

## A Study of Men and Nature Relationship in the Khasi Folktales through the Lens of Environmental Ethics and Frog-Pond Philosophy

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### An Abstract

The Khasi tribal people live mostly in the state of Meghalaya, in Assam, and Bangladesh. The Khasis believe to have descended from above. However, it can be seen that, apart from their myth of a beyond-earth origin, their narratives surround around the environmental nature. There are a number of narratives that attempt to explain the natural events; for example, why the crow is black, why the bull does not have teeth and so on. The traditional customs are also nature-centric. It is believed that almost every object of nature has a spirit that can harm or help men. Nature here is not just a nurturer but also the law-giver following which men have to live their life. The present study attempts to understand the man-nature relationship in the Khasi folklores and how they have influenced the tradition and culture of the Khasi people through the lens of philosophy of environmental ethics and frog pond philosophy.

**Keywords:** Khasi, folklores, nature, environmental ethics, Frog Pond philosophy.

### Main Article

*“... we do not have, and perhaps will never have, the capacities of perception and conceptual discernment finally and adequately to understand ecosystemic and ecospheric reality. At best, we will always see more or less through a glass darkly, though we gaze upon the natural, earthly, value-laden real.”*

*“We would note carefully the diverse ways that we interact with nature and the equally diverse experiences and values that arise or are disclosed in these interactions. We would readily discover that Nature Alive is Nature Valuable, Significant, and Good; it is the locus of ultimate moral and civic responsibilities.”*

- Strachan Donnelley, *Frog Pond Philosophy*, 2018

### Introduction

Man and nature relationship is studied from multiple viewpoints depending on the disciplinary boundaries in the academia. Here folklores act as rich archives of information which are also studied in multidisciplinary ways in the fields of anthropology, ethnic studies,

culture studies, literary studies and so on. Philosophies and world-views, socio-economic and cultural practices are integrated in the folk narratives. Folklores reflect the indigenous knowledge system which is based on a community's understanding of natural environment and man and nature relationship. The current study would explore the man and nature relationship in the Khasi folktales from the view point of environmental philosophy (viz. environmental ethics and frog pond philosophy) assuming that the folklores are the earth-lore as they reflect the value, moral structures, and ethics related to the human and non-human contents of environment.

### **Background of the Study**

In the light of the above, this study explores the man and nature relationship in the Khasi folktales. Khasi, a tribal community reside mainly in the state of Meghalaya, Assam in India and in some parts of Bangladesh. They have an oral tradition and a rich archive of folktales. The sub-tribes in the group like Khasi, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Lyngngnam and now extinct Diko community all are commonly identified as Khasi which is an umbrella term; the Khasi term *Hynniewtrep* is also used to mean all the communities together and *U Hynniewtrep* is used as a singular term to mean the "first Khasi Man." Pnars are now politically claiming a separate identity from the Khasis. The Khasis practice matriliney where the youngest daughter of a family inherits the ancestral family property. The language of the Khasis is of Austro-Asiatic family.

Folklores are the means of educating people, of shaping their consciousness and their ways of life. Folklores are the reflections of the "collective consciousness" of a community. The Khasis have a rich archive of folklores which reflect the earth-centric life that the people are still living despite modernization. The Khasi folklores show the myths, history as well as their worldview. Tariang (3) mentions that, "The Khasis had the habit of recording events or conveying ideas by allegorically weaving stories around them and these were usually associated with hills, mountains, rivers, waterfalls, flowers and the like and they come down to posterity in the form of legends and folklores. But these legends and folklores were, invariably, open to distortions and modifications to suit different circumstances and motivations and the narrator's flight of fancy and embellishments over the years." Tariang posits folktales as representation of the natural environment. Such positioning of folktales as representation of the natural environment places folktales as a site of narrativity; here man and nature relationship offers a site of exploration of the eco-biological elements of the non-human contents and the cultural elements of humans fused together. Tenets of Environmental ethics and frog pond philosophy here can help us to understand the philosophical underpinning of the man and nature relationship in Khasi folktales.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Environmental Studies explore nature in terms of the moral and ethical value system as developed by the human society and culture. Here the human and non-human contents are viewed as objects and entities having instrumental values, intrinsic values and so on. The non-human elements are often valued in their relationship with man. To elaborate the point further, any non-human object will have its value for the human — only when it has any utilitarian value for the human contents. Here the non-human contents are valued on the basis of their instrumental values. The debate intensifies with the argument that — should the non-human contents not have their own intrinsic values? The answer is often intriguing as some will consider it as “No” while some will roar it as “Yes” with the argument that the non-human contents have value in their own right. Now, in both the cases, it becomes a moral responsibility for humans to respect the rights of the non-human contents, value their existence and protect/preserve them and refrain from damaging them. This kind of synthesising view too, nonetheless, is “anthropocentric” as human gains the centrality in the discourse of the relationship between man and nature which is a central theme of Anthropocene.

Strachan Donnelley’s pathbreaking philosophy in his eponymous book *Frog Pond Philosophy* (2018) is an important contribution to eco-literature that explores the man and nature relationship philosophically. Donnelley explores how man’s attitude and treatment of nature reflect much about human selves and the place of humans among the non-human contents of the environment. Philosophical and moral judgement of natural elements often place man and the non-human contents on an equal platform — all being the manifestations of the same ontological source of power/energy. Donnelley says, “The foregoing descriptions of animal encounters in different contexts — how and why animals matter — involve humanly reflective interpretations as well as descriptions of ourselves, animals, and nature .... Actually it is the interaction or intermingling of our firsthand experiences and culturally influenced reflections that allows us to understand and explicitly value ourselves, animals, and nature” (web, np). Donnelley establishes a symbiotic connection between man and nature in philosophy of nature (ecosophy) as well as in human culture and narratives making it all subject to human interpretation based on human experience.

Many of the studies on Khasi folklores are descriptive. Application of the theories of moral and ethical values and frog pond philosophy can help us explore the Khasi folktales in novel sights.

### **Men and Nature Relationship in Khasi Folktales: A Discussion**

Since the Khasi people live mostly in the forest areas of the hills, nature is a part of their life and living experience. Their understanding of nature has created a unique world-view that is practiced in their socio-cultural life as well. The folktales represent the unique man and nature relationship in a number of ways. We can read Khasi folktales as — “stories as metaphors, metamorphosis, or metaphorizing, metaphor-based conception of the self” (Donnelley, 2018, np). Here man and nature are represented as organically existential and experiential, and the narratives are not reflectively rational. The Khasi folktales as Earth narratives are spaces where existential, phenomenological/experiential and the conceptual and metaphorical meet. These narratives are, “creatively fashioned out of the “arational” bases of organic and metaphoric existence and experience” (Donnelley, op cit. np). Here “truth” is not necessarily one but subject to various and different interpretations.

The origin myth of the Khasis places an intrinsic value upon the non-human contents and brings in a metaphysical spiritual sense of divinity. Khasi origin myth appears to be a non-Darwinian ecological biology though it shows a chronological development in the creation of the Earth and its contents. In Kharmawphlang's collection of the Khasi folktales, Word is the beginning of all creations. The narrative has a priest (Lyngdoh) who begins his tale of the origin as:

At that time then, there,  
 the word- the word God  
 Created ka *Ramew* and from it  
 the sun (mother Sun), the moon,  
 nature, air, water, fire- fire yes.  
 a marriage took place with  
 u *Ryngkew* along with waters of  
 Gold and Silver and the marriage  
 Was consummated and two  
 Children were born-  
 (good) Soil and Stone.

Kharmawphlang, 44

However, imposing the concept of marriage between *Ramew* and u *Ryngkew* (earth and dry land), an institution of union in human society and materiality of gold and silver upon the natural element of water reflect how man and nature are seen to be a part of a cultural system which is purely a result of phenomenological/empirical/experiential imagination in narrativizing nature. However, the birth of soil and stone as divine or quasi-divine entities reflect nature having a higher degree of value than the human contents. Thus in the philosophy of creation narratives, plurality of nature in its worldly manifestation is emphasised and one can look at it as a cosmogonic narrative of origin (which is similar to the Greek philosophical claims that "all things are one" as said by Heraclitus), as all elements are ontologically from the same source. Such an understanding of nature shows that Nature is not seen in a marginalistic view and nature is akin to the "Absolute" having an intrinsic value. It reflects, to borrow the words of Donnelley:

... modes of essentialist thinking, [that] might see the significance of nature and animal species as arising from (or grounded in) atemporal and unchanging Platonic ideas (for example, the archetypal form "horse"). Or they might appeal to Aristotelian substantial forms (the "formal plan" of development into an adult horse, perhaps an unintended adumbration of genomic information) or a once-and-for-all creation ex nihilo by a transcendent deity. (2018 np)

Khasi cosmology in their origin myth, thereby, can be seen as an "Organic Cosmology" leading to the creations of biotic entities from abiotic contents through a complex admixture and interaction of the particles within the Absolute. Human creation in the Khasi folktales can be seen as an example of natural essentialism. Here the dynamic nature of humans' worldly life is causally related to an archetypal nature.

In Kharmawphlang's collection, Word has 16 children out of which seven descended upon the "earth's skin" to inhabit it. They were connected with the other nine through a

golden vine which connected the earth with the world above. After the end of Sotto Juk (era of truth) when men and animal were supposed to divide the property on earth among them, Word asks them to come for a council after seven days. But the animals go after seven days and so they get the maximum share of physical strength as they had approached in advance. When man (U Hynniewtrep) goes to Word after nine days, there was very little of strength left. So Word blesses him as:

I shall give you the great  
Power of skill and wisdom,  
And you, and only you,  
Shall keep the Word, the power  
Of speech.

Kharmawphlang, 96

Placing human beings thus to a position of superiority through the power of speech and wisdom, earthly nature is made into “Half nature” (meaning ‘nature shaped by human intervention,’ a concept of Victor Westhoff as cited in Donnelley, 2018, np). As the Word is akin to the Absolute, human being sharing that attribute of Word – the power of speech – gains intrinsic value while earthly non-human contents are attributed with instrumental value for the human contents. Thus, man is given more power than the animals through skills and wisdom that justifies man’s supremacy over animals. This narrative moves from the earlier stand of nature as the Absolute in the creation myth to anthropocene. It is also a shift from attributing intrinsic value upon all elements to attribute intrinsic value upon humans.

The folktales of the Khasis are also rich with issues of moral ecology and ethical-aesthetics. The folktale of the crow and bull makes an interesting reading in moral aesthetics. The story goes as that, God/Word had sent a message for the humans through a bull. The crow misled the bull to tell lies and distorted God’s message. The crow was punished:

The crow was put in a  
black earthen pot and  
its beautiful white feathers  
became black.

Kharmawphlang, 52

The bull was slapped so hard that its teeth to fall off:

The command heard this  
and slapped the bull so  
hard, *slait*, that some of his teeth fell off.  
(ibid)

Such narratives that centralise on cultures and belief of visuality in terms of colour and physical features can be read as “Holy beauty of/in the visible” (Donnelley, 2018, np) as the

work of the Supreme is visible in the worldly elements like the animals. In another way, they are symbolic of bio-vulnerability when the non-human entities are involved with human affairs, a typical feature in Anthropocene. This folktale is an example of the Khasi understanding of nature which entails a non-mono-valued ethical system (that concerns only human), but it recognizes the plural values and ethical dimensions of the other worldly non-human contents.

The Khasi folk narratives are also representations of nature as phenomenological experiences. They are narratives of every day experience, not of methodical scientific rationalising. Donnelley explains such narrativization as:

Human individuals and communities endemically and necessarily need some form of cosmogonic myth, some basic philosophic, moral, and spiritual orientation. Such thinking is inevitable, as well as necessary and good, if done critically and with awareness of what we are doing: pursuing philosophic, speculative understanding and meaning. This is not the same as scientific knowledge, testable by recurrence to natural or empirical phenomena. Such understanding and meaning are necessary for us to gain a fundamental orientation in the world and, moreover, to discern our fundamental moral and civic responsibilities to the earthly world of humans and nature. In short, the heights and depths of philosophic speculation have decided and important practical implications. (op cit.)

We live in a world which is natural and cultural. The tale of Ka Puri (water-nymph) is an example of the interaction of nature and culture. The folktale of Ka Puri includes the humanly communal and cultural selves within nature which is the experiential one. The story goes as, a youth named Ren falls in love with a water nymph of a river. They decide to get married. The nymph gives a condition that when she comes as a bride to Ren's house, the house should be clean and the broom should be hidden. Ren's mother cleans the house on the auspicious day but due to her excitement forgets to hide the broom. When the nymph arrives, her eyes fall on the broom and she goes back to the water. Ren could not tolerate the separation and he follows the nymph to the water and lives with her there. The story underlines that human and animal do matter and they both matter together. This narrative is often regarded as an explanation and representation of the custom of the groom going to live in the wife's house after marriage. The Khasi people also have a practice to keep the brooms hidden after cleaning the house. The return of the water nymph to nature is symbolic that nature is not in a comfortable position in the world of human intervention and it has its own will and agency. This again imposes an intrinsic value upon the natural elements. The belief in the spirit of water/river signifies nature's position as divine/quasi-divine connected to the great Spirit of the universe.

### **Disenchantment in the Contemporary Nature Writings**

However, we notice a disenchantment of nature in the contemporary writings; we notice a denial of the intrinsic value of nature in the age of global capitalism. Such representation can be personal as well as apersonal. For example, the loss of the past is lamented in Esther Syiem's "Pinus Khasia" where the pine tree is addressed as a relic to her tribe, as she says,

But you are the  
Petrified relics  
Of our land, as we are  
Of ourselves,  
And the scores  
Written on you  
Can no longer  
Yield song.

("Pinus Khasia: some thoughts," *Oral Scriptings*, 33)

The Pine trees which were brought by the colonisers are known as *Kseh bilat* (tree from London) in Khasi language. Here the natural elements are given an identity which is a result of human intervention. Nature is treated as an object and at the mercy of humans. Thus the enchantment of the spiritual and the supernatural intrinsic value of nature is replaced by the instrumental value for natural elements.

## Conclusion

The Khasis have a practice of conserving sacred groves from where nobody can take even a piece of leaf. They believe that the forests are guarded and nestled by the spirits. This folk belief shows that the Khasis attribute a deep intrinsic value to the natural elements in their collective psyche. This is an interesting practice aimed at preserving an ecological balance and saving nature from getting destroyed, which again places the power and responsibility upon human to protect the nature in the practical daily life. Such attachment and existential beliefs and narrative get expressed through the folklores.

Donnelley's (2018, np) frog pond philosophy claims that, "Nothing is unnatural;" he continues that, "Rather, I have argued that fundamentally the "natural progression" is from primary worldly experience, to metaphorical experience, to conceptual, rational experience, irrespective of whatever interfusions of the different realms or levels of experience there might be and that often, if not invariably, take place. The message seems clear. Rational, conceptual experience and truth do not lie at the foundations of our existence, certain philosophic and theological traditions notwithstanding." The Khasi folktales, thus, are the metaphorical narratives of their phenomenological experiences, of their existence and of their deep relationship with nature. Through the folkloric narrativization, they express their understanding of nature and the universe and find a place of existence amid the natural environment which again place them as another element in the Great Chain of Being.

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