to the land is foregrounded as a direct response to such violence. A pivotal moment in *The Black Hill* illustrates this when the Mishmi chief Kajinsha, following a conversation with Father Krick, reclaims epistemic authority by invoking his ability to read the land. In response to the Bible-holding priest’s implied spiritual superiority, evident in Kajinsha’s challenge, “Why you have come here to tell us of a God you say is more powerful than any other god”, Kajinsha responds:

“The Tibetan Lamas have books and you read your book for knowledge of God. We read the land. The land is our book. Everything here on the hill, the grass and rocks and stones is saying something” (Dai 140).

For Kajinsha, land itself becomes scripture, a living repository of knowledge, and reading the land emerges as an Indigenous epistemic practice that resists colonial impositions, reasserting the vitality of territory as a space of relational knowledge and resistance.

2.2 Narrating “Territories” in *The Black Hill*

Territory, in *The Black Hill*, also unfolds through the narration of a kind of stories that Carious suggests best exemplifies territory, by linking themselves to the land in material ways. Although Carious extends the applicability of *territory* beyond oral forms to encompass all narrative types, its emphasis on the materiality of oral stories makes it particularly suited to engaging with Indigenous oral storytelling. Focusing specifically on oral narratives, his point of departure for conceptualising *territory*, Carious argues that *territory*, by demonstrating that oral

stories are not detached from but inhabit the land, and have material presence, enables a critical rejection of the long-held assumption about the transient nature of oral stories. In underlining the materiality of oral stories, often disregarded by dominant discourses as relics of the pre-modern past, *territory* provides a powerful critical framework for understanding the continued vitality of Indigenous storytelling in the contemporary world and for affirming Indigenous sovereignty, agency, and ethical relationality with land when that relationship is contested. As Cariou posits:

“Rather than imagining oral stories as evanescent, incorporeal and constantly threatened with disappearance, perhaps this way of thinking would help us to foreground the substantiality of stories, their matter and their resilience. If stories live in the land and are not separate from it, then it is easier to see how they are as real and persistent as anything in the material world.” (Cariou, 2020, p.2).

One such story is evoked by the sight of a rock in the section titled “Journey.” On their way to Kajinsha’s place, Gimur and Kajinsha come across a rock. Pointing towards it, Kajinsha recounts the story of a girl the rock has come to be associated with. The girl, claimed by the spirit of a bird in the tug of war between man and spirits, had to go and live with him only to return once to pay the bride price in the form of a mighty wind (to clear her parents’ fields). Accompanied by a tiger in this journey, before leaving, the daughter promises to “spread her red garment on that rock, there” every day to let them know that she was alive and well. However, as Kajinsha recounts, “For four years the old couple looked at the rock and saw their daughter’s bright cloth spread out on it. Then one day the rock was bare” (Dai 66).

The story serves as a mnemonic device as the sight of the rock triggers Kajinsha’s recollection of the story embedded in the rock. Kajinsha, here, engages in a practice what Cariou articulates as “a mode of reading the land,” whereby people “see these places and remember the stories, and often re-tell the stories as they are passing by” thereby linking them to the land in a profoundly material way (Dai, 2014, p. 3). The rock, marked by the absence of the red cloth, is imprinted with the story of the girl.

While the rock, imprinted with the girl’s story, may function as a geographical marker aiding in the navigation of the landscape, it simultaneously serves as a site for the inscription of Mishmi Indigenous ontological credence characterised by its animistic faith and the reciprocal relationship with the land, specifically in this context, its more-than-human animal and bird inhabitants. The agency and personhood attributed to the bird spirit who marries the girl, and the notion of the tiger as a companion, delineate a cosmology in which the more-than-human entities are conceived as agential beings with consciousness. This ontological stance is reaffirmed by Kajinsha later, when he attributes speaking agency to various land-members including the hill, grass, rocks and stones as he asserts how “all of them are telling something to us which we need to listen to” (Dai 140).

Aiyadurai sheds light on the ways the ethical underpinnings of the Mishmi relationship to their land, particularly the animals, are shaped by their animistic ontological credence and the attendant practice of attributing personhood to more-than-human members of the land. While the level of personhood ascribed to different animals might vary, the animist relational ontology, integral to the community’s ways of life, nonetheless creates a worldview that perceives animals and more-than-human entities to have intentionality, consciousness, and moral agency. It is within this epistemological context that the practice of hunting, although undertaken for subsistence, trade, and protection of humans and their products, is never seen as a neutral act of

resource extraction but as a morally charged encounter. The act of hunting is, therefore, always attended by a sense of moral responsibility that manifests itself in taboos and rituals observed before, during, or after the hunting activity. As Aiyadurai remarks, "There is a sense of moral responsibility attached to hunted animals, and taboos (aangi) observed during hunting and trapping make hunting (aambe) a serious activity" (Aiyadurai 309).

In the novel, thus, territory is sustained through the material embodiment of the story by the rock, which continues to elicit the story in those who pass by, prompting them to become storytellers, much like Kajinsha does for Gimur, thereby ensuring the story's continued circulation through its oral rearticulations.

Within this framework, the figure of the tiger as a human companion, as portrayed in the story, also resonates with the story of the Idu-tiger brotherhood, as discussed earlier in the paper, reinforcing the Idu-Mishmi articulations of territory as a counter-narrative to state and science-driven discourses on tiger conservation in the Dibang Valley.

In another resonant moment in the narrative, territory, as the convergence of land and story as a living, relational matrix, is dramatised through the story of the river serpent, rooted in oral traditions, as the story shifts from mythical time^{vii} into the historical time of the novel's plot. The episode unfolds during Kajinsha and Gimur's journey to his ancestral home, when they encounter a snake and Kajinsha kills the creature without much hesitation. This act of killing the snake, while on the surface, appears incidental, within the Indigenous epistemological cosmology the novel invokes, it marks a rupture with the more-than-human world governed by rules of respect, reciprocity, and ancestral memory. Shortly after this incident, Gimur, who is pregnant, is seen seated beside a river. The sight of the river becomes a sensory and mnemonic portal that transports her into the realm of remembered stories from her childhood, tales of a serpent spirit dwelling in the river, angered by the killing of her children, waiting in the depths to exact revenge.

Gimur's internal monologue, "There is always a serpent spirit lurking in deep water, waiting to pull someone in... The snake is angry because her children have been killed by men, and she wants revenge. Who is the unfortunate passerby she will claim?" (Dai 84), signals not only her embeddedness in the Abor cosmology, but also a foreboding sense of retribution. The narrative follows this moment with the traumatic loss of one of her twin children in childbirth, transforming the serpent's vengeance from a mythic motif into a lived, historical consequence. In doing so, the novel collapses the binary between mythical time and historical time, showing how the world of stories continues to inflect and shape the material world. Kajinsha's act of killing a snake reflects disregard for the cosmological knowledge and the moral and ontological order embedded in the story and becomes an act of transgression against the more-than-human realm, which results in the subsequent loss of one of his twins during childbirth. Portraying the serpent as a being with memory, grievance, and agency, this incident constitutes a moment of interspecies reckoning illuminating the relational consequences of failing to uphold the protocols of co-existence inscribed in the Indigenous epistemologies. This blending of temporalities – mythical and historical – not only affirms the enduring vitality of orality within Indigenous lifeworlds but also challenges colonial and post-colonial dominant temporal regimes that seek to relegate such narratives to a mythologised past. By allowing oral traditions to actively intervene in the novel's historical present, *The Black Hill* asserts the epistemological sovereignty of Indigenous storytelling against both colonial and post-colonial forms of epistemic violence. The serpent story becomes a vessel of territory, a way of knowing, being, and relating,

where narrative and land co-constitute one another. It is within this relational field that Kajinsha's loss gains its fullest meaning: as both a personal tragedy and a cultural allegory of what happens when the sacred balance between humans and the more-than-human world is disrupted.

3. Conclusion

Reading *The Black Hill* through the lens of *territory* demonstrates that while territory is grounded in Indigenous relational ontology that understands land and story as co-constitutive, it gains particular urgency in the face of colonial disruption, both epistemic and material. The novel illustrates how such disruptions, manifested in the internalisation of the colonial gaze, the privileging of chirographic authority, and the violent assault on inhabited land, fracture the intimate connection between Indigenous expressions, identity, and the land. Yet, these moments of rupture also become occasions for resistance and re-articulation. Through symbolic refusals of the written word and acts of oral and territorial reassertion, characters such as Kajinsha, Zumsha, and Gimur's mother reclaim orality as a site of Indigenous agency.

Territory also emerges, in the novel, through stories embedded in physical features of the landscape, such as the story of the girl evoked by the rock, or the story of the serpent spirit dwelling in the river. Through these "territories," Indigenous oral traditions are shown not as ephemeral myths of a distant past but as vital, material, and enduring forms of knowledge. These stories do not merely describe the land; they inhabit it, transforming geographical features into storied sites that guide, instruct, and bear witness to ethical relationships with the more-than-human world. Through these stories, the novel foregrounds an animistic ontology that attributes agency, consciousness, and memory to animals, spirits, and elements of the landscape, thereby affirming a worldview in which the land is not inert or passive but alive with relational significance.

This materiality of "territories" is further emphasised in the conflation of mythical and historical time, most notable in the juxtaposition of Kajinsha's killing of a snake followed by the death of one of his twins, and the story of the vengeful serpent spirit dwelling in the river, seeking retribution for the loss of her children. This merging of the historical and the mythical time transforms the story into a cultural allegory of what happens when the sacred balance between humans and the more-than-human world is disrupted, thereby affirming the continued presence and potency of the story within the historical narrative of the novel. In doing so, *The Black Hill* affirms the enduring vitality of orality within Indigenous lifeworlds, challenging colonial and post-colonial dominant temporal regimes that seek to relegate such narratives to a mythologised past.

The novel's assertion of the material and epistemic force of "territories" through its collapse of mythical and historical time acquires deeper significance when situated against the backdrop of the marginalisation of Idu Mishmi knowledge systems by dominant state and science discourse that tend to relegate the Idu Mishmi story of human-tiger kinship to the realm of myth and superstition. Recent findings that lend credence to the narrative of Idu-tiger brotherhood, coupled with Idu Mishmi concerns over losing access to their ancestral lands if the proposed tiger reserve is implemented, underscore the high stakes of epistemic silencing faced by the community. In this light, the novel's articulation of territory as a dynamic and resistant force gains renewed political urgency, speaking directly to the ongoing struggles over land, identity, and epistemic sovereignty in the region.

Thus, the paper, by drawing parallels between epistemic violence of colonial discourses and the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous voices in post-colonial India, particularly in the context of tensions between state and science conservation narratives and the Idu-Mishmi oral tradition that is underpinned by a relational ethic, underscores the urgency of sustaining *territory* as a contemporary framework for reading and relating to land. Such a framework carries important implications for alternative modes of ecological thinking, rooted in ethics of respect and responsibility. Through this act of ^{viii}“writing orality,” *The Black Hill* itself becomes an instance of “territory,” reasserting the relational ethic between human and more-than-human being.

References

- Aiyadurai, Ambika. “Tigers Are Our Brothers: Understanding Human–Nature Relations in the Mishmi Hills, Northeast India.” *Conservation & Society* 14.4 (2016): 305–316. Web. Accessed 22 January. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-4923.197614>.
- an Eeden, Jeanne. “The Colonial Gaze: Imperialism, Myths, and South African Popular Culture.” *Design Issues* 20.2 (2004): 18–33. Web. Accessed 2 March. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1512077>.
- Ao, Tamsula. “Writing Orality.” *Orality and Beyond: A North-East Indian Perspective*. Eds. Soumen Sen and Desmond L. Kharmawphlang. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007. 99–112. Print.
- Armstrong, Jeannette. “Land Speaking.” *Speaking for the Generations*. Ed. Simon Ortiz. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1997. 172–191. Print.
- Cariou, Warren. “Territory: Land and Language in the Indigenous Short Story – Oral and Written.” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 42.2 (2020): 1–10. Web. Accessed 15 January. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.2356>.
- Dai, Mamang. “On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives.” *India International Centre Quarterly* 32.2/3 (2005): 1–6. Web. Accessed 17 January. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005973>.
- Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. New Delhi: Aleph, 2014. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. Print.
- Drichel, Simone. “The Time of Hybridity.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34.6 (2008): 587–615. Web. Accessed 26 February. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453708090330>.
- Guha, Nabarun. “Why Are Idu Mishmis Resisting a Proposed Tiger Reserve in Dibang Valley?” *Mongabay India*. 12 May 2023. Web. Accessed 27 February. <https://india.mongabay.com/2023/05/why-are-idu-mishmis-resisting-a-proposed-tiger-reserve-in-dibang-valley/>.
- Misra, Tilottoma. “Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in Northeast India.” *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*. Ed. Margaret Ch. Zama. New Delhi: Sage, 2013. 14–27. Print.
- Neeganagwedgin, Erica. “Indigenous Ancestral Lands and Elders’ Epistemologies in a Time of Pandemic.” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 16.4 (2020): 406–08. Web. 1 June 2025.
- Nijhawan, Shashank. “Tribal Tigers.” *Sanctuary Nature Foundation*, 2019. Web. Accessed 24 February. <https://www.sanctuarynaturefoundation.org/article/tribal-tigers>.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Pariat, Janice. *Boats on Land*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2012. Print.
- Prodhani, Jaydeep, and Urmila Kuhad. “Interview: Critical Dialogue with Mamang Dai.” *Rupkatha Journal* 14.2 (2022): 1–10. Web. Accessed 4 March. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne44>.

Rood, Tim. "Mythical and Historical Time in Herodotus: Scaliger, Jacoby, and the Chronographic Tradition." *The Authoritative Historian: Tradition and Innovation in Ancient Historiography*. Ed. K. Scarlett Kingsley, Giustina Monti, and Tim Rood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 62–81. Print.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. London: Zed, 2012. Print.

"The Role of Elder Indigenous Knowledge and Connection to Land." *The Keeping Place*, www.thekeepingplace.com/the-role-of-elder-indigenous-knowledge-and-connection-to-land/. Web. Accessed 1 May 2025.

Vizenor, Gerald, ed. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008. Print.

Wilson, Shawn. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax: Fernwood, 2008. Print.

ⁱ Also, referred to in the *The Black Hill* by Dai, the term "ELDER," IN THE INDIGENOUS CONTEXT, carries far deeper significance than its conventional association with age. An "elder," in this context, is a respected member of the community, who, being deeply attuned to the land, assumes the role of the custodian of traditional knowledge, oral histories, and cosmological insight, and transmits the community's values and ethical frameworks across generations through storytelling, ceremonial practice, and embodied example. Thus, in the context discussed above, the advice offered to Nijhawan gains much more significance precisely because it is given by an Idu Mishmi elder, who, by his long-standing relationship with the land, and people, embodies the Indigenous relational responsibility.

ⁱⁱIn the Indigenous context, "relationality" refers to the foundational worldview that sees all life, human and more-than-human entities, as interconnected through relationships of responsibility, reciprocity, and respect. Instead of seeing individuals or knowledge as isolated or autonomous, relationality underlines how meaning, identity, and knowledge emerge from and are sustained by relationships with the land, community, ancestors, spirits, and more-than-human entities.

ⁱⁱⁱ"Land," within the Indigenous relational framework, is not seen as an object or just a resource but as a living relation. Often seen as a relative or kin, land, in this context, is a part of a web of reciprocal relationships between humans and more-than-human beings, including animals, plants, ancestors, and spiritual beings.

^{iv} Due to the layered meanings embedded in the term, this paper employs three distinct usages of TERRISTORY. When italicised, TERRISTORY denotes the conceptual framework developed by Cariou and employed to read *The Black Hill* in this paper; when used in plain text, terristory refers broadly to the relational connection between land and narrative within Indigenous ontologies; and when placed within quotation marks, "terristory" refers to specific stories from within the oral tradition of Indigenous communities (in this context, the Abor and Mishmi oral traditions) which best exemplify terristory.

^v "Milgun" is a term employed in *The Black Hill* to refer to British colonisers.

^{vi} "Colonial gaze" refers to the way colonisers perceived, constructed, and represented the colonised subjects and their cultures from a position of dominance, control, and assumed superiority.

^{vii} "Mythical time" refers to the non-linear, mythic temporality often found in oral traditions, myths, and Indigenous storytelling, where events are not bound by historical chronology but exist in timeless, symbolic or cyclical realm.

^{viii} "Writing orality," conceptualised by Temsula Ao, refers to the act of translating oral traditions, stories, and Indigenous worldviews into written literary forms, thereby preserving and revitalising them within literary and cultural discourse.

The Banter and the Bond: A Tapestry of Tender Tales in *Din about Chins* by Santosh Bakaya

Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar

Retd. Officiating Principal and Associate Professor of English

MLN College, Yamuna Nagar, Haryana 135001

Mail id: ritukumar@gmail.com

Bibliographic Information:

Name of the Book: *Din About Chins - Vignettes about Mother and Daughter*

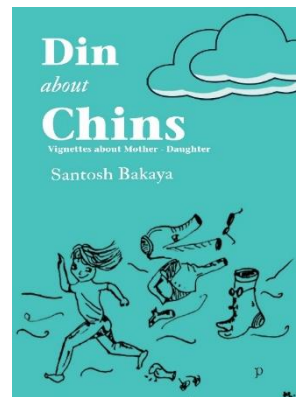
Author: Santosh Bakaya

Publisher: Penprints

Language: English

ISBN: 978-8197403668

Price: Rs. 450



“So many chunks of memories came jostling and elbowing from all sides, that I had a tough time ducking them.”

Santosh Bakaya

Santosh Bakaya's *Din about Chins- Vignettes about Mother Daughter* is a kaleidoscope of mother-daughter memories—each anecdote a fleck of colour on the tapestry of time, textured with tenderness, tickled by laughter, and tethered to truth. Rooted in the vibrant soil of Indian domestic life yet soaring in literary imagination, this collection of anecdotes revolving around her daughter Iha reads like a series of love letters — humorous, honest, and human. The title *Din about Chins* itself jingles like a nursery rhyme, suggestive of an inside joke — an onomatopoeic secret handshake between mother and daughter. This playful phoneticism signals what lies within: the lyrical wrapped in the laughable. The prose carries the melodic touch of one who has danced with words before — Santosh Bakaya, after all, is a poet at heart.

Much like Erma Bombeck, whose *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?* brought motherhood into the literary limelight with humour and heart, Bakaya's stories mix domestic drama with deft comic relief. In one anecdote, Iha declares, “You can smile and smile and yet be a villain. Villainy thy name is mom” — a Shakespearean snipe, cheekily revised for the breakfast table. The Bard meets brat, and comedy ensues. In “Of Teddy Bears, Calories and Clouds”, a teenager's deflection becomes a philosophical quip: “I was looking at the mirror, not in the mirror.” It evokes the introspective spirit of Virginia Woolf but is anchored

in hormonal angst and cotton-candy rebellion. When Iha protests, "Don't browbeat me with your knowledge," she voices a universal teenage lament — the desperate need to be seen, not sermonized. Like Sudha Murty, especially in her collection *Three Thousand Stitches*, Bakaya celebrates the extraordinariness of the ordinary. In "Want You to Have a Good Time", Iha orchestrates her mother's birthday with colour-coded kurtas and culinary delight — an act of love that mirrors Murty's belief that "compassion is not taught in schools; it's taught at home."

Another delightfully personified moment comes in *Love Never Dies — The Pizza*, where food turns feisty. "The pizza bit me back," Iha declares, licking a singed lip. It's culinary slapstick, yes — but also symbolic of love's bite: warm, sudden, unforgettable. The humour here is never slapstick for its own sake. It's a prism through which parental love refracts.

INCORRIGIBLE is perhaps Bakaya at her most Wodehousian. She can be found quipping -INCORRIGIBLE must be turning its head, in response to a daughter's sass, turning a vocabulary lesson into a comic opera. The word seems to don a monocle and protest from a dusty Oxford tome. Wodehouse once said, "To find oneself no longer a subject for conversation is a tragic fate." Bakaya ensures words never suffer that fate. In "The Flurry About Egg Curry", the poetic clash of "yummy and yukky, yolks and folks" spirals into a minor epic. Domestic negotiations become delicious dialectics. Bakaya excels in such oxymoronic juxtapositions: the comic undercuts the crisis, the trivial becomes tender. With "Oh, the Horrel of It!", she captures a moment of linguistic misfire — Iha's mispronunciation of "horror" becomes "horrel" — but it's more than cute diction. It's childhood defiance, dramatic flair, and droll delivery rolled into one. One is reminded of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* or *Sophie from the BFG*, who weaponize words with innocence and insolence.

"Come Listen to Me" takes a more contemplative turn. Iha's engagement with Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream becomes a mirror of awakening — not just social, but personal. "If he could dream that dream, why can't I?" she asks. It's not just rhetoric; it's resolve. The anecdote pulses with Maya Angelou's spirit — the belief that "We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated." "The Inside Story", featuring Iha's first tattoo — a triangle symbolizing their family — unfolds as a tender tale of generational negotiation. The mother's apprehension dissolves into admiration. What begins as "a rash decision" ends as a "permanent mark of us." Here, Bakaya does what the finest memoirists do: reveals transformation not through epiphany, but through quiet acceptance. Bakaya's gentle jabs at digital vanity in "Selfie versus Self-Introspection" are reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's social commentary, albeit with a softer lilt. "I was caught with a grain of rice on my tooth, mid-selfie," she writes, mirroring Wilde's quip: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances." Here, appearances are judged — but with affection, not arrogance.

In "Why Are You Teaching Her Urdu?", linguistic pluralism finds a poetic champion. As ghazals echo and Gulzar's lyrics colour the backdrop, language is not a barrier but a bridge. The spirit of R.K. Narayan, whose *Malgudi Days* showed the local as universal, wafts through this piece. Cultural rootedness here is never rigid; it's fluid, fragrant, and musical. In "Neither More Nor Less" and "Attention Class", Bakaya lends dignity to childish logic. Words like "shopners" (for sharpeners) are not errors — they're windows into a nascent world. The tyrannical *Gandi Madam* looms large, but not for long. The decision to pull Iha out of that toxic class is both protest and protection — the fiercest acts of love often look like quiet exits.

In “Yummy Mummy, Anything for a Hungry Tummy”, the generational axis tilts — Iha now nurses her mother. “Chill, bro!” she says, wrapping warmth in teenage slang. These moments are deeply reminiscent of Jhumpa Lahiri, who writes in *Unaccustomed Earth*, “The best journeys are the ones that answer questions you didn’t think to ask.” Bakaya’s anecdotes are not about answers; they are about evolving questions. From “You Are Incurable, Mom” to “The Squirrel”, from “I Am Jiggered” to “Minor Wars and the Corollary”, language transforms into heirloom. “Swatchescoollp” and “Whoopsy Splunkers” aren’t just made-up words — they are family myths, private shibboleths. Bakaya’s brilliance lies in transforming private jokes into public joy. “The Travails of Being an Adult” and “Cut, Cut, Cut” peel back adulthood’s glitter to reveal its grit. Iha’s grown-up decisions reflect maturity, yet her bond with her mother remains unsevered. In “A Mother’s Tremors”, as earthquakes ripple across geography and heartlines, the metaphor solidifies: maternal love is the Richter scale of the soul- Immeasurable!

The Last Word: A Tapestry of Tenderness

Santosh Bakaya’s *Din about Chins* is a literary embroidery — every anecdote a stitch, every pun a knot, every sigh a silken thread. Her diction dances with figurative finesse — personifications, oxymorons, puns, paradoxes — all woven into an idiom at once Indian and intimate. This collection sits on the shelf beside works like Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* — stories that celebrate the soft power of domesticity. But unlike many who romanticize motherhood, Bakaya illuminates its comedy, its contradictions, and its contagious affection. In a world rushing toward the sensational, *Din about Chins* invites us to pause, to savour the small: a daughter’s mispronunciation, a misplaced lunchbox, a mother’s bemused smile. These are not just anecdotes; they are lullabies of legacy.

In these pages, humour hugs pathos,
Wit waltzes with wisdom,
And every anecdote becomes a lullaby, whispered from one generation to the next.
Santosh Bakaya, like a bard with a poised pen,
Strings together stories that do not merely entertain —
They echo, endure, and endear.

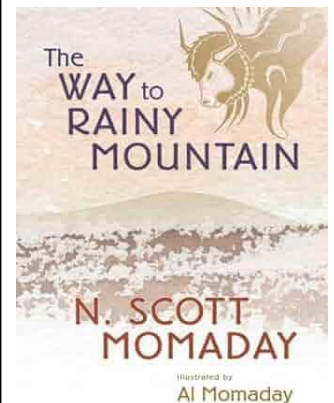
Reviewer’s Details:

Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar, Retd. Officiating Principal and Associate Professor of English at MLN College, Yamuna Nagar, is an accomplished writer, poet, and academician. With over 500 published articles, poems, and middles in leading national newspapers and magazines, she has also authored eight acclaimed books across poetry, essays, and fiction. Over 75 of her research papers appear in reputed national and international journals. A frequent resource person and panelist at national literary forums, including the 2024 Delhi Book Fair, she has conducted numerous creative writing workshops. Twice recipient of the Indian Woman Achiever Award (Asian Literary Society), she has been featured by *The Hindustan Times*, *The Tribune*, and *The Times of India*. Honoured by the District Administration (2023) and recognized internationally by Poetry Planet (Philippines), Dr. Kumar continues to inspire through her multifaceted literary contributions and scholarly achievements.

"Folklore and the Anthropocene": A Review of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, by Scott Momaday**Samantha Robin Christopher**

Lecturer

Graduate English Department, Bishop Cotton Women's Christian College, Bangalore

Mail id: samantharobinchristopher18@gmail.com | Orcid: [0009-0002-9588-1156](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9588-1156)**Bibliographic Information:****Name of the Book:** *The Way to Rainy Mountain***Author:** N. Scott Momaday**Publisher:** University of New Mexico Press**Language:** English**ISBN:** ISBN 978-0-8263-0436-0**Price:** Rs. 3,444 /-**INTRODUCTION**

*"Yes, I thought, now I see the earth as it really is; never again will I see things as I saw them yesterday or the day before."*ⁱ

- Scott Momaday

Native American folklore has dwelt on the communal self, where Indigenous memoirs visibly depict how individual and communal histories are unavoidably correlated. The voices of myth, history and memory in each chapter are seamlessly interwoven, transforming this oral tradition into a rich written tapestry. Momaday intertwines fact and fiction by linking the mythical, cultural, historical and personal through a literary tracing of Kiowa migration. The usage of multiple voices and the style of oral composition in his memoir allows for a more layered comprehension of the Kiowan consciousness.

The way of life and cultural history of the Kiowa tribe is deeply embedded in its food, language and religion, which is profoundly reflected in their oral tradition that is passed down from generation to generation. This bicultural composite narrative¹ contains representations of culture that are all controlled by a system governed by biopolitics within the American subcontinent. This is a reference to the political apparatuses that dominate social structures, be they ideological or repressive. Power dynamics between the

¹ Bicultural composite composition refers to the creation of something new by blending elements from two distinct cultures. This can manifest in various forms, like literature.

coloniser and the colonised shift, resulting in a bio-social hierarchy, thereby giving rise to an imbalance in the socialisation process that aims to preserve and extend the empire.

So, the subversive and resistant vernacular expression by way of song, story and oral tradition of the Kiowan cultural ethos challenges Eurocentric metanarratives steeped in Orientalist practices. These oral forms are visceral, artistic, and authentic, offering a powerful counter-narrative to colonial hegemony. The memoir juxtaposes the cultural reality of the Kiowa tribe with Western modernity, unveiling the Native American existence in an era transitioning and consumed by industrialism and innovation.

CONTEXT

The indigenous way of life as a more sustainable practice of living shows that Humankind's impact on nature has made this ecological epoch one of precarity. The accelerating intensity of urbanisation and civilisation has made the ecosystem more susceptible to damage. It has made the collective masses more desensitised to the destruction of the natural environment in the age of the Anthropocene. This memoir explores the effects of colonial displacement in tribal native American communities as an outcome and consequence of British colonisation. The impact of Western culture is visible despite native resistance to altering and amalgamating native traditions with Western religious and political ideologies. During decolonisation, the Kiowa community transitioned from colonial domination to co-existing with its natural environment. This piece of folklore discovers sentiments in Native American mythology that are peculiarly and uniquely multicultural and pantheistic. The narrative is an ode to Momaday's Grandmother Aho as much as it is to preserving oral tradition. This tradition is about passing down culture, history and stories generation after generation through the spoken word.

ANALYSIS

The memoir is highly metaphorical and symbolic in the tone it exudes, which gushes with intense eloquence and colloquialism specific to the Kiowan community. One cannot ignore the facet of the sign and the signifier in this memoir and how tastefully it draws the audience with its magnetic articulation, where the author's gravitas is reflected in this narrative's mimesis. While the memoir presents itself artistically and sensitively, which makes up for the absence of a stream of consciousness and characterisation, the author's insights into his own life leave the reader grasping for more.

The reader will notice the blend of history and local folklore woven into this chronicle, including several origin myths that rationalise the origin of the tribe, much like Adam and Eve, for instance. Or how, as a people, they are protected by their ancestors, who are believed to be constellations in the sky. This memoir is an account of a journey of hundreds of miles that spanned many generations, and like every epic journey, it starts with a single step. This memoir amalgamates historical events and the subjective personal memory of the incidents that took place when the U.S. military displaced the native American tribe in the late 1860s. The individual experience transforms into the political here.

The author embarks on a journey that traces back to the migration of the Kiowa tribe from Yellowstone River eastward to the Black Hills and ultimately south to Wichita Mountains, Oklahoma, where a knoll marked by the harsh weather enveloped in rains, blizzards, and tornados is celebrated with an evocative moniker- Rainy Mountain. The climate and the wilting flora cast a sense of alienation over the land that could symbolise

the tribe's loss of identity. Since warfare was a matter of disposition and not survival for the Kiowa tribe, it was not uncommon to witness rivalry between clans. Yet, as they traversed through the wilderness, Kiowans enlisted the help of fellow native tribes like the Comanches to reach their destination.

Cut to the Summer of 1879; this may be recorded as the date of disappearance of the Buffalo from the Kiowa country. Thenceforth the appearance of even a single animal was a rare event. ⁱⁱ (Momaday 67) This tug of war between man and nature is illustrated in the memoir as a battle of brawn between a buffalo and an archer. These stories embody the desire of the tribe and nature, how they both yearn for a restored biodiversity as nature fights back and emerges victorious, if only in the realm of imagination. Momaday explores the historical experience with the use of the imaginative realm. And even in the imaginative dimension, that is a direct depiction of Kiowan culture, wherein the pervasiveness of misogyny cannot be evaded. Women who are considered "bad" or "immoral" are stringently dealt with for the most minor offences.

Much akin to patriarchy, the Kiowa clan could hardly escape cultural imperialism, the pleasures of which the coloniser basked in. As a result of this hegemony², various dispositifs³ were employed to engulf and transmute the Kiowan way of life, which gradually faded away and gave way to the prevalence of Western religious practices. The once potent Indigenous ethos eventually led to the triumph of predominant culture as an ideological base, as seen in the gripping account of Aho, Momaday's grandmother, who changed her last name from Mammedaty to Momaday as a way of adopting Christian naming conventions.

Still, the humanity and identity of the Kiowa tribe persist, and its ways are not entirely lost but idle in the background. The landscape and terrain of one knoll of the Wichita Mountains, whose nom de plume came to be Rainy Mountain, reflects and symbolises the strength, toughness and fortitude of the Kiowan people. As Momaday's words come to life, one must pay attention to the significance of each signifying element in his narrative. The foreshadowing of events to come, allow us to anticipate struggle and recognise the Kiowans' ability to overcome. Through the penning down of the Kiowan oral tradition, it is discernible that the journey of a thousand miles isn't just a journey but a pilgrimage with spiritual demands that beckons the tribe to their new home. Legend and myth become interfused with memory, which allows for an exploration of varied origin myths that could surpass even the most captivating bedtime story through its vivid imagery and masterful rhetoric.

The aforementioned continuous and recurring displacement and migration of the Kiowa tribe results in an alteration of biodiversity within the disputed native American geographical territory. The leading causes of loss of biodiversity are land use change and overexploitation of resources. There is a desecration of the hallowed ground which the Kiowan community called their own. This results directly in an imbalance of nature and geographical conditions, even though the Indigenous community engages in sustainable practices that are intertwined with a collective environmentally conservational consciousness that preserves the ecosystem.

The involuntary relocation resulted in the loss of connection to their land, flora, fauna and other resources. The Buffalo, in particular, was a vital part of the Sun-dance ritual and served as a sacred cultural symbol of the tribe's connection to the Sun. The tragic near-extinction of the Buffalo before the migration was

² Control by a dominant group. (political, social, etc.) in this case, the western coloniser.

³ Machinery, device, or tool of power. (See Foucault's "The Confession of the Flesh" 1977)

caused by a colonial strategic agenda to subjugate and destabilise the native way of life. In the face of adversity and famine, they were left with no other choice than to rely heavily on Buffalo for sustenance during their forced migration, resulting in the complete extinction of the Buffalo.ⁱⁱⁱ (HÄMÄLÄINEN 3) Therefore, the 'Great Buffalo Massacre' was indeed a result of colonial military strategy.^{iv} (*Great American Buffalo Slaughter* | EBSCO, n.d., p. 1)

This resulted in the persistent relocation from period to period, which is bound to result in land use change that diversely affects the biodiversity of an ecological system in terms of less vegetation diversity and leads to further extinction and environmental degradation. Yet, the human spirit endures through the "collective unconsciousness"⁴ of the tribe that remains persistent despite strife, turmoil and loss within the significant healing Tai-me ritual that is an embodiment of the ethereal and mystical.

CONCLUSION

*Nothing moves, and it does not occur to you to make any sound. Something is going on there in the shadows.
Everything has slowed to a stop in order that the Sun might take leave of the land.^v*

- **Scott Momaday**

This book does not just explore the linear trajectory of historical events; it alternates between memories of the author's grandmother and Kiowan mythology, anecdotes, and indigenous wisdom. The memoir is an experience in itself that cannot be fully savoured until there is a subjective affective interaction between the reader and the text. Momaday proves to be a Wordsmith in this endeavour, like all his other writing, which gives us a profound sense of the metaphysical in very concrete terms.

In this profound and poignant narrative, one is led through a compelling catharsis of the author, where every anecdote, legend, or reminiscence of the past evokes a specific emotive response. Digressing to an eco-critical point of view, Momaday has given the contemporary critic the opportunity to delve into the timeless struggle of Humankind vs. nature that is relevant even today. Since we live in the age of the Anthropocene, this memoir offers lessons and sheds light on Humankind's unstable relationship with Mother Nature and urges us to be wary of the implications of neo-colonialism and the aftereffects of annexation and destruction of Indigenous land as well as forced displacement on the environment.

ⁱ Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

ⁱⁱ Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

ⁱⁱⁱ HÄMÄLÄINEN, PEKKA. "THE FIRST PHASE OF DESTRUCTION: KILLING THE SOUTHERN PLAINS BUFFALO, 1790-1840." *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2001, pp. 101–14. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23533186>. Accessed 17 June 2025. Page 3.

^{iv} *Great American Buffalo Slaughter* | EBSCO. (n.d.). EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | www.ebsco.com.
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/great-american-buffalo-slaughter>

^v Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

⁴A universal, inherited layer of the unconscious mind shared by all humans. It's a shared inheritance from our ancestors, influencing our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.