

Redefining a Land of Mist: An Eco-Critical Study of Select North-Eastern Women Poets

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Abstract

The women poets of the North-Eastern India like Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, and Dairisa Rumngong try to mainly concentrate on the interconnections between human beings and nature and how nature is being endangered due to human civilization. These women writers constantly make an effort to focus on their distinct tribal identities and tradition endeavoring for preservation of cultures and beliefs to create an environment to upgrade their own ethnic identities and to augment their ethnic literature through their valuable inspiration. My paper thus focuses on eco-criticism as a literary instrument to explore into the delicate aspects of the relationships between mother nature and human beings in the writings of some of the women poets from the north-eastern region, namely to create an environment to upgrade their own ethnic identities and for preservation of cultures and beliefs.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Women Poets, Nature, Civilization, Northeast, Tradition, Identity.

Introduction

North-East India has been considered to be a blanket term for the eight states which are included in the shell of North-East India. This term refers not only to the states but also to the diverse cultures, traditions, and heritage which these states hold as an individual identity under the blanket. But this blanket of protection has been always under a continuous struggle for progression, identity and desire to be a part of the larger blanket that is India. Thus, in case of political, social, cultural, ethical, and economical terms the north-eastern states are considered to be underprivileged in all the forms of development. There might be many reasons for this underdevelopment of the region and some of the valid reasons might be the continuous disturbed political environment by the insurgent groups and the confluence of various ethnic groups which has led to this disturbed environment. But the beautiful landscape of this region with its thunderous upheavals have given birth to strong women writers like Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Janice Pariat, Dairisa Rumngong, and many more to be mentioned. These women writers constantly focus on their distinct tribal identities and tradition endeavoring for preservation of cultures and beliefs to create an environment to upgrade their own ethnic identities. These writers try to focus on the cultural loss and recovery of these cultures and ethnic identities through the power of writing. They unlike the Indian women writers are different because these writers generally portray the pain and struggle of the region focusing on the aesthetics of poetry in the north-eastern region of India. It generally focuses on the aesthetic of the picturesque and tries to focus on how the aesthetic becomes a medium to serve the distinct political power. On one hand we can see that the vibrant natural landscape brings in peace and harmony not only to nature itself but also to human civilization. But this human civilization has brought in disturbance,

disharmony and indifferences between the godly nature and human civilization which remains the main focus of the north-eastern women writers. These writers concentrate on how this godly nature brings in peace and harmony to the human civilization creating an aesthetic sense of belongingness which is on a continuous process of destruction, disintegration, renovation and revolution of identities. This renovation and revolution have led to shifting of spaces enabling fresh assessment of the literatures which is interrogated to mold borders and boundaries in transforming spaces with an intercession of cultural variances. “North-East” is considered to be a tellurian of geographical attraction which is built up with many cultures, races, religion, and languages and has therefore given rise to diverse varieties of folklore and folktales which has also been the surface to many writings of the region. These literary writings have come into existence from the appearance of differences resulting in from issues like migration, insurgency, cultural and linguistic nationalism which have been a part of the day to day living of the people of North-east India. These writers have tried to evolve out of the colonial pangs of separation which has brought in a lack of integration with the nation resulting in the impressions of westernism from the colonial rule bringing in a difference with their own ethnic identity. Therefore, the presentation of their own folk traditions and cultures through the writings of English language has brought in a decline of our own native languages due to the intense need of the hour that is the English language.

Review of Literature

As English is considered to be a universal language it transcends the tribal folk languages for academic and public purposes which is accessible to the general public. Therefore, north-eastern poetry is basically written in English language to concentrate on the readers worldwide as it is based on the natural landscapes and it generally portrays the harmony and serenity between the mother nature and human beings. North-eastern poetry has been from a long time been pigeon-holed and marginalized from the center that is India. Therefore, these writers specifically the women writers have been marginalized in view

of the other women writers from the other parts of India. Through the various phases of unremitting determination and struggle these women writers have been able to create a space for themselves among the Indian English women writers. Mitra Phukan, Esther Siyem, Patricia Mukhim, Indari Siyem Warjri, Mona Zote, Margaret Chalthantluangi Zama, Margaret Lalmuanpuli Pachuau, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Monalisa Chankija, Nini Lungalung, Sudha M Rai, Jogamaya Chakma, Sefali Debbarma, and Jahnvi Barua are some of the contemporary women writers along with Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Janice Pariat, Dairaisa Rumnong focuses on the ecological and identity crisis by trying to explore their ethnic and ancestral roots to where they belong.

This paper tries to mainly concentrate on the interconnections between human beings and nature and how nature is being endangered due to human civilization thus focusing on eco-criticism as a literary instrument to explore into the delicate aspects of the relationships between Mother Nature and human beings in the writings of some of the poets from the north-eastern region, namely Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Daiarisa Rumnong, and Mamang Dai.

The North Eastern Eco-system and its eco-critical concept: Easterine Kire Iralu, is a poet and novelist of Nagaland who is known for her consciousness about the Naga eco-system and traditions. Through her works we can peep into her intense love for the people, land, culture and traditions of Nagaland. Her poetry generally focuses on the intense longing for the dead soldiers who have lost their lives in the Indo-Naga conflict. Her writings are usually compared to Irom Sharmila from Manipur who also portrays actively through her social and political activities. Iralu’s first volume of poetry “Kelhoukevira” confirms her as one of the leading poets of Nagaland.

In the poem “Genesis”, she very beautifully expresses how education has been the major factor in ruining the oral narratives of the natives and therefore she feels an aching sensation for her homeland Nagaland which is very aptly portrayed in the lines below:

**Keviselie speaks of a time
When her hills were untamed
Her soil young and virgin**

**And her warriors worthy
 The earth had felt good
 And full and rich and kind to his touch.**

(lines 138-142)

Added to this another prominent literary voice from Nagaland, Temsula Ao serves as a guardian of her society. Like Easterine Iralu her role is no short of being a preservationist as she bears the conscientiousness of safeguarding her ethnicity, artistic inheritance and enveloping marines of reconstruction. Subsequently, more than a few of her poetries portray social order of the traditional society with its rich cultural heritage. Ao's poetry is marked by a perceptive environmental emotional response in the battle for development and expansion where a rift has been created between nature and man. Thus man slowly but surely losing touch with nature and becoming inclined to forget off their relationship with mother nature inviting their own catastrophe.

Temsula Ao in her free verse in the poem "New Terror" refers to the old ruler who has molded his throne to continue the tradition of his community like his ancestors and refers to his utter longings for his mate or companion who has despised him due to some disease or ill fate. She very beautifully describes the blood of his companion as the tradition and culture of the earlier generation which cannot be carried out or preserved and therefore moving into a new colour of tradition and culture. Temsula Ao through the poem "New Terror" tries her best to sustain and defend her culture. She wants to convey the homogeneity of the contemporary culture which has been a result of heterogeneity in the culture, community, traditions, and the different phases of the society of the seven north eastern cultures which people do not understand.

She again clearly states that the silence is not a silence of acceptance but it is a silence of new assurance unable to do anything but renouncing her own self which she revives without caring or feeling for the loss that has occurred. She very beautifully mentions that she does not blindly support the ancestral customs and beliefs which has lost its significance in the modern times but there is no other way but to accept the newness of life by becoming one with the new self. In her poem we see a sense of alienation or longing for the old self and

an intermixture with the new self. The old form is rejected in the form of acceptance with the new form not with happiness or will of mind but in order to bring in peace and prosperity to the contemporary generations. It is the grandfather who tries to bring in peace and harmony by rejecting the new norms of the radical reformers and letting the young ones accept to let go violence and dexterity and also to believe in nature and to be with nature which has been described in the following lines of the poem "New Terror":

**At last, a bold youth speaks,
 'Grandfather, you taught us
 How to prowl and prey,
 Dodge the spears and sidestep the traps.
 But now the new enemy
 Comes from nowhere,
 Moves like lightning
 And kills at will'... (lines 11-18)
 'Grandfather I saw, I saw one
 He looked so funny
 All dressed up like a tree.'
 The village idiot butts in
 'Yes grandfather, I saw it too
 But he was not chasing
 Grandmother, but another tree'.**

(lines 25-30)

The above lines also denote about the extremists' groups who have infused the psychological mindset of the Nagamese people with negativity and hatred. The image of the grandmother and grandfather is an echo of the deep-rooted image of the ancient traditions and customs which are falling apart in search of novel wisdom to create new confused rules of life. Ved Prakash expresses "In India's North-East, insurgency is an ethno-cultural phenomenon, in the sense that perceiving their ethnic identity threatened, they seek political power to preserve it..." (33).

Daiarisa Rumngong is again a leading contemporary poet who has contributed to Looking Glass a NEHU Anthology of Poetry in 2010 which was published by Cambridge Press of India and Shillong Forum for English Studies, NEHU. The yearning for liberation in terms of political and social autonomy, cultural harmony and concord has been found incessantly in the form of oral literature which is also an essential part of North-Eastern literature is portrayed by Rumngong in her Khasi literature.

The poet Dairaisa Rumnong in her poem “Poetry is a Tree” compares life or habitation as a tree which branches out to bring in peace and happiness to the younger generations. She very well writes that she has not realized that poetry could be a source of transformation from the older self to the newer self. Her longing for her roots for the past culture and tradition has made her accept the new. But the fear of accepting the new has brought in a chaos amongst herself and therefore she tried to arrange her older self in the natural and unnatural beings of life blanketing the past and un-blanketing the new in order to flip with the upcoming culture forgetting the past with nostalgia. She very beautifully describes these in the following lines:

**Poetry is a tree
Neglected for too long
I had forgotten its sway and grip.
I slighted the thrill and quiver of creation.**
(lines 1-4)

But gradually she realizes that poetry is the only source or outlet to be laced up with the old and the new. Therefore, she beautifully describes:

**“Poetry is palimpsest overlapped
Intricate like lace upon lace.
Where I heard
love and pain
cooing in a pigeon’s calls.**
(lines 15-19)

She describes that writing of poetry is her sacred duty which will help her get back to her roots and there is always a struggle between the memory and the mind as she describes below:

**Gazing but not tasting
the cadence and rhythm
But it returned like
a beloved nostalgia
heart drumming and hands trembling.**
(lines 10-14)

According to Rumnong poetry is produced and reproduced as it is a test of time which has brought in transformation to the entire Khasi community. The colonial and other influences have brought in a change amongst the people but this change can only be stabilized by the use of poetry which is like a master tree and never falls off but also keeps on branching giving in new hopes and aspirations. She

very well mentions that in her interview “Speak the Roots”:

We really need more fiction. I want people to read more.” Khasi may be have been revived from an endangered state, but its obscure dialects, especially in the War regions, remain in a delicate state. Garo, which comes from the Sino-Tibetan branch, is in an even more precarious state; Ruga, a language related to Garo, became fully extinct in the 2000s.

Rumnong very beautifully describes about the lives of the Khasi’s with its complications, faith, superstitions and poverty which is not found in the urban society. She also very well explains about the hybridity of culture which has cropped in due to the effect of urbanization.

Again, Mamang Dai also like Rumnong compares a tree to the generation which has given light to many forms of beings. Here Dai wants to express how nature and sky has been interrelated and the sky has formed a blanket enveloping the earth in order to protect mother nature from the deadly evils of human civilization. As nature has shown its grudge to the human civilization by being mysterious to the human world due to the cruel action of the human beings to nature.

Mamang Dai very beautifully expresses how the conviction of mother nature has lost its way into a greater world of hope and if faith and hope are interrelated as nature and human beings are than human beings are falling into a crisis of morality as Mamang Dai expresses in her poem February:

**Coral tree. Silk cotton
The conical hills are laughing
One black heron. (lines 1-3)**

In the poem “Floating Island” mother nature and human beings are depicted to be interdependent on each other in order to bring civilization and wellness to the society. This is well expressed through the example of a woman who lies in floating darkness nurturing hopes and aspirations inside her. It is a waiting of the human nature and to bring in newness in nature by erasing uneasiness of histories, disturbances and bringing into an uncertain future of liveliness and goodness. Nature as in the poems of Dai is seen to be having transcendental strength which not only influences people but also establishes a relationship between nature and human beings.

Dai demarcates that each ingredient of Nature is permeated with the emotion of affection, love, aspiration and hope.

Conclusion

“Indian women have been at the forefront of ecological struggles to conserve forests, land and water. They have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakriti, the living force that supports life” (xvii) stated by Vandana Shiva. North-Eastern India is considered to be an environmentally amenable section of India because of its topographical position in the map as it is surrounded by the Himalayan elevations. Since ancient times we can perceive that these north-eastern states have been tenanted by the ethnic and tribal cultures who have always tried to establish an inter-connection with mother nature and therefore leaned on the possessions of mother nature for their sustenance, nourishment and existence. Nevertheless, with the intrusion of complex identities like reconstruction, gentrification which has terribly led to the division within the local communities has gradually encroached into the peaceful social order annihilating the natural process of the environment. The poetry produced by the north-eastern women writers is considered to be a test of time which has brought in transformation to the entire north-eastern literature. Therefore, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Daiarisa Rumnong, and Mamang Dai clearly portray their consciousness to the transformation that is taking place acutely in the natural landscape, culture, livelihood of the people due to natural degradation like landslides, cloud bursts, deforestation and also the flowers, animals, and birds which are being endangered. These writers express through their poems a deep sense of anguish and pain that mother nature is experiencing due to the intrusion

of civilization. Besides being a celebration of the region’s ecological glory in its myriad forms, their poetry also reflects their vehement reactions against humans’ ruthless acts of ravaging the environment.

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