

Ecology, Myth and Mystery: A Study of Select Poems of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the significance of nature and ecology in the development of a society. It is due to the deteriorating environmental conditions and its ecosystem that the study of ecology has become a subject of discussion and gained an immense popularity in the recent years. In fact, ecological consciousness has been seen as one of the dominant themes of contemporary poetries in English from North-east India. The study will give the idea of protecting, preserving and propagating natural resources in order to maintain a balance between nature and man. It indicates the function of ecology, myth and mystery in the poetry of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao and thereby rendering the inseparable relationship between man and nature. The theme of ecology, myth and mystery also enhance the beauty and aesthetics to their poetry. By studying the poetries of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao, the paper aims to look at what the cultures and literatures have done to the environment and attempts to draw a connection between nature and man. The present paper examines the ecocritical perspectives as envisioned in the selected poems of these two writers.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of science and technologies, huge damage is seen in the environment and its ecosystem and thereby posing a big threat to human society and mother earth. The most important environmental problems include population explosion, depletion of valuable natural resources, extinction of rare species, nuclear war, garbage dumping and many more. In such an environmental crisis, literary and cultural theory has begun to address the issues as a part of academic discourse. At present, environmental consciousness has come forward as a major concern and ecocriticism has undergone rapid development since introduction. Ecocriticism serves as an interpretative tool for analyzing nature writing which is commonly associated with environmental criticism, Animal studies, Green cultural studies, ecofeminism, deep ecology and the like. In 1978, William Ruekert coined the term ecocriticism in his critical essay "*Literature and ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*". He also mentioned that ecocriticism is the application of ecology on ecological principles to the study of literature. The definition of ecocriticism given by M.H Abrams is that "Ecocriticism (or by alternative names, environmental criticism and green studies) designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities." (Abrams, 81) In fact, a regional ecological concern is essential in most of the modern writers. They present a prospect of images of the mountains, hill, rivers, myths and legends, tradition and culture and multi-ethnic people of the region. Nature plays an important role in the artistic creation of many contemporary writers of Northeast India too. My intention in this paper is to present a slice of contemporary Northeast poetry with special reference to ecocritical approach in the poetry of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao. "Reading 'North east' and its literature logically encompasses the geography and locale, land and

people and more importantly the psyche and sensibility of society at large." (Kalita, 7) Indeed, "the scenic beauty of Northeast attracts the attention of many Northeast writers and have become a continual source of inspiration and admiration for the artistic creation to many contemporary writers". (Jamir, 21) Rivers, lakes, mountains, tree, temple, priest, stones are seen in many of the poems of Northeast writers. Through these images, the poets symbolically expose their way of life in the midst of all hardships. Regarding the poets of Northeast India, Nigamananda Das "Call them multiethnic poets because they hail from multi-various ethnic groups and their chief concern is ethnicity. Hills, valley, men, myths, legends, communal violence, tribal rites, mystic and profoundly aesthetic sensibilities, ecology, self-alienation, autobiographical exegesis of self, being some of the themes of their poetry, the poets are consistently home-bound pilgrims." (Jamir, 18) Therefore, nature serves an integral part to the lives of Northeast people and most of the people are also quite aware of the ecological changes. This awareness is seen in the writings of Northeast India to a great extent. "Indian English poetry from Northeastern part of India is rich in enshrining various aspects of ecology of the region. It has been a fashion with the poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness. (Chandra, Das, 35)

The poetry of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao reflects a marvelous mixing of myth and mystery related to the ecology. Mamang Dai is a significant writer from Arunachal Pradesh, who resigned her position as an IAS officer to become a full time journalist and writer. She is a poet from Adi community and as a poetess she gains immense popularity of national repute. She has published a number of poems in various Indian Journals. She is widely known after the publication of collection of poems entitled *River Poems* (2004) by Writers Workshop, Calcutta. *River poems* (2004) contain fifty one poems which seem to be the poets' voice of home-bound

ballads. In her poetry, she elaborately deals with nature and uncovers the life of Arunachal Pradesh, its nature beauty, tradition and culture of different tribes and so on. Legends, myths, rites, rituals and customs presented in the poems of Mamang Dai are powerful for asserting self identity. She believes that the rich cultural heritage and maintenance of the state is gradually degraded by the coming of modernization and urbanization and thereby fading away their age-old faith and identity. Significantly, there has been a conscious use of the ecology of their land as a means of asserting identity and roots. There is always an inner urge of going back to the roots in her poetry by using the geography and topography of the land. A regional ecological concern is inherent in most of her writings. She describes peoples' faith and her own, mountains, rivers, streams, stones so as to expose the glorious heritage and ecology of Arunachal Pradesh in her poems. Through the images and metaphors chosen mostly from nature, she depicts her emotions and feelings. In one of her poems, she expresses her consciousness of ecology and beliefs in tribal pantheon of Gods. The Mystery of enviroing ecology is seen in the poem "The Balm of Time":

Yes, I believe in gods
in the forest faith
of good and evil,
spirits of the river
and the dream world
of the dawn. (Qtd. in .Das, 65)

The question of identity is closely associated with nature and ecology of the land. Thus, nature serves as a space where one can identify one's identity. One can find the ancestral roots through the spirits of trees, rivers and mountains. In such a context, Mamang Dai writes in the poem "An obscure Place".

The History of our race begins with the place of stories
We do not know if the language we speak
Belongs to a written past
Nothing is certain
There are Mountains, oh! There are Mountains
We climbed every slope, we slept by the river
But do not speak of victory yet. (Misra, 5-6)

Here, the mountain provides a symbol of history and roots that enable us to trace the ancestral roots and presents her inner urge of going back to the lost roots. She further mentions that:

The words of strangers have led us into a mist
Deeper than the one we left behind
Weeping, like a waving grassland
Where the bones of our father are buried
Surrounded by thoughts of beauty. (Misra, 6)

The above line shows the poet's lamentation on the losing of age-old faith of their ancestors by the coming of Christianity and modernization. It depicts the deteriorated relationship between the native people and nature and identity.

She opines that:

'See! They have slain the wild cat
And buried the horn-bill in her material sleep.' (Misra, 6)

Mamang Dai also observes the socio-cultural changes in her land. She is a keen observer of the cultural changes that

are taking place with the advent of Christianity and modernization. She symbolically uses mountains, rivers, trees, the men and harvest as one of the dominant subjects in her poems to show the socio-cultural changes in the land. In the poems "Sky song", she says:

We left the tall trees standing
We left the children playing
We left the women talking
and the men are predicting
Good harvests, or bad
that winged summer
We left, racing with
The leopards of morning (Qtd.in.Das, 65)

In her another poem "Voice of the Mountain," she laments the destruction of flora and fauna of the land. She says that nature is just a collective identity of the people and destruction to nature leads to the distortion of identity. So, we should preserve nature and its ecosystem for the betterment of the society and its identity. In her quest for identity, she uses a number of metaphors like the mystic mountain, rivers and forest. These metaphors dominate most of her poems.

The other day a young man arrived from the village
Because he could not speak he brought a gift of fish
from the land of rivers
it seems such acts are repeated
We live in territories forever ancient and new
and as we speak in changing languages
I also leave my spear learning by the tree
and try to make a sign. (Misra,3)

Here, the mountains delicately provide the traditional values of the land. She vividly portrays the communication of man and nature.

Temsula Ao is one of representative writers emerging from the state of Nagaland. She is a recipient of Padmashri in 2007 for Literature and Education. She has published four collections of poem namely *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003) and *Songs from the other life* (2007). In this study, my focus is on the select poems of Temsula Ao which is marked by the socio-ecological concern. By delving deep into her poems, we can say that she is truly an ecofeminist writer. Like an eco-feminist, she exposes the environmental crisis and the ever increasing deforestation and destruction of nature by man. She asserts the identity of her people through the metaphors of trees, mountains and animals. She says that it is through the spirits of nature, one can find the lost identity of the Ao people. In the poem, "Blood of others", she writes,

We believed that our God lived
In the Various forms of nature
Whom we worshiped
With unquestioning faith. (Ao, 81)

Indeed, this belief was faded and gradually removed by 'a tribe of strangers', who came with:

Armed with only a book and
Promises of a land called heaven. (Ao, 82)

Thus, the Naga people were separated from their ancestral beliefs and customs with the advent of Christianity. And they started "Declaring that our trees and Mountains/Rocks and rivers were no Gods". Temsula Ao further mentions that:

Stripped of all our basic certainties
We strayed from our old days
And let our soul-mountain recede
Into a tiny ant-hill...(Ao, 82)

In the poem "My Hills", the poet portrays her concern for the protection of environment. Human interference with the nature brings a lot of destruction to the sights and sounds of the hills. In the past, there was a perfect blend between the man and the nature. But now, there is no harmony with nature due to materialistic attitude of the human and the very essence of the hills has lost forever. Instead of birds humming, gunshots are heard from every nook and corner of her hills. Her nostalgic yearning for the past is vividly described when she sings:

The rivers are running red,
The hillsides are bare
And the seasons
Have lost their magic (Ao, 49)

In the concluding lines of the poem, the poet emphatically expresses her lament that the people of her village have forgotten their rich cultural heritage and tradition. They are running behind a 'gun culture' which they think that it will bring back their lost culture and tradition. But the poet is quite sure that things are totally changed.

Because
The very essence
Of my Hills
Are lost
Forever – (Ao, 49)

In the epigraph to her work *Songs from the Other Life*, Temsula Ao Writes:

To All
Who can still
Sense the earth
Touch the wind
Talk to the rain
And embrace the sun
In every rainbow (Ao, 8)

The above lines describe the connection between human and nature. Nature plays a pivotal role in the very existence of human being. Harm to nature is nothing but harm to human

being. The poet says those who can feel and sees the beauty of nature will surely lead a peaceful life. It is a dedication to humanity especially to the people who can shares every bit of their existence.

The beauty of nature is seen in the poem "The Garden". The poet praises the miracle life of nature. The poet is so pleased on seeing the works of gardeners. The mother earth can bring a joyous state to human and the poet expresses her views on mother earth and its beauty as:

The slice of earth
Thus nurtured
Brings forth
Beauties
In Praise
of the Gardener
of all gardens (Ao, 16)

To sum up, we may say that "Both Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao's writings represent coherent responses to a changing social and cultural landscapes that intercede between individual stories and the history of a community 'to create spaces of ethnic solidarity, communal belongings and individual freedom'. There writing may, in a sense, be read as 'narrative of community' through their focus on the details of local life and the idea of a shared history." (Kalita,37-38). Most of the poetries from Northeast India reflect a mosaic of myths and legends, festival and cultures, tradition and people, religion and rituals that make their poetry unique from the rest of others. In the poetry of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao, we have seen a number of nature images and metaphors which give their poetry a sense of rootedness and belongingness for they go back into the past to understand their present. One can see that these poets are conscious of nature and in their poetries they capture the essential beauty of the land. A meticulous reading of their poems reflects two themes- the theme of myth and nature on one hand and the theme of violence and bloodshed on the other. In midst of terror and violence, they try to uncover the beauty of natural landscapes and the enduring quality of their myths and legends. This ecocritical analysis of their poems offers a scope for examining the intricate relationship between man and nature and able to explore the place of nature in the material world. Nature is just an extension of identity and roots and therefore harm to nature immediately affects the question of identity. Nature becomes a space where one can identify oneself. Thus, through the spirits of trees, rivers, mountains, and other nature elements, they give an idea that these spirits are the path where we can find our ancestral roots.

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