

# Decolonising Ecopedagogical Storytelling: Writing Lotha- Naga Orature through Jasmine Nzanmongi Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree*

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## Abstract

*The dismissal and devaluation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) across the world was one of the multitude facets of colonization. These knowledge systems, containing the accumulation of centuries of information, are almost on the verge of extinction following the imposition of colonial methods of Enlightenment. However, the constantly degrading climatic situation demands awareness and prompt action. This paper attempts to showcase how orally transmitted folklore(s) can be a medium for Ecopedagogy and how this pedagogical system serves as a counter-narrative to the modern anthropocentric, capitalistic landscape. These knowledge systems foster empathy and compassion for Nature and ascribes equal respect to non-human lives featuring a sharp contrast to the ruthless ways of techno-capitalism. The paper observes the transmission of ecological knowledge through Lotha-Naga Oral folklore, specifically the text *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* by Jasmine Nzanmongi Patton and how it can help bring up an ecoliterate generation, capable of making better decisions for the planet. It also situates and examines Patton's work within a larger body of global indigenous framework.*

**Keywords:** Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Lotha-Naga Folklore, Ecoliteracy, Storytelling, Ecopedagogy, Cultural Memory, Oral Literature, Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

Orature or oral literature has existed since the dawn of human civilization. In fact, as the only mode of literature existing before the invention of written script, it enabled the primitive communities to retain and transmit crucial information through storytelling and pass down traditional knowledge. The Lotha-naga tribe from Nagaland have a strong cultural tradition of orality. *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* is a short story collection comprised of thirty short Lotha-Naga folktales that were collected, written down and translated from the original oral format by the author Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton. These

stories not only provide a rich insight into Lotha-Naga Orature, but at the same time become a reflection of Lotha-Naga collective cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and moral frameworks. Like most tribal tales, these very short stories are quite intertwined with Nature as well as natural and supernatural elements. It is very clear how through these tales, Lotha-Naga people attempted to make sense of the world around them, weaving their outstanding imagination with ecological knowledge. It also highlights the communal bond between Lotha-Naga people and their symbiotic dependency on the surrounding ecology for sustenance and survival which also majorly contributes to the aesthetic sensibility of the population. Thus serving both as a medium of entertainment and a repository of knowledge. Presenting a sharp contrast between the precolonial Lotha-Naga socio-political system and its modern counterpart, the book has been lauded as one “that attempts to erase the boundaries between subaltern traditions and great traditions, however is an assertion of a political awareness on the part of communities that have been living in enchanted spaces bearing unpronounceable names.” (Mishra 102). Colonization, Christianity and the globalizing forces of modernity have impacted and disrupted the smooth transmission of Lotha-Naga knowledge systems. The simple act of preserving these stories becomes an act of radical step towards decolonising folklore and tribal narratives that had been stifled and dismissed by the colonisers and later settler communities. Patton’s book performs a vital decolonial intervention by ensuring the survival of these tales in the face of the past historical and ongoing cultural erasure. This paper attempts to examine *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* as a critical text that encapsulates ecological, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions of Lotha Naga storytelling and situates Patton’s work in a broader theoretical framework of decoloniality, ecopedagogy, and indigenous epistemology. These narratives embody a blend of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, cultural resilience and pedagogical functions, challenging colonial narratives and promoting relationality and sustainability. While at the same time transmitting eco-consciousness to battle the climate vulnerability of Nagaland which is becoming more and more prone to incidents such as increased precipitation, rainfall, and landslides.

The Nagas were orally narrated to have travelled through southwestern China and Myanmar, leaving their original habitat which is presumed to be Mongolia. The tribe settled in the erstwhile Naga Hills which is the current Nagaland. The Lotha-Nagas, considered a subgroup of the Naga tribe, inhabit the Wokha district of Nagaland. The community has always relied on oral narratives and stories due to the absence of a written script until the Roman script alongside the Bible was introduced by the American missionaries during the end of 19th century. The Lotha-naga society prior to colonization, mainly relied on agriculture; practicing shifting cultivation namely, jhoom cultivation, however they were also excellent foragers and fishermen. The traditional Lotha-Naga society was patriarchal and was characterized by gerontocracy (Ezung & Ovug 278). The concerned population inhabited the dense forests in the hilly regions and unable to comprehend unexplainable natural phenomena, they attempted to rationalize it through the richly imaginative storytelling which also carried the crux of survival in that particular area formulating moral and ethical lessons that also guaranteed survival for the upcoming generations. The interference of the British and subsequent Colonization brought about a number of transformations in the social fabric of the Lotha-Naga community. Initially, operating on a non-interference policy, direct annexation was implemented promptly and through the subjugation of the local tribes, Naga Hills district was established in 1881. The local tribes as well as Nagas were categorized into different subgroups and were stereotyped as savage and barbaric due to rituals and practices such as headhunting. Alongside the traditional sacred spaces such as the ‘Chumpo’ the Lotha-Naga political autonomy was threatened. So was the disruption of traditional land and forest usage. Furthermore, British governance was even implemented through traditional and introduced systems such as ‘Dobashi’

and 'Gaonbura' (Chase 157). Despite a fierce struggle against the British and the Lotha uprising in 1888, and with the introduction of Christianity, the Lotha-Nagas were a rapidly changing society, slowly forgetting their ancient rituals and practices. Currently, Christianity is practiced by around 87.93% of the population, making it the religion of the majority (Census 2011). Patton's very short tales attempt to transport us to precolonial Nagaland, and upon surveyance, one can see how loss and trauma have shaped the modern Lotha-Naga society, inflicted by the process of colonization. With the absence of a written script, oral storytelling had been an integral component that held the community together. The folktales were embedded into the Lotha-Naga socio-cultural landscape until the arrival of American missionaries and subsequently the British colonial forces. In the introduction of the book, Patton reveals "what they left behind was a set of people who were trapped between worlds, sceptical of their indigenous identity that distinguished them from others." (Patton 13). Despite of a history laden with unrest and turmoil the cultural resilience of the Lotha-Naga people is rooted in their land which is clearly visible through the ecopoetics of the community.

Oral storytelling has always been an integral part of indigenous and tribal population of India and around the globe. With the advent of globalization and cultural transformation, it has faced significant challenges. However, storytelling and writing down these stories has become an acknowledged method of reclamation of self-identity for the indigenous population and as a decolonizing tool. The craft of storytelling is rooted in one's cultural identity: thus facilitating cohesive social bonds, communal identity, and values. "As a research tool, Russell Bishop suggests, storytelling is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing the 'diversities of truth' within which the story teller rather than the researcher retains control." (qtd. in Smith 145). It is also crucial in understanding the function of mythological narratives in shaping cultural beliefs and practices which includes gender roles and different perspectives from within the communal space. This practice not only helps in reviving dying languages but at the same time transcribes cultural history and memory. Studies have shown transmission of oral tales amongst indigenous people helps the youth develop a sense of communal identity and helps in lowering the suicide rates. With a sense of belongingness within the community, loneliness and depressive episodes become significantly lower in the younger members (Dudgeon et. al 20). Furthermore, from a functionalist view of folklore, Indigenous ecopedagogy/gies also instill a sense of appreciation for their habitat which prevents acts that can be harmful to that space. Almost all Indian tribes have their own version of ecopedagogical tales and narratives. Sharing and discussing these stories can be a major proponent in building solidarity, literary diversity, and cross-cultural dialogue amongst tribal communities of India. Furthermore, this creates space for regaining autonomy over their own narratives thus becoming a crucial symbol of resistance towards the oppressive colonial frameworks.

David W. Orr connects the concurrent ecological crises to educational systems and a dismantling of the Western education system deeply rooted in capitalist ideologies since the industrial revolution. Orr believes that "all education is environmental education." (25) and in order to answer the 'what then?' question, the educational system propagating the rapid decline of the natural resources must be transformed entirely. Ecoliteracy or ecological literacy is the retention of ecological knowledge of the surrounding and the ecosystem while comprehending the interconnectedness of natural phenomena as well as the gravity of impact created by humans. Derived from Paulo Friere's seminal concept of 'Critical Pedagogy', ecopedagogy redefines the traditional western pedagogical frameworks and rigid, sterile aspect of science. Richard Kahn describes Ecopedagogy as a "future-oriented ecological politics that militantly opposes the globalization of neoliberalism and imperialism, on the one hand, and attempts to foment collective ecoliteracy;" and realize

culturally relevant forms of knowledge grounded in normative concepts such as sustainability, planetarity, and biophilia, on the other.”(18) Indigenous oral stories are excellent ecopedagogical tools that can foster ecoliteracy that is relevant in particular local contexts and nurture biodiversity as well as social bonds. These stories serve as the medium which transmits Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in the form of parables and moralistic lessons to navigate through life. These tales are usually passed down by the elders of the community who are considered the custodians of traditional ecological knowledge. It is. “a cumulative body of knowledge and beliefs, handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment.” (Berkes 3)

This vast repository of ecological knowledge about their surroundings is further saturated by indigenous and local populations through years of experiences and trial and error. This knowledge includes but is not limited to “hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry and a holistic knowledge, or ‘worldview’ which parallels the scientific disciplines of ecology” (Inglis) Thus TEK can show the way to sustainable resource management. Traditional Ecological Knowledge “practices can include monitoring, temporal or total protection of species or habitats, multiple species management, resource rotation, succession management, and the social mechanisms behind them such as cross-scale institutions, taboos and regulations, rituals or ceremonies, and social and religious sanctions, among others” (Berkes et al. 2000) Thus, TEK becomes a valid way of propagating ecological literacy inside and outside of the classroom. These systems do not just contain information but are also based on certain ecological principles that are rooted in human emotions such as kindness and empathy. Scholars such as Arbon advocate for a mixed pedagogical approach which validates and incorporates TEK into science classrooms. In the indigenous context, this is also known as ‘two eyed seeing’ as it combines two very different worldviews.

The short stories in the collection are written in a very simple, comprehensive language, making them accessible and enjoyable for almost every age group. While older people can relish the nuances of the craft of storytelling, this format also resonates with younger generations and bestows them with ancient yet practical wisdom. These stories are concerned with social and ethical issues, highlighting the importance of living in harmony with others (human or non-human) as well as living a life without senseless greed and jealousy. A sharp contrast to the modern anthropocentric, capitalistic ideology which has no limit on profit nor has any ethical boundaries, leading us closer and closer to a barren, polluted earth. These powerful stories when taught to young minds can surely make us hope for a better future. Patton’s book showcases the adaptability and relevance of oral storytelling in the contemporary scenario. Oral stories tend to lose their performative aspect when written down, however the author has masterfully attempted to maintain the tonality of these tales.

Wilson (2008) suggests three different types of storytelling techniques in the indigenous societies. Firstly, sacred stories, secondly indigenous legends, and thirdly, educational, metaphorical tales. The stories cover a plethora of emotions, ranging from revenge to grief. Almost all the stories combine the human and superhuman world, where non-humans and inanimate objects are imbued with agency: similar to the narrative pattern of a lot of indigenous stories across the world. They also feature deities, spirits, and supernatural beings as well as local heroes, ancient warriors and ancestors who stand for noble virtues such as bravery, wisdom, and honour.

These stories have a distinctive feature of seamlessly integrating the themes. The ecological lessons are interconnected with moral and cultural frameworks. One of the common themes the stories share is the idea of Nature as a living entity with agency. Almost all stories utilize the metaphor of anthropomorphism, which unabashedly challenges the anthropocentric western dualistic frameworks which dichotomizes human vs. Nature. It becomes a tool for creating

ecological ethics and not just a literary device, thus allowing the formation of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship. For instance, the ‘Rruuu Rruuu’ sound produced from the friction of bamboo trees, is attributed to a vengeful spirit through the story of ‘Arilao’ imbuing the tree with sentience and agency. In the story, “The Tale of the Fortunate Sister” one of the sisters gets swallowed by a tree for plucking its flower even though she was warned not to. The orphan girl had “trespassed its space without seeking its permission.” These narratives showcase themes of reciprocity and mutual respect which are highly valued in Indigenous epistemologies.

Lotha-Naga society, being a patriarchal and patrilineal tribe, emphasises on the bravery and courageous feats performed by these ancient legends. As per the stories, Lotha-Naga men are described as “Chivalrous and honour-bound.” We see such examples in the stories of ‘Ranphan, the Brave’ who fearlessly ventures into a tiger’s cave. The stories promote Lotha-Naga ideals and virtues with warnings and lessons and teach important moral lessons and communal values highlighting the dire consequences of malpractices and ill virtues. ‘The Pumpkin Bride and the Gourd Bride’ and the tale of ‘The Akao and the Jerhan’ are two such stories. The stories constantly remind us to treat everyone with compassion. “It is a common saying among Lotha Nagas that there is an unalterable law of nature whereby those who ill-treat the oppressed are also paid back in the same measure by fate.” There is a deep emphasis on accountability and ethical, moral, and spiritual obligation. Most of the stories are etiological, providing the listeners/readers with a mythical or symbolic rationale behind certain actions and practices. For instance, according to the story ‘Humchupvuli Eloie,’ tender wild taro (yikhro) cannot be cut with a machete as it causes incessant itching as a woman was once murdered with the same weapon. Thus it historizes local, cultural events and honours the memories of the people, which is very unusual for the western culture which reveres magnanimity. Similarly, in the story of ‘The Duel Between Wind and Fire,’ we see Indigenous ways of meaning-making and world view coming into play. “Old Lotha folks believe that during this feat because Fire hid in rocks, striking stones together creates fire and because it also hid in the tree trunks, which makes wood, hence rubbing and keeping sticks together makes fire too. These are both a reminder of this great contest.” (Patton 76) Many such natural incidents have been analysed by the Lotha-Naga folktales where there is a curious intermingling of wondrous imagination with profound knowledge of how the world works.

The stories also feature plants and herbs that are indispensable to the Lotha-Naga culture and cuisine. ‘How Chili was Discovered’ tells the amusing story of the discovery of a miracle plant that cured stammering and thus became an integral part of the Lotha-Naga palate. It is also a symbol of adaptation to local ecosystems by choosing practical resources. ‘The Legend of Sungalia Plant’ elaborates why the sungalia plant stayed stunted due to its disloyalty to both creepers and trees. This story also highlights the value of mutual reciprocity in the ecosystem as well as a moral lesson warning about extreme selfishness which can stunt one’s intellectual growth. These stories equip the listener with ecological consciousness and establish Nature as an active participant in the community’s day to day life. The stories also introduce us to some of the precolonial practices the Lotha-Naga community practiced, such as the ‘Lonhyaka period’ which is the period after the engagement where the future son-in-law takes on the responsibility of doing menial jobs and household chores for his fiancé’s family. One of the stories gives us an insight into the unique fishing practices where a mild poison extracted from plants was scattered into the waterbody to immobilize the fish. This is where Traditional Ecological Knowledge clashes with western philosophical systems such as Arne Naess’ ‘Deep Ecology’ which absolutely prohibits and condemns any sort of human intervention in the natural life cycle. These methods have become more and more scarce given the unscientific nature and barbarism associated with such practices. However, scholars such as Ranajit Guha has critiqued such privileged positions which undermine the struggle for resistance and sustenance for indigenous people of Third world countries (Guha 207)

Living in close quarters with nature comes with its own perils. These folktales were also a way of warning the community of different forms of dangers. They also impose environmental taboos as mechanisms for regulating human behaviour. Some stories have a dangerous animal or a natural element people have no control upon as an antagonist. The story of the battle of the 'Wind and the Fire' and 'The Sun and the Moon' talks about these cosmological entities and showcases human powerlessness during natural calamities. "Since villages were built on forest areas, wild animals posed a constant threat and nuisance to the village folk. Every now and then there was fear and paranoia spread in the village on account of man-eaters, but when a brave man lived among them, the villagers' spirits were fired up." (Patton 51) Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* explains how myths often serve as true stories that provide existential meaning and situate human practices within a sacred cosmology (17). In the stories, Nature becomes a sacred space. In the story 'The Tiyilong Legends,' a boulder becomes an object of worship in Lakhuti village. Eliade calls this 'hierophany' where certain landmarks/ sacred objects connect the community to the divine as well as their cultural identity and turns it into a sacred space. Some of these stories reflect the social background such as the patriarchal nature of the Lotha-naga society and the strict gender binary. It also sheds light on different taboos such as being a widow, or a sterile woman. These stories are intuitive and spiritual in nature and based on information transmitted through multiple generations.

The fact that these stories have managed to survive despite a couple of centuries of suppression, showcases their resilience. Gerald Vizenor calls this 'Survivance' which is derived from combining the two words Survival and resistance. It redefines narratives surrounding indigenous people, (in this case the Lotha-Nagas) emphasizing their resilience in the face of colonization and cultural erasure. 'Survivance' is defined as "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. Survivance is greater than the right of a survivable name." (Viznor 1) Moreover survivance in the indigenous context, refers to any form of self-expression irrespective of the medium which makes their current 'active presence in the world' felt. These collected tales penned down by Patton are examples of the Lotha Naga tribe's survivance against years of suppression in various forms.

## Conclusion

Many indigenous scholars are against the revelation and documentation of sacred Indigenous stories. "To write them down is to transform them, to endanger them, and ultimately may serve to deactivate them" (Haig-Brown & Dannenmann 23). However, the contrasting view is to protect them by writing them down. These oral stories run a risk of getting lost with time if not passed down properly. It only takes one generation to lose these ancient treasures full of wisdom. Jasmine Nzanmongi Patton's book bridges two distinct modes: Orature and Literature, chronicling Lotha-Naga tales and promoting ecoliteracy in the framework of indigenous epistemologies. *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* is an excellent founding stone for the upcoming indigenous literature and an inspiration to other writers who want to document the oral history/literature from their community. It is also a proof of resilience that the tribal people from India have to stand against the face of colonization and globalisation, creating a space for indigenous voices who can challenge colonial stereotypes. As Temsula Ao points out, the act of writing orality in North-Eastern India, is devoid of romantic nostalgia. Instead it is "an exploratory and evolutionary process of identifying relevant metaphors in oral sources to cope with modern predicaments by making creative writing perhaps more 'native' to the natives themselves." (110) So in a way, such writing gives way to self-exploration and rewriting the past in the terms of the colonized. The hybridity of Patton's text that merges traditional oral storytelling with contemporary literary techniques creates a space for indigenous voices within the global literary discourse. This act of documentation not only preserves

Lotha-Naga epistemologies but also challenges the Western Privileging of written traditions over oral ones. By preserving the performative essence of Lotha-Naga tales, Patton ensures their cultural authenticity while making them accessible to diverse audiences.

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