***In a Strange Darkness*: An eco-critical reading of some select poems of India’s North-east**

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**ABSTRACT**

The treatment of earth-centric affiliations in literature has ever been a primordial feature of artistic sensibility which only receives tonal varieties of expression over the ages. Though the term ‘eco-criticism’ originally applies to the bulk of literature written in English where the writerly sensibility is actuated by a strong commitment to the well-being of the flora and fauna and the subject as a field of study shows a tendency for theoretic alignment to the West, there is however no denying the fact that in the classical texts and even epics of India, the issue of the human role in the shaping of nature /environment has been problematised, more often than not, as something determinant of history or the destiny of men or a community concerned. For example, the *Khandavadahan* episode (burning of the forest named *Khandava*) in the *Mahabharata*, which relates the story of a royal project of setting up the capital *Indraprastha*, at the cost of forest wealth, nevertheless shows the flip side of urbanization/development by way of offering the saga of enmity between the reptile *Takshak naga* and the *Pandavas* which ensued as a result somehow connected with the burning of the forest. Hence, keeping in view Indian culture and literature, any instance of ecocide for human purpose acquires a teleological significance in the poetic vision as something shaping up the destiny of the community or a nation concerned. The present article dwells on some representative poems of India’s North-east where poetry and prophecy fuse into an organic wholeness of an acute eco-conscience that recommends a harmony between nature and nurture.

**Key Words: Earth-centric, Eco-criticism, Flora and Fauna, Community**

The incorporation of ecology in literature has been considerably great since Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and now a days, eco narratives are studied as forms of oral literature popular among indigenous communities in which narratives relating to nature and surroundings of a particular region, dealing both with its primeval purity of the past and subsequent changes in course of time, holds as a receptacle the history and development of the community living there and its habitat into its present look. The ecosphere that has entered the collective psyche of a particular community, becomes manifest in the literatures of India’s North East. To be more specific, a moving note of eco-conscience is thoroughly recognizable in the poetry of India’s North-east though with habitual tonal varieties of expression in different states.

A synoptic survey of poetry in the seven (or eight including that of Sikkim) sister states in India’s North-east bears out how even a minor change in the familiar environment sparks off a writhing sensitivity in the poetic heart that always felt a perfect peace with the plenitude of nature such as the mystic hills and magic rivers flowing with their gorges and ravines through dense forests along mountain ranges, often punctuated by small habitations in hamlets characterised by, among other things, - the *jooms*, the mixed smell of traditional flowers and the fragrant rice in the *Nabanna*, the melodic spell of a mythic bird or a traditional stringed instrument that fills the hollow of the evening sky. However, eco-consciousness as a mark of poetic experience shows distinctive qualities as per the delicate nuances of thoughts and feelings bred by the changed milieus, however little, for poets of different states. The present article proposes to offer a bird’s eye view of the works of some leading poetic figures of Assam and Tripura.

In the poetry from Assam, changes in ecosphere such as, pollution, urbanisation, global warming and deforestation elicit poetic concern as manifest in the works of *Navakanta Baruah,* Anupama Basumatary, *Ram Gogoi, Harekrishna Deka, Hiren Bhattacharyya* among others. Though the theme becomes more explicit in the Assamese poems of poet Nabakanta such as “Tamrongi Akax” (Copper colored sky), “Futsai boronor prithibi” (Ash colored world) etc.etc., his poems originally written or translated in English also bear a streak of ecocriticism. For example, the poem *Palestine* bears under the garb of socio-mythic implications, an alarming consciousness of a total disaster drawing near us as a result of our violation of moral norms and the apprehension is conveyed through a deft use of natural metaphor:

We housed them in prisons

For they wanted a home,

We killed them for they wanted eternal life

Then bull1dozed their prisons into fields of corn.

(Nabakanta:2009:13:1-4)

The sacrilegious acts are fated to face natural justice sooner or later as the person holds:

What’s that hand sticking out from the earth?

Other hands will sprout from it ---

And tickle us to death. (L.5-7)

This acute eco-sensibility can also be marked in the works of another poet Anupama Basumatary. For instance in the poem *Snail*, the speaker’s vicarious pleasure at breaking the shell of snails to watch on the floor ‘their certain strange rhythm/that hid the agony of their dying’( L.8-9), is counterbalanced by ‘the heart-breaking agony’ received by the shell of the speaker’s as she fails to negotiate the surge and resurge of the ‘marauding waves’ of the sea.

An acute poetic urge to return to the elemental essence of life in the terrestrial world can be traced in the poetry of Lutfa Hanum whose poem titled *Poem* amply expatiates this centripetal nature of consciousness operating in nature as per the poet’s vision:

The fallen leaves want

A green passage

Back to the branches of trees.

(Hanum:2009:22:1-3)

However, this symbolic return to the original self caught in imaginative perception breeds a similar penchant in the speaker to retain her original self notwithstanding the fulfillment of the reciprocity of feelings and passions with her lover and here the poetic reflection is reminiscent in a way, of the lover’s intention of retaining each a hemisphere and yet at the same time constituting together, a separate world in Donne’s love-lyric *The Good Morrow* – “Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one’ (L.14).

And me, melting in you

Seek a passage back to me

Through the green ,

Through water, stones

Words and tunes.

(Hanum:2009:23:16-20)

Interestingly, while the metaphysical poet rests on the union of souls, for the poet from North-east here, the passion of love and the urge for union too can’t but get expressed in the vesture of eco-consciousness.

The poetry of Srimanta Bhattacharya often marks a pallid projection of nature in the fitness of a pathetic tone of the theme that veers around a sense of loss in the atmosphere. In the poem *Between Bomb Blasts* for example, one notices a stunning economy of expression in the poetic attempt to silhouette the silence permeating atmosphere preceding and following blasts (of terrorism or counter-terrorism?) as the proverbial stillness before storm:

The Sky is rigged with booby traps. Nobody mentions

Death by lightning. Natural occurrences are rare;

In life as much as in death. So long as the silence lasts

There is no cause for panic.

(Srimanta: 2009:49:11-14).

Another poem of this writer *A Lament for Their Eyes* is soaked in pity possibly for the dead youth ostracized at the cult of violence and much in the fashion of Owen’s famous verse *Anthem for the Doomed Youth*, the poem distills a moving pathos of flowery youth consigned to doom.

The sky sometimes weeps

The eyes do not weep, they cannot

The eyes have become clogged with excess salt

They cannot wash themselves clean like the sky

The eyes do not have the luxury of tears….

(Srimanta:2009:47:8-12)

However, the treatment of nature as a means of self –projection is often found to receive a Freudian twist in a poem like *Moonlight* by another noted Assamese poet Harekrishna Deka for example, where ‘the emerging moon’ standing on ‘the floor of the sky’ seems to be emblematic of the poet’s self (‘is it a reflection of my manhood’?) and, as if under a faint spell of the libido, the speaker receives a sort of revelation:

The Golden field of crop glistens,

I realize that like all women

The earth becomes pregnant.

(Deka: 2009:96:11-13)

The opulence of beauty in the moonlit night evokes a sense of sexual fiesta which though luring, remains elusive to the adolescent psyche of the persona:

Do the abundant crops dancing in the waves of moonlight

Give an inkling of some illicit love affair? (L. 14-15)

The yearning for a happy past, the lost home which was just an extension of nature is also found in the works of later day poets like Nilim Kumar among others. The following extract from a poem titled *Thief* articulates under the metaphor of ‘theft,’ the pang of losing as if one’s umbilical cords of existential bliss that can be felt only in harmony with nature:

My deserted homestead of the past

Is now devastated and of concrete.

Trees and shrubs of stone and brick

Breathes with leaves of glass panes.

(Nilim: 2009:155:1-5)

The ironic thrust at the quality of experiences as the bounty of modernism or progress is hauntingly exposed in the following lines:

I wish that he steals

From my dining table the iron apples

The bronze grapes, the fleshy chopper

And from the fridge the white cold laughs. (L.8-11)

On the contrary, time has stolen bigger issues from the speaker’s life and the images of fruits in the quotation above spell out the trauma of losing the blissful, familiar eco-space that sustains and encourages life:

Where is it lost, where is it lost

That mysterious ancient being of mine? (L.6-7).

Taken overall, the poetry of Assam posits a space which so often disturbed by natural disasters and man-made ills though, yet retains its nuclear innocence with the flora and fauna constituting as it were, a mythic realism envisioned in traditional *Bihu* songs and *Bagurumba* dance which uphold in the collective consciousness, the sanctity of heritage.

On the other hand, the poetry in Tripura offers an interesting picture of adulation and retrospection in terms of poetic attitude to nature in the works of the tribal and non-tribal poets of the state respectively.

In Kokborok poetry, best represented by the formidable phalanx of indigenous poets of Tripura such as Nanda Kumar Debbarma, Sachlang and Sudhanya Tripura, Shefali and Dipali Debbarma, Manishankar Mura Singh among others, the poetic approach to nature and environment is chiefly that of an absolute awe, at times tinged with some worries for wrongs done to her, but rarely showing any tendency to trace any ruthless element in the ecosphere. In a word, the element of eco anxiety in Tripuri poets gets ultimately smothered by a visceral love for and an unquestioned dependence on nature. Apart from Kokborok poets, some other leading poets of the land such as Bhaskar Roy Barman (1950- ), Niranjan Chakma (1951- ), Kalyanbrata Chakraborti (1940- ), Krittibas Chakraborty, Pijush Routh and Gombhini Sorokkhaibam (1971- ) also have vociferously dealt with the themes of indigenous myth, legend and the ecology of their land.

In his poem entitled *Tripura*, poet Krittibas Chakraborty (in the book *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* .P.246-48) has nicely presented in a chiseled form, the bucolic set up of the ecology of the land that dates back to the early settlement of different tribes across the fields and hills:

One day they left beyond the dawn towards the woods

The green corn of *jhum* and

Terrain flowers greeted them

They started living in the silent hills

Across the cucumber and *futi* fields.

(Chakraborty: 2003:24)

Again, the mute history of generations of the land -- of their struggle, growth and challenge alongside the deterring ills of custom affecting the weaker sections of the society – all this is ably manifest in the ecology of the place. The following lines taken from a poem by Gombhini Sorokkhaibam is rich in eco-mysticism as well as eco-feminism:

A tree’s also just the same-

Will take birth, grow, spring leaves, spread branches will

bear flowers, will hang fruits….

But, it doesn’t have the power to say anything.

So I, where no love is bred in hearts,

am a frustrated woman of a society’s brutal stage.

(Sorokkhaibam :2003: 262)

In the poetry of Kalyanbrata Chakraborti, one comes across a disquieting conjunction of pity and poetry. In poems like *Before a Trip to Sindhukumar* and *Manirung Reang*, Chakraborti makes a naked exposure of terrorism that is camouflaged by a cultured interpretation prevalent in the civic and academic parlance of the day. Another notable poem *In a Strange Darkness* articulates the trauma of losing one’s original, familiar space as a by-product of cash-nexus that runs paramount under the façade of development:

“ … it is simply propaganda that the imperialists have

Left our country for good.

Do the commoners want to realize anything beyond

Moneymaking?” (Kalyanbrata:2009:85:9-12)

The ennui and boredom induced by urbanization in the daily run of life also receives a telling evocation in the works of some other Bengali poets such as Aparajita Roy, Amulya Sarkar, Aloke Dasgupta et.al. Notably, the change in the familiar landscape in the works of the poets mentioned are often interfused with the change in the mindscape bred by the trauma of partition among other things. The following extract from the poem *Gone are lamp-lit Nights* conjures up the pallid cover of drudgery spread over the familiar evening and a resultant hazy feeling of nostalgia coupled with a vague fear of an uncertain future and angst for the unwelcome changes in the familiar landscape:

Gone are the lamp-lit eves for long

Only the stifling load-shedding reigns

I grope for the door in vain,

To lock-out an old prisoner of darkness.

(Roy: 2005:31:1-4, *Translation mine*)

…………………

…………………..

Who would turn again the pages read out!

When some new pages wait to be written?

……………..

Whom does the arrow aim at

Declaring war

In words written in fire on the wall,

Shall it set all lapses right?

(L.1-4, 7-8,10-13.*Translation mine*)

The poem *My Boat yearns to be Ashore* by Amulya Sarkar unravels a poignant account of post–partition violence which has turned the poet’s familiar space in the border state, into a cemetery of hopes and dreams. The following extract shows how the epiphany of a ‘sweet’ homeland turns into a nightmare amidst the heart-wrenching cries of the widows, raped women and parents who have lost their wards in the altar of violence and civil war.

My woeful night throbs

Cribbed with enemy tents around

While I cover my body with cactus

Pall my child’s corpse with moonlight

Some say it’s the spring time of the year

Yet I am caught in midstream all along.

In my yard, now unknown serpents hiss,

The woods murmur the moaning of the raped,

…………………

The water of Gomati turns red

With a new spurt of bloodshed

Who is it that covers the *harmadi* cry

With chanting of *Chadipatha*!

Is this the land we dreamt all along,

To be a place my dear, for a sweet home?

(Sarkar:2005:36:1-8, 10-13, *Translation mine)*

A stifling awareness of insurgency and violence is further noticed in a poem by Shankar Basu named *Smell of Powder in the wind* where the lamp-lit sky of festive nights in the recent past is found to be covered with the pall of insidious nights that get occasionally split with the flash of guns with the wind carrying ash and the spell of powder. As the poet puts it:

The bestial glare and ecstasy of the night

Breaks the silence of the dozing town

The song of life halts at every beat

Light and blood join hands…..

Will they stop the flow of life?

Won’t men again embrace each other

With the protective wrist-band on festive nights?

(Basu:2005:339:6-12.*Translation mine*)

The shocking change in the eco-space of the poverty-ridden indigenous people wrought by bloodshed and death associated with terrorism and/or its countermeasures gets a haunting expression in the poetry of Aloke Dasgupta. The following extract from a poem *Under a Stormy sky* nicely recaptures the unhappy inroads of urbanity and corruption in the poverty-ridden plight of the subaltern people and strikingly, nature as if sympathizes with the persona that deplores the loss of sanctity in a life that practically degenerates into a frantic bid for survival even to the exclusion of morality :

The metal sound of bullets often

tears apart the pitch dark of night!

Following a zigzag road, Padmamoni

reaches the syphilitic bed of a recluse pensioner

The sylvan breeze breathes the aroma of little khumpui

and the fumes of gun-mouth.

A fresh oxygen worth 15 rupees

Undresses Padma of her *Pachra* and her shame!

A promise broken, champs the cabbage soul…

fire in the joom burns the mythic Nuyai…

So grave a sin was in store for all! So grave a sin!

Feeling terribly alone under such a stormy vault, terribly alone!

(Dasgupta:2005:47: 4-11, *Translation mine*)

Thus, often it is the ingredients of a sordid reality, the pathos of poverty, compulsion and perversion that set the poetic fancy on fire to have produced such lines as the above.

One wonders to see how the indigenous bards of India’s North-east serve to find in the pretext of chaotic experiences, the text for creative and curative expressions and often manage either to diffuse on the familiar objects that transcendent kind of ‘light that never was on sea or land’ or to rehearse the kinds of feelings and emotions that spring eternal in the human heart.

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