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Eco-Anxiety, Cultural Dispossession, and Environmental Crisis in Select Poetry from Meghalaya

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Abstract

The poetry of India's Northeast regions carves a special niche of its own in terms of articulating some dilemma of poetic stance in respect of an unconditioned love for and dependence on nature on the one hand and a disturbing awareness of changes in the surroundings in the name of urbanisation or development on the other. As a matter of fact, the literary treatment of this issue – the pristine beauty/bliss of nature *vis-à-vis* human intervention – has received only tonal variations in the literary world over the ages since time immemorial. This article, using textual analysis research method, examines a representative section of the poetry of Meghalaya that projects alongside the habitual documentation of the Edenic beauty of the flora and fauna, a disquieting awareness of not only some hidden danger like terrorism lurking in ambush, but also a legitimate angst against seamless bids for fetishization or commodification of indigenous culture threatening such a land specifically in the last few decades. It is interesting to note how the poetic self while feeling blessed among the plenitude of nature in a bucolic set up, can hardly avert a feeling of 'What man has made of man!'

Keywords: Commodification, urbanization, flora and fauna, intervention

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Introduction

> Give us back those forests, ye, cruel, ravenous civilization!
> Take back this city, a Bleak house of wood, stones and bricks
> Restore the hallowed shade of hermitage, days spent in sheer bliss…
> Those pastures vibrant with calm, Vedic incantation!
> (Tagore's "Sabhyatar Proti", lines 1-6, translated by authors).

An acute eco-conscience coupled with a somewhat ambiguous experience of inevitable changes in the natural environment consequent upon the processional march of civilization has ever been one of the common factors that has actuated writerly or artistic sensibilities in every age or clime. Judged in the Indian context for example, if the *khandavdahan* episode of Vyasa's *Mahabharata* metaphorically stands for ravishing nature for regal agenda (founding the capital Indraprastha) which however invites severe teleologic repercussions for man (in terms of the enmity between the Pandavas and the reptile *Takhshaka* Naga); the *Lankadahan* (the burning of Lanka, the golden city and capital of King Ravana) of Valmiki's *Ramayana* also, though viewed from an oblique angle, seems imbued with a message of inevitable disaster that nature faces when one (here, in the person of Ravana) violates the quintessential norms of *Dharma* which prescribes among other things, the perfection in observing codes of morality as conditional to 'living in perfect unison with the cosmic rhythm' – the ideal kind of existence to which nature provides the perfect backdrop.

In the poetry under discussion, an initially naïve perception of life unfolding in perfect harmony amid mystic hills, gorges, and ravines—landscapes steeped in a rich legacy of myths and legends—gradually come into focus. These terrains stretch across dense forests and past jhum fields (the traditional shifting cultivation widely practised in Meghalaya), suffused with the fragrance of unnamed flowers and resonant with the melodic calls of mythic birds or the lingering strains of indigenous stringed instruments. Such imagery evokes a deep sense of nostalgia in the poetic persona, an unnamed bard whose intimate bond with the land becomes the ground for articulating an acute ecological consciousness. This eco-conscience is awakened primarily by human-induced disruptions that, under the façade of development and progress, gesture towards ominous ecological and cultural consequences. Against this backdrop, this article undertakes a synoptic survey of select poetic voices from Meghalaya, a major state in India's Northeast, to examine how poetry becomes a medium for scripting eco-anxiety, cultural loss, and environmental precarity.

A Gleam beyond the Gloom

A quest for roots through foraging the tangled bines of the indigenous myths and folk-tales that enshrine a sanctimonious relation between man and nature threatened by modern trends, characterizes the English poetry of Meghalaya which is chiefly represented by Desmond Lee Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih along with the Shillong based Manipuri poet Robin S. Ngangom. The formidable phalanx gets further refurbished by poets like Ananya S. Guha, Esther Syiem, Donboklang Rynthathiang, Paul Lyngdoh and Bevan L. Swer among others. The general gamut of their poetry testifies to the exaltation of the pristine glory of man-nature relationship under the garb of traditional myths and legends of the land with a strong suggestiveness for a ruinous impact of ecological disaster upon human life. The beautiful panorama seems to reserve some mystery behind its veil and the uncouth stillness and calm in the familiar landscape, as if a sullen reaction to human callousness, is often symptomatic of some unsavoury possibility deluding human intelligence.

The following excerpt from the poem "When The Prime Minister Visits Shillong Bamboo Poles Watch In Silence" by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih relating to the visit of former Prime Minister I. K. Gujaral, is marked by a tone of an astute, ironic detachment in the poet (as in all of his place?) expressed in the form of a callous and unresponsive environment which curiously enough, as if possesses the capacity for feeling more than the human agents:

> When Prime Minister Gujral planned a
> visit to the city
> bamboos sprang up from pavements like a
> welcoming committee…. (lines 1-4)

This poem brings into sharp focus the innate purity and beauty in nature which mocks the human antics in the form of political games of naughts and crosses counterbalancing the opposite pulls of power and corruption on the one hand and progress and political stability on the other.

A yearning for the bucolic retreat in the past is tellingly recaptured in another poem of Nongkynrih named "Hiraeth" which being a Scottish term, stands for various forms of longing as endemic to every poetic heart, here specifically to that of the poet who is a representative of *Soso Tham*, the traditional poetic figure in the Khasi community. The clamorous set of sounds startling the poet out of his delicious slumber such as harsh *azaans* in mosques, shrill ululations in temples or midnight carols in

churches, noisy crackers and sound of bullets at night, are set in perfect contrast to the essentially natural set up associated with the day-break of the poet:

> No more do I hear the morning sounds of home:
> birds warbling, cicadas whining, crows cawing,
> chickens yapping about the yard…
> ……..
> ……..
> ……..
> our old rooster, how his triumphant cry would stir
> my slumber making me draw closer to mother. (4-11)

A perfect ecological balance presiding over the plight of his forefathers is beautifully couched in the epiphany of the past as manifested in the following excerpt:

> …. the past rises from dimly
> remembered songs and I watch my ghostly ancestors
> hasten from their dark pallets at the rooster's
> first reveille; warming up for their fields,
> boiling rice, packing their midday meal in leaves
> ……
> ……
> …. I watch them emerge from their huts
> at the third; bamboo torches twinkling in their hands, (2-20)

The saga of a life in perfect harmony with nature is expressed in the form of traditional songs that with a sanctity of usage, celebrate the pristine vitality of life: "ancient songs and playful limericks flowing / from their lips…." (21-22).

Another poem of Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih titled "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" is a poignant account of an insider's view of the ecological banality of Cherrapunjee, the wettest region in India. The land with an 'incredible barrenness,' has made poverty writ large on the hills ("Poverty eats into the hills and squeezes/ a living from stones and caterpillars" 3-4). The deep gorges in and around Cherra owe their origin to the death throes of the *Thlen*, a gigantic man-eating serpent in myth that once supposedly stalked the wilderness of the land.

Oblique Angles: Beckoning of a Lost Elysium through Myths

Yet in the midst of a deep-seated concern for ecological sanctity as expressed by Nongkynrih in the poem "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra", the persona detects in nature the fount of wisdom to imbibe for a happy life:

Men and trees have left their habitats
to a crude and lowly breed like brush,
but the sight of dark grey rocks like sages
spells home to me. (13-16)

The poet's exploration of tribal myths celebrating the sacrosanct relationship between man and nature is also found in the poem titled "Ren" which relates a Khasi folktale about the union of a young fisherman Ren and a water nymph. Ren's parting message to his mother before he is lured into the mysterious depths of water tells of two things – first, the inextricable bond between man and nature in the collective consciousness of the Khasi community and secondly, the astounding range of acculturation in this matrilineal race that absorbs divergent influences and inputs from varied experiences.

The eco-mystic element in the poetry of Nongkynrih is further rehearsed in some other poets of Meghalaya and more specifically, in the works of Almond D. Syiem. The poem titled "Lucia", bearing an obvious echo of Wordsworth's Lucy poems for example, presents nature as a mystic entity as soothing and attractive as a young girl with a tantalizing beauty. The similar kind of mystic feelings are also traceable in the poetry of Ananya Guha for whom, different aspects of nature with their distinctive properties, as if constitutes a heterogenous entity in the form of the environment. Each and every agent is as if capable for divergent feelings like human beings. The following extract from the poem titled "Tree" tends to substantiate such interpretations: "Now I am alone/alone as the tree" (1-2). The poet's personal affinity with the tree in terms of a common quality ('loneliness'), becomes further susceptible to other qualities of difference/ dissidence marked by the tree:

the tree is taciturn
knows the sun, the hills
the moon and the speckled stars
The tree stands anonymously
refusing to mingle with the ambiance. (8-12)

Poemssuch as "Evenings" and"Birds Laugh," are rich in esoteric suggestions about the elements of nature. An acute eco-consciousness in the persona comes out in expressions like – "Evening has a soul, and in it impinges/past" ("Evenings" 4-5) and "somewhere in mists are tears, blood/ and soaring skies can actually mourn" ("Birds Laugh" 4-5).

Ecocriticism in the poetry of Desmond Kharmawphlang operates in the form of a quest for roots through the cultural odyssey in traditional myths and folklores of the land. The poet finds in myths and folk-tales the glimmer of a dignified past in a radical contrast to the ignoble kind of existence amidst a mute, uncanny fear for self-amnesia under the perilous threats of Westernisation. The following excerpt from the poem "Letter from Pahambir" drives home such a conjecture:

> The stories burn our memories like
> a distant meteor searing
> the unnamed gloom, by their light I examine
> the great hurt I carry in my soul
> for having denied my own (52-56).

The ecology has a liberating spell upon the perception of the poet in so far as he can detect his roots in nature across the bars of geo-political territories. The following extract from the poem "Autopsy" spells out an urge for unity out of the cataclysmic experiences of division and disharmony wrought by man:

> You call me and I hear.
> Here, where your voice lives,
> I dream with empty hands and a sadness runs
> Between memory and being.
>
> Time is pinned to the wall
> Along with a thousand words
> And a heart weeping in the midst of broken music. (8-14)

In the works of Kharmawphlang, one further comes across an acute eco-feminist concept in the treatment of nature with the attributes of a woman or a mother so that the onslaughts on nature gestures to acts of sacrilege. The following extract from the poem "Pictures" exudes a compact feminine appeal of the terrestrial elements as revealed in the poetic vision:

> Lightning is happily licking the clouds,
> and a light drizzle falls.
> Your hair is wet, damp clothes
> delicately sculpt your body. (10-13)

Notwithstanding this eco-mystic and often a prominently eco-feminist renditions of poetic thoughts and feelings, the poets of Northeast can hardly suppress their concern

for the degrading impacts on nature coming as corollaries to the projects of urbanization and modernization. Interestingly, what bothers the poetic self is not so much the government's agendum of progress as man's willful dislocation from / indifference to his age-old relation with nature as manifested in the rampant extortion and depletion of natural resources for materialistic gains. The Uranium mining, a major environmental threat in Meghalaya, has also evoked touching poetic speculations of some ecological disaster. The poem titled "Domiasiat" (the uranium site in Meghalaya) by Paul Lyngdoh contains a poetic dirge over the loss of the essential purity of the natural surroundings as human greed does not even spare the entrails of mother earth in search of materials not essential for the common man.

This feminist interpretation of ecology, traceable to a classical lineage inaugurated by Kālidāsa—who famously conceptualized mountains through the corporeal metaphor of the earth's breasts—has continued to reverberate powerfully within Indian English literature. In contemporary writing, this ecofeminist sensibility frequently mobilizes the feminized landscape as a site of cultural memory and ecological critique. In the present context, one may mention Almond D. Syiem's poem "On Top of a Hill" that poignantly shows how the denuded and ravaged appearance of the hill evokes the imagery of a violated female body, thereby collapsing the boundaries between environmental degradation and gendered violence.

The eco-feminist feature of the poetry written in Meghalaya seems to have been endorsed by a popular *Khasi* legend that attributes to ecology a pathetic saga of suffering womanhood. The legend tells the story of an unfortunate girl whose lover dies while meeting the challenge of running up a hill as a mark of his love and also beating other rivals as per the condition of the race arranged by her father. The pathetic death of the lover whose heart burst out of panting led to the resolution of the girl to remain life-long on the hills to mourn the saga of her love aborted *in medias res*. Esther Syiem's poem "The Hill of Woman's Death" for example relates, through the persona of a girl, the pathos of unfulfilled love and the unwanted role of paternal interference that so often thwarts the possibility of a happy conjugal life for the wards.

This note of a heart-rending complaint against patriarchy may easily represent the eco-feminist urge for liberation (as voiced by the poets) from the utilitarian use or commodification of nature for vested interests camouflaged in such terms as urbanization or modernization in an essentially male-dominated society. The patriarchal treatment of nature by men and a shocking commodification of the familiar

eco-space receive a shrewd insinuation in the poem "Pahsyntiew" by Indari Syiem Warjri:

> The sons became men, royal in stature
> Having wisdom gifted by the gods
> They came to rule the misty hills;
> To dwell in pinewood mansions
> Where carpets of clouds
> And cloaks of rain
> Conserve the forests of the Khasi hills (19-25).

The fetishization of nature does not leave unaffected the nuclear features of tribal life such as their mind-set, system of values and other indigenous roots and culture and last of all, beautiful and attractive young girls of the communities as fresh as nature. The pathetic syncopation of all such traits – the physical, terrestrial and the psychological aspects under the sweep of cultural commoditization is nowhere better illustrated than in the poem "For Sale" by Paul Lyngdoh of Meghalaya:

> For sale
> this battered, autistic land with its lucre-laden earth,
> our precious minerals, medicinal herbs, rare orchids,
> and trees and fields and waters,
> ……
> ……
> our young, nubile girls, beautiful like the land itself: (1-7)
> ……
> ……
> Our cumbersome anachronistic tribal roots
> …..
> our pride, values, work culture,
> our sense of shame, our collective conscience. (15-21)

Conclusion

This paper has examined the poetry of Meghalaya that articulates a strong note of eco-conscience arising out of a concern in experiencing the innocence of the plight perpetuated over generations to be lost in the maze of unsavory changes in the familiar space wrought by diverse factors. For a careful reader, the poetic sensibility in such lands is as if found to be writhing in quest for a lost peace with the surroundings

that had worked as a matrix for the lives of generations. The paper has explored the general body of this poetic genre that articulates a craze for the revival of traditional values that enshrine a sacred bond between human life and ecology.

Taking cue from the epigraph quoting the lines of Tagore's celebrated poem "Sabhyatar Proti" (An Address to Civilisation) where the poet wistfully plumbs the depth of loss at the spiritual and psychic level as a backfire of development, it can be safely concluded that in addition to such an unsavory inheritance of loss, a plea for the restoration of the ecological balance, steering clear through the mazy issues of development involving a steady drain of natural resources from India's Northeast; forms a major thrust of Postcolonial English poetry of the region.

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