

Folk Tales of North-East India: A Tryst with Nature

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Abstract: Ecocriticism can be defined as, in the language of Cheryll Glotfelty, the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. One of the newest branches of literary criticism, started formally only in mid 1990s, Ecocriticism aims at looking at a piece of literary text from a perspective of ecological awareness. It resists anthropocentric world-view and rather advocates an ecocentric perspective.

Tribal people live amidst the natural world and they earn their livelihood from various natural and forest resources. Hence, they are connected to and concerned for nature in all possible ways: economically, historically, geographically, culturally, socially and in the present day context of deforestation and dispossession of forest land by the tribal people, politically. North-East India is the home for many a tribal groups and each tribe has its own distinct culture and literature. Again, North-East India is, or rather, was under lush green natural vegetation and this forest land is dwelled by the tribal people. In this context, the present paper will reread some of the tribal folklores of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and Mizoram emphasizing on their ecological concerns.

Keywords: Anthropocentric, Ecocentric, Ecocriticism, Folk tales, Nature, North-East India, Tribal.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism can be defined as, in the language of Cheryll Glotfelty, the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty and Fromm). One of the newest branches of literary criticism, started formally only in mid 1990s, Ecocriticism aims at looking at a piece of literary text from a perspective of ecological awareness. Ecocriticism distinguishes itself from all the other literary theories as it reject the very notion that everything is socially or linguistically constructed, a notion which is the very basis of many other literary theories. According to the ecocritics, nature is not a social or linguistic construct. It really exists and it existed long before human society or human language came into existence. Ecocriticism rereads a literary text not from an anthropocentric world-view, but from an ecocentric perspective, emphasizing the representation of the natural world. Ecocriticism applies a range of ecocritical concepts, such as, growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, sustainability and unsustainability.

Tribal people live amidst the natural world and they earn their livelihood from various natural and forest resources. Hence, they are connected to and concerned for nature in all possible ways: economically, historically, geographically, culturally, socially and in the present day context of deforestation and dispossession of forest land by the tribal people, politically. North-East India is the home for many a tribal groups and each tribe has its own distinct culture and literature. Again, North-East India is, or rather, was under lush green natural vegetation and this forest land is dwelled by the tribal people. In this context, the present paper will now attempt an analysis of a few tribal oral folklores of North-East India emphasizing on their ecological concerns.

II. BODY OF ARTICLE

The Kherengbar or *The Orchid*, a Koloï folk-tale from Tripura, describes how a newly-wed man was transformed to a hoolock, a whooping monkey, and his wife was reborn as a lizard as the man dared to pluck some forbidden kherengbar

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flowers on the insistence of his wife, who was attracted to the sweet fragrance of those flowers and wanted to put them in her hair. The tree bearing these flowers is not supposed to have its roots on this earth as it was brought here by a cursed apsara and hence it was forbidden. While there is a striking similarity of this tale with the Biblical story of Adam and Eve and their consequent fall after tasting the forbidden fruit, the story here, teaches us not to disturb nature. It warns us of the disastrous consequence if we do not follow the rules of nature. The story also tries to justify and explain the presence of lizard beating its tail on the ground and monkey around the tree when kherengbar blossoms. It also justifies the natural phenomena of absence of fragrance of kherengbar flowers, as to save humans from further temptation, gods took away its fragrance.

Similarly, *Chethuang* or *The Chhatim Tree*, a Tripuri folk tale, describes how a girl, extremely ashamed, embarrassed and pained of her brother's willingness to marry her, takes the help of a chethuang or chhatim tree which grows up higher and higher away from her brother, family and society to the height of the clouds. Ultimately she stepped into the cloud, breaking the top of the tree. This story, apart from showcasing the transition of a primitive society allowing incest to a more civilized one, shows how a human being, a girl, out of her utter frustration and despise of the society around her, takes help from nature and finally takes refuge amidst the nature itself. This story, like many other oral tribal folk tales around the world, tries to explain the natural phenomena that a chhatim tree is flat roofed.

Kongliang Otsu, an Ao Naga folk tale, describes how during the jhum harvesting time, taking the advantage of the absence of the parents, the elder sister exploits the younger sister, compels her to do all the hard work, pays no attention to the hunger of the little girl, and finally hits her. When the parents return from the field, happy on the prospect of good crop, asks the elder sister about the younger one, she lies blatantly about her younger sibling. The younger daughter, extremely hurt by the behavior of her sister, climbs up the nearest tree, transforms herself into a small bird, kongliang, and sings a sad song describing her story and takes shelter in deep forest. In this story too, human being, frustrated in the complexities of social and familial affairs is found to get respite in nature. Here too, there is an attempt to explain a phenomenon of nature, singing of kongliang, a small bird, during harvest. The story also teaches us that it's not enough to have nature's plenty, but human beings must have fellow feeling and affection among themselves to enjoy nature's gifts.

Another Naga folk tale, a Mao-Naga tale to be precise, describes that Tiger, Spirit and Humankind (man) were three brothers who took birth from the womb of the first woman through a miraculous union between this first woman (named Dziilimosiuro meaning 'purest water') and the clouds of the sky. The woman represents the reproductive power of nature. When these three children grew up, their mother became old and sick. So the three brothers took care of her in turns. When the Tiger looked after her, the mother becomes sicker with anxiety. It is because the Tiger used to touch the mother's body to identify the fleshy, good muscles which he could eat after her death. When the Spirit looks after her, the mother becomes more feverish and develops acute headache. The mother feels good only when the Man looks after her as he demonstrates great care and concern for his mother. Just before the mother's death, there was a quarrel among the brothers regarding the inheritance of her land. Finally, the mother devises a contest to settle the issue of inheritance. She creates a ball-like grass at a distance and says the one brother who touches the ball-like grass first would inherit the land. The Man being mother's favourite, was instructed by her to make a bow and arrow to shoot at the grass target. The Man follows his mother's instruction and succeeds in touching the grass target first by firing the arrow. He inherits his mother's land, the Tiger goes to the dense forest in disgust and the Spirit disappears. Thus the three brothers got separated forever. Here in this folk tale, Tiger and Man represents the animal kingdom in which the tiger represents nature whereas Spirit represents the supernatural realm. They are shown as all related, as they are born of a common mother. Competition between Man and Tiger perhaps indicates the human's getting distanced from nature and finally they gets separated. The Mother represents reproductive energy. Her name signifying pure water, being fertilized by a cluster of clouds is perhaps a metaphor of the union between the sky God father and the receptive earth mother from which all things have originated. This is perhaps like the Indian principles of Purusha and Prakriti.

The proverbial war of *Van Indona* or *War of the Heavens*, a Mizo myth, was supposed to take place in the valley near Reiek Tlang or Reiek hill and the river Tlawng Lui, just 10 km away from Aizawl. The myth describes a series of battles, first, between Khawluahlali, queen of the demon spirits of Reiek Tlang and the demon spirit of Tlawng river, who planned to flow in a different way and then, between Khawluahlali and Chawngchen, the demon spirits of the famous nearby Chhawrpial Tlang, all the warriors getting transformed into falcons. Khawluahlali won in both the wars but was extremely sad losing her dear daughter Ngaiteii in the battle. The myth ends with Khawluahlali sitting and mourning on

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Reiek Tlang. Ecocritically, this myth tries to explain a number of natural phenomena like the movement of river, contours of Reiek, Chhawrpial and other hills.

Yet another Mizo myth, the myth of Rih lake shows the close relationship between Humans and nature. According to the myth, a girl named Rihi has a cruel stepmother. Once, her father takes Rihi's younger sister deep into the forest to kill her. When Rihi finds her dead sister she becomes inconsolable. A good spirit known as Lasi finds Rihi weeping. He reveals to her the healing powers of a particular magical tree with whose leaf Rihi revives her sister back to life. To quench the thirst of her younger sister, Rihi turns herself into a small pool of water with the help of a leaf of the same magical tree. Later, Rihi then changes herself into a white mithun, and wanders around in search of a permanent safe place. While roaming around, her urine forms *rih note* i.e. small lakes wherever she goes and these lakes are still believed to be found in the Vawmlu Range, Zur forest near the village Natchhawng, a place above Bochung village, the area of Khawthlir village, all of which are in Myanmar now. She surveys Sanzawl village for her permanent settlement not far from which flows the river Run. But the demon spirit of the river threatens to suck her dry if she settles there permanently. Rihi then visits the valley of Champhai but finds that unsuitable too. She finally settles in the present location of Rihkhawdar village in Myanmar, in the form of a lake, which she likes the most. The name of the lake Rih retains the name of the girl Rihi. If read ecocritically, this legend demonstrates Human's close relationship with nature. Here a dead girl is brought back to life by a healing leaf of a tree and it is again some leaves of a magical tree which satisfies the thirst of that girl. The myth explains the location of some natural elements like lakes and rivers.

III. CONCLUSION

Lawrence Buell enlists the characteristics of an environmentally oriented literary texts in his *The Environmental Imagination* which are: (1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. (2) The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. (3) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical framework. (4) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. Many of the tribal oral literature of the North Eastern India do conform to at least some of the criteria of ecocentric literature mentioned above.

However, the tribal oral nature writing can easily be distinguished from so-called mainstream green literature like the poems of British Romantic poets, Thoreau's *Walden* in America or Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali* or *Aranyak* in Bangla. Transformation of human beings to natural element, flora or fauna, is a feature of tribal oral literature which is mostly absent in the so-called mainstream nature writing. The tribal folklores attempt to explain the natural phenomena or event in its own aesthetic way is another significant characteristic of tribal oral literature.

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