www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
UGC-Approved Journal
An International Refereed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 2.24 (IIJIF)

An Ecocritical Reading of Select Northeast Indian English Poetry

Amrita Bhattacharyya
Assistant Professor
Amity Institute of English Studies and Research
Amity University, Kolkata

Abstract

Poetry, as with art in any other form, has an existence that is intertwined with the nature the poet, or the artist, lives in. While they can, of course, be defined and studied separately; it is not possible for poetry to exist bereft of nature. This is especially true for North-East Indian poetry as one of the major themes of the poetry emerging from this region is the relationship of the different peoples living here with the space they live in. this paper tries to analyze this relationship and its effect on the English poetry emerging from this region.

The paper looks into the concepts of deep ecology to try and find a pattern in North East Indian English poetry. Deep ecology has a profound effect in the poetry of this region where one can clearly envisage a shift in the worldview from anthropocentric to biocentric. The paper also looks at the ecotone as present in the poetry of this region and how far the ecotone is productive in building a bridge between poetic concern and ecological planning. The other aspect this paper focuses on is the concept of reversed sublime as applicable in North East Indian English poetry.

An Ecocritical Reading of Select Northeast Indian English Poetry

The North-East region of India is not simply a geographical place in the Indian map, it is also a rich storehouse of cultural and literary activities of the different tribal/racial groups living in this region. North-East literature is as diverse, in its manifestation of different aspects of cultural life of this region, as the perspectives of the various cultural groups that seek to define to their distinctive cultural traits. In fact, a study of the poetry of this region shows that there are contested issues, multiple forms of representation and heterogeneous modes of expression which need to dealt with a lot of understanding of the different poets cultural/social positioning. There are several other themes percolating the same body of literature that cry out for a reader's attention – one of the most significant among them being relationship between the peoples of this geography with the space they live in. Nature poetry – in its most traditional form – had to have a place in North East Indian literature if not for anything else, then for the sheer variety and beauty evident in that area. However, that is certainly not where this region's poetry was confined too.

Rather, it has taken the long road to representing the socio-cultural singularity that nature forms with the peoples residing in this geographical space.

To put things in perspective, the once rigid boundary between the natural space that people resided in on one hand and their culture on the other seems to have generated some translucence at the very least and ceased to exist in all probability. While this certainly does not mean that a people's culture and their natural surroundings cannot be separately defined; this does mean that none can exist without the other and – more importantly – are shaped and modified by one another. Nature and culture are neither static entities nor do they lead self-completing, isolated existences. On the contrary, they continuously reshape and reform each other leading to extremely dynamic identities in both cases. It is only natural, therefore, that the nature-culture singularity of a predefined group of people or of a predefined geographic space varies greatly with time. As nature changes with time, it forces a resultant change in culture and *vice-versa*. Of course, the poetry from North East India is sensitive and dynamic enough to reflect such changes and empathise with the relationship between the ecology of its geographic space and the culture of its peoples. This is the aspect of North East Indian poetry that this paper would focus on.

The principal linguistic groups found in this area are Tibeto-Burmese and Indo-Aryan. However, this paper would concentrate only on poetry written in English from amongst a wide array of rich oral and written literary gems. A select few of the poems coming out of North East India would be taken up in accordance with them reflecting the relationship between – or the oneness of – nature and culture and would be critically analysed from an ecocritical viewpoint. In most literary theory, 'the world' is synonymous with society – the social sphere. Ecocriticism, as a social and literary theory expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere.

Nigamananda Das and N.D.R Chandra, conjointly wrote *Ecology, Myth and Mystery – Contemporary poetry in English from Northeast India* in which they dealt with the aspects of the ecology, myths, rituals, mysteries and demographic traits reflected in the poetry of some major poets from Northeast India. The book focussed on the myths and mysteries embedded and lurking within the natural world and the culture of the peoples of the land. Later Chingangbam Anupama, a scholar from Northeast of India wrote an article titled "An Ecocritical Approach: A Study of Selected Northeast Indian Poets" in the journal "The Criterion: An International Journal in English" where she shows how the "spirit" of the nature becomes an integral part of human identity and; although she had mentioned the process of eradication of the nature/culture dichotomy, no detail analysis of this issue had been shown in her work. The objective of this term paper is to analyse some poems of seven major poets of Northeast India from the perspective of 'Environmental writing' rather than of 'nature writing', as the former focuses on both natural as well as cultural concerns. Initially I have chosen a few poems of Mamang Dai, Rabin S. Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawphlang, TemsulaAo, Mona Zote and Cherrie L. Chhangte and R.K.Madhubir to show that; in their poems, the two components of nature, organisms and their environment are not only complex and dynamic but also interdependent, mutually reactive and interrelated.

Ecocriticism, as a separate school of literary criticism, started emerging in 1990 in a meeting place of American critics dealing exclusively with American literature. Association for the Study

of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE) have enabled to flourish the theory related to Ecocriticism and to define an emerging ecocritical canon. Cheryll Glotfelty started editing *The Ecocritical Reader* in 1996. Etymologically, the word Ecology bears the prefix 'eco' which has its root in Greek word "oikos" meaning house. The Oxford English Dictionary cites the German "oecologie" as the first appearance of "ecology" in 1876 which meant "the branch of biology that deals with the relationship between living organisms and their environment". Ecocriticism has been defined as the conflation of ecology and criticism. Peter Barry added a chapter titled "Ecocriticism" to the second edition of his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (1995). Some ecocritics date the birth of the word "ecocriticism" to William Rueckert who in a 1978 essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in "Ecocriticicm" wrote that ecocriticism involved "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Rueckert 1978 p. 107). Cheryll Glotfelty, the Sanford distinguished professor of Humanities described it as 'the study of nature writing'. He presents his explanation of ecocriticism as "a response to needs, problems, or crises, depending on one's perception of urgency" (Dean 1994 p. 1). Ecocriticism is a space that bridges the gap between literature and science. Lawrence Buell, Chair of the English department at Harvard, writes about literature being in relation to physical environment in the Modern Language Association's "Forum on Literatures of the Environment". Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. This interdisciplinary combination of the physical and the spiritual can be observed in some of the terms of ecocriticism which, according to Lawrence Buell, has the aim to preserve the *where* without which there cannot be the*is* or the survival of man (Buell, 1999). In *Ecocriticism* (2004), Greg Garrad measures some ecopolitical praxis by the extent to which one uses, saves, or ignores the environment. Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007) complements Buell's work by pursuing the nature of nature in Ecocriticism. Morton dealt with the changing definition of the word 'nature' and suggests that nature can be anything. He clarified the extended notion of 'nature' which includes Buell's 'built' and 'natural' nature. Jelica Tosic in her essay *Ecocriticism---Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Environment* argued that while Ecology is anthropocentric, deep ecology emphasizes the fact that man is only one part in a 'complex life net in nature in which everything has a certain value' (Tosic, 2006 p. 45). Man, therefore, is compelled to realize that he is not allowed or entitled to cause damage to the variety and richness of the natural world except for the satisfaction of his basic needs.

The term deep ecology was coined by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher in 1973. Deep ecology gives importance to probing the deeper level of self-awareness which changes anthropocentric view of the world to a biocentric view that is centred around life – any life – on earth. The change includes two steps: firstly, man should change his own way of life and thinking individually and secondly; one should go beyond oneself and that too not only verbally. Deep ecology is action-oriented. Ecocritical practice is generally prompted by a sense of political urgency associated with the desire to investigate and remedy contemporary environmental problems such as threats associated with deforestation, environment pollution, species extinction

and climate change. Lawrence Buell, in his seminal book *Writing from an Endangered World* (2001), argues that literary texts function as "acts of environmental imagination" that may "affect one's caring for the physical world," making that world "feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable"(Buell, 2001). Kevin Hutchingson in his writing mentioned John Evelyn, the naturalist in seventeenth century England, who warned the Royal Society in his book *Sylva* or *A Discourse of Forest Trees* (1664) that English deforestation had reached epidemical proportions (Hutchingson, 2007). Romantics poets like William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley have also shown their ecological concern through their poems. The era of Enlightenment sciences also valorised the nature but with the perspective of subject/object dualism. Their concern for nature was anthropocentric as they thought of saving nature in order to satisfy their needs to survive themselves. Romantic ecocritics destroyed this subject/object dualism and paved for the postmodern refusal of the split between subject and object, observer and observed, species and biosphere, consciousness and cosmos. Romantic Ecocriticism, therefore, may be considered as aptly synonymous with deep ecology. As Kevin Hutchings in his *Ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies* speaks of two markedly different and often contradictory theoretical perspectives of ecocriticism; on the one hand, the writers' effort to communicate a sense of nature's otherness to human or cultural realm or what Jonathan Bates had called "ecopoetics", on the other hand, a second wave of ecocriticism which focussed on the nature's relationship to the realm of politics (Hutchingson, 2007).

Ecopoetics follows the etymological root of the word "ecology", *Okologie* that had taken its origin from the Greek word *Oikos* meaning a house, a dwelling place, habitation. Jonathan Skinner, the Editor of the journal *Ecopoetics*, says:

> "Eco" here signals—no more, no less – the house we share with several million other species, our planet earth. "Poetics" is used as *poesis* or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative act (nor vice versa). Thus: ecopoetics, a house making (Skinner, 2002).

To define ecopoetics, Skinner has used the term "ecotone" which has been derived from the Greek word *tonos* meaning tension. An ecotone is a biological term describing the area between adjacent ecosystems that is the actual boundary between different habitats which often creates an "edge effect". A true ecopoem is expected to create the ecotone between different habitats and, thereby, place itself on the cutting edge of poetic innovation and ecological thinking. This paper intends to centre upon these two waves of ecocriticism and their reflections in the poetry from the North-East India.

Poetry from the North-East is varied as are their languages and culture but they do have similarities stemming from affinities in their landscape and their geo-political situation. Perhaps, it would be highly effective if we recollect what Chandrakanta Murasingh talked about his poetry in a conversation conducted in December 2004 for Poetry International Web. He said:

> "… In the poetry we hear the shrieks of the victims caught in this vicious conflict. (Yet) as the poetry here develops in the lap of hills and descends there in a cascade of rhythm it retains its own identity. It has not wandered off like a fleeting cloud. The face of time has

been engraved on the poetry of North-East." (Murasinghweb:net (http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/2716/27/Chandrakanta-Murasingh)

Murasingh himself has spoken of a special genre of nature poetry which Terry Gifford terms as post-pastoral. Pastoral poetry, previously, dealt with a panegyric attitude towards the bucolic and idyllic beauties of nature as reflected in Philip Sidney's Arcadia. People in the new nations have built an alternative relationship with land, forests, mountains and rivers and that special bond between human beings and their environment is something more than merely being smitten by the pictorial beauties of naturescape. That bond lends them their identity and becomes instrumental in providing to them their source of sustenance. This new poetry emerging from North-East India is also poetry of struggle and changing relationship with nature in a blighted postcolonial environment. The multifaceted voices of contemporary poetry in English from North-East India sometimes express an individual poetic self and sometimes that singular tone reverberates as the saga of the people of the region in general. They present a plethora of images of mountains, hills, rivers, myths and legends, tradition and culture, and multi-ethnic people of the region.

Mercella Durand in her essay "The Ecology of Poetry" published in the journal *Ecopoetics* defined ecological poetry:

> "Ecological poetry is much like ecological living—it recycles materials, functions with an intense awareness of space, seeks an equality of value between all living and unliving things, explores multiple perspectives as an attempt to subvert the dominant paradigms of mono-perception, consumption and hierarchy, and utilizes powers of concentration to increase lucidity and attain a more transparent, less anthropocentric mode of existence"(Skinner, 2002).

Old-fashioned nature poetry does not include the "bulldozer" along with the "bird". The other extreme of this, as Christopher Arigo suggests in *Notes Toward An Ecopoetics: Revising The Postmodern Sublime and Juliana Spahr's "This Connection Of Everyone With Lungs"*, is a poem that not only evades the distinction between the "bulldozer" and the "bird", but also expects profound and immediate change in human action toward the environment, while causing any essential or fundamental change within its own poetical structure(Arigo, web). Ecopoetics parades a more experimental kind of ecological poetry that includes in its ambit both ecological processes and ecological concern. It is this budding tendency of nature poetry that Mercella Durand cites in her essay "The Ecology of Poetry"– the fusion of matter with perception, observation with process, concentration to transmission – has turned the nostalgic remnants of "nature" poetry into something more vivid, dynamic and affective poetry (Skinner, 2002).

Here Durand drew reference of Rodrigo Toscano who found the idea of "equality of value between all living and unliving things" as the most compelling one in Durand's definition. The Pongeian or Thoreauvian revolutionary idea of concentrating upon the exterior system has animated the dynamic idea of poetry as an ecosystem itself and the idea of equality of value is essential for changing the course of nature poetry from its traditional exploitativeness to present

notion of 'poetry being an eco-system' (Skinner, 2002). The poetry of Robin S. Ngangom hints at that essential trait of ecopoetics where a poem itself becomes an ecosystem. In the poem, "Everywhere I Go", the poet speaks of his homeland which is both 'real' and 'virtual' at the same time and yet, earnestly his own:

> "Everywhere I go/ I carry my homeland with me./…/ I often hear about its future/ in conflict resolution symposiums/…/ But I can see it returning with women/ and water in rural evenings./And I want to tell my poet-friends/ of the twelve mothers who stripped themselves/ and asked soldiers to rape them/ In fact, I make imaginary journeys/ to its little world everyday" (Mishra, 2011).

Mamang Dai, one of the strongest voices of North-East Indian poetry in English, aestheticizes the landscape of her motherland with a newer dimension which peoples nature with different genres and voices. Her poems landscape the past and present with recurrent images embedded in nature. They are not just passive observers to the existential despair of men and women as reflected in the wasteland of modernist poets. Her poems are a living presence of small scale turmoil of nature felt within the poetic psyche. This philosophy of animism is reflected in her poem *The Voice of the Mountain*:

> "I know, I know these things / as rocks know, burning in the sun's embrace,/about clouds, and sudden rain;/As I know a cloud is a cloud is a cloud,/A cloud is this uncertain pulse that sits over my heart. /In the end the universe yields nothing/except a dream of permanence. /peace is a falsity/A moment of rest comes after long combat:" (Ed Mishra, 2011)

The ever-changing transience of worldly life is itched over the canvas of nature and Dai has felt her responsibility to act as the agent to perform the tusk:

> "I know the towns, the estuary mouth./ There beyond the last bank/ where the colour drains from heaven/ I can outline the chapters of the world." (The Voice of The Mountain, Mishra, 2011)

Robin Ngangom, a Manipuri poet from Shillong, comments on the aesthetics of experience not being indulged in woolly aesthetics or verbal wizardry but with a constant effort to perforce master the art of witness. The hills of Manipur and Meghalaya haunt him and he passionately celebrates their ecological glory blending the traditional pattern of life with the modes of transition:

> "Solitary lights on Easter hills / tender rivulet, evening bells…/Hills with spires of churches/ hills with rice-fields for siblings/ Hills with genial steps/ where earth's tribes/ Intercourse"(Mishra, 2011).

The grandeur of natural beauty in these poems goes beyond any sensory perception and the pictorial description is intuitively woven into the framework of memory, longing and recollection. Ngangom's poetry was meant to be a bridge between the paradoxical worlds of the primitive and the modern and that virtual bridge has been made in the lap of the nature:

> "The poet loses his metaphors/ when you do not return… / The murmuring river is hushed as it loses its course/ in a sunless kingdom./…when/ you do not return dead waters breed/ reptiles in our minds,…/ .. The barbwire of the day encloses us as we enter the era/ of the assassin./ .. And I write these letters of winter, asking you/ to return to the hills.." (When You Do Not Return, Mishra, 2011)

The poetry of North-East India moves beyond the picturesque aesthetics of Romantic Ecology and the observer/observed dualism of Enlightenment science as it connotes a blurring boundary between the human and non-human worlds. However, as Kelvin Hutchingson finds, such a profound identification with nature "entails a quasi-mystical surrender of critical self-reflexivity that has troubling political implications" (Hutchingson, 2007 p. 182). A serious concern for deep ecology naturally gives birth to "Ecofeminism" as the social construction of "nature" and the social construction of "woman" seems to be highly connected in the current social discourse. Ecofeminists identify themselves with nature and, thereby, reject anthropocentrism and the androcentric view simultaneously. Though Mamang Dai's poetry resonates with the contemporary trend of ecofeminism and she portrays her bodily connections with nature, it is not a Euro-centric association of woman's body with degraded nature. It is rather a reconfiguring of nature, bodies, and the relationship between human body and natural world:

> "I am the woman lost in translation/ who survives, with happiness to carry on./ .. I am the place where memory escapes/ the myth of time,/ I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain." (The Voice of the Mountain, Mishra, 2011)

This reconstruction and reconfiguration of nature, gender and body comes out of a denial of value hierarchies and value dualisms of Western metaphysics. Sometimes the devalued or rather the erased self of "womanhood" finds expression in the natural world:

> "Life is so hard like this./ Nobody knows why./ It is like fire./ It is like rainwater, sand, glass./ What shall I do, my love,/ if my reflections disappears?"(The Sorrow of Women, Mishra, 2011).

But it is not the lamentation of an erased self but the assertion of self-value that has pervaded the poem where the poet concludes with an omniscient observer of the whole scenario:

> "And they are talking about escape,/ about liberty, men and guns,/ ah! The urgency for survival./ But what will they do/ not knowing the sorrow of women." (The Sorrow of Women, Mishra, 2011)

The multifaceted enigma of 'womanhood' and its overt connectivity with the course of nature has been portrayed throughout the poem "The River" where Dai with her poetic ease has equated the unpredictable nature of a woman's soul with the ever-changing presence of a river. The river assumes the space of being a woman, a name, an ambience and the whereabouts of all these entities and thus becomes the identity-incarnate of a universal existence of human being as an integral part of nature:

> "I thought the river is a woman./ A country, a name,/ a note of music trapped in the white current,/ a sheet of paper carrying a secret map;/ the skyline is where it begins/ between the

darkness and the summit/ in the birthplace of thirst" (The River, Ngangom &Nongkinrih, 2009).

Temsula Ao, a poet from Nagaland has compared the body of a woman and its violation with the landscape and its devastation. The potent imagery of rape of forests culminates to a barrenness of the womb as she says:

> "Cry for the river/ muddy, misshapen/ Grotesque/ Choking with the remains/ of her sister/ the forest/ No life stirs in her belly now/ The bomb/ and the bleaching powder/ have left her with no tomorrow" (Mishra, 2011)

The origin of ecocriticism naturally coincides with ethnopoetics as humans are integral part of ecology. William Howarth in his essay "Some Principles of Ecocriticism" discussed how ecology advanced from description to advocacy after 1960 with special reference to land-use in American history (Glotfelty, 1996). Ecological study has started shaping a new ethics in landscape history. North-East India is inhabited by more than three hundred culturally distinct ethnic groups of various sizes and at various stages of development. The invasion of Christianity has not been able to wipe out the existence of indigenous culture entirely. They co-exist and this interdependency has changed the life of the local people in various ways. Change in Education, Economic development (consumerism), and deforestation caused by the growth of urban civilization combined with a change in societal value system has created a deep-seated conflict between the ideal past and the changed present in the mind of the poets of these lands. People of this 'land of seven sisters' became acquainted with their land, hills, river and forests through a series of cultural memories and mythical allusions told by their predecessors to them. The agony of changing earth and the endangered ethnicity mingles with one another and takes a singular expression in the poetry of Temsula Ao:

> "We believed that our gods lived/ in the various forms of nature/ whom we worshipped/ with unquestioning faith/ Then came a tribe of strangers/into our primordial territories/Armed with only a book and/ Promises of a land called Heaven/ Declaring that our Trees and Mountains/ Rocks and Rivers were no Gods/And that our songs and stories/Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense./… we borrowed their minds,/ Aped their manners,/ Adopted their gods/ And became perfect mimics." (Blood of Others; Mishra, 2011)

The 'land' itself is a loaded term having both material presence and emotive significance. The changing landscape is the external reflection of their changing identity which, they have felt, can only be retrieved through unearthing their cultural memory, the old songs and stories of their own culture. The last part of the poem "Blood of Others" assures of that retrieval of the lost identity:

> "But a mere century of negation/ Proved inadequate to erase/the imprints of intrinsic identities/ Stamped on minds since time began/ the supressed resonance of old songs/ and the insight of primitive stories/…/In the agony of the re-birth/Our hills and valleys reverberate/ with death-dealing shrieks of unfamiliar arms/ as the throw-back generation resurrects." (Blood of Others; Mishra, 2011)

She felt the inherent power of the old songs, stories and legends of her Ao culture in retrieving the lost identity of her generation:

> "When my time came I told stories/ As though they ran in my blood/ because each telling revitalized/ My life-force/ And each story reinforced/ My racial reminiscence/ The stories told of the moment/ When we broke into being/ From the six stones and/ How the first fathers founded/ Our ancient villages and/ Worshipped the forces of nature". (The Old Story Teller; Mishra, 2011)

An unyielding intimacy between nature and Ao community has been a recurrent theme in her poetry. In "Stone-people from Lungterok" she seems to be reminding the new generation who have trodden far from this relationship:

> "Lungterok,/ The six stones/ Where the progenitors/ And forebears/ Of the stone-people/ Were born/ Out of the womb/ Of the earth./ …/ Stone-people,/ The polyglots,/ Knowledgeable/ In bird's language/ And animal discourse./ The students,/ Who learned from ants/ The art of carving/ Heads of enemies/ As trophies/ Of War/…/Stone-people/ The worshippers/ Of unknown, unseen/ spirits/ Of trees and forests,/ Of stones and rivers,/ Believers of soul/ and its varied forms,/Its sojourn here/ And passage across the water/Into the hereafter." (Stone-people from Lungterok; Ngangom, 2009)

Desmond Kharmawphlang, a poet from Meghalaya, undergoes a journey to the remote village of Pahambir in search of his cultural root in the midst of his hybrid generation. The village folks doubt his intention and in his explanation the past conjures up with the present:

> "'we come,' I plead, 'to learn, not to teach./ We come with longing, we are the / Forgetful generation, our hearts tapping/ A rhythm spawned in shame, a shame/ That splits our present from our past./ We have suckled for so long/ On a wisdom of falsehood – we ourselves/ our own worst enemies.'" (Letter from Pahambir, Mishra, 2011)

The untenable existence of the modern times stands as a sharp contrast to the solidarity of natural folk life in "Tyrchiang":

> "Tyrchiang, the wind among your/ pines shames me with its/ simplicity, I whose roots draw/ deep from books to prop up/ my tribal bones." (Tyrchiang; Ngangom, 2009)

A serious concern for bio-diversity is equally important for ethnopoetics and ecopoetics. Jelica Tosic in her essay *Ecocriticism – Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Environment* shows how Eco-definition can apparently be applied for culture in the context of bio-diversity, especially to endangered species (Tosic, 2006). Biodiversity is a matter of fact in nature. But due to planned or collateral intervention of man, a lot of animal and plant species have been eradicated and an equal or greater number have been added to the list of endangered species. Debouched economic schemes and constant economic growth are the reason behind these unnatural activities. Things have been similar in culture or cultures as well. The cultural diversity reduction occurs as a result of the development and domination of great cultures which have come to existence at the cost of the extinction of a lot of "smaller" cultures. Coming back to the context of North-East India, the collective name 'North-East India' actually comprises many

different ethnic races, tribes and many different linguistic sub-tribes speaking various dialects. But a recent geo-political tendency is in process to identify these heterogeneous lands as a homogeneous entity. With the advent of modernity, especially in economic and cultural fields, the indigenous identity of these tribes has been pacing towards a national one and the definition of this identity has been derived from political and economic dependencies, rather than any cultural, traditional or linguistic affinities. This consciousness of being homogenized or rather globalized has created conflict of values and rejuvenated the urge of reconstructing the cultural identity of the ethnic groups among the poets of these lands and these crises have mostly reflected in their poetry through the efforts at saving the endangered flora and fauna from extinction. The destruction of flora and fauna also serves as a metaphor of lost identity as nature in holistic way representing the collective identity of the people and destruction of its parts leads to the distortion of that identity. In her quest for identity Mamang Dai writes:

> "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 leaning by the tree/ and try to make a sign." (The Voice of the Mountain; Mishra, 2011)

The "gift of fish" from the "land of river" is being offered to the mountain, the spirit of the land, and in return the mountain tries to make a "sign" to communicate with man.

Mona Zote, a poet from Mizoram is vocal in protecting the natural and cultural diversity of her land. In her poem "Girl with Black Guitar and Blue Hibiscus", she shows how an artistic creation requires a human being, an avian, the natural setting and various species of flora to portray a cherished picture of human life:

> "The pigeons are insane with grief because you left them/ the clouds will be noble and distant as always/ The scent of citrus flowers will fade in soft explosions/ and the girl will put a blue hibiscus in her hair/…/Until it becomes the black guitar and music becomes/ A cleft of a certain colour waiting for the first quiver of strings" (Girl With Black Guitar and Blue Hibiscus; Mishra, 2011).

In the poem "What Does an Indian Look Like", Cherrie L. Chhangte, another poet from Mizoram, ironically points out the in-between existence of North-East India where national inclusion of these states is sometimes earned through the nullification of their individual ethnic identity:

> "Celebrated land of diversity,/ Tourist brochures, colourful and vibrant./ Rich hues, striking costumes,/ Interesting faces – a veritable Benetton ad./ Difference, in theory, are appreciated;/Make a good topic for the politician's speech./ Are we as proud of our unity/ As we are of our diversity?" (What Does an Indian Look Like; Mishra, 2011)

According to Tosic, though habitat modification is another issue of extinction it does not really affect the mobile human being in the way it endangers the plants and animals. Metaphorically, men lack roots and, therefore, they continually keep on their quest for something firm and whole.

This aspect of man's physical mobility is attaining a broader insight into other cultures and people. The world ecosystem speaks of the removal of all the boundaries within various ecosystems. She speaks of *global environmental culture* which ultimately leads to *environmental unconscious* in which concern for space anywhere in the world becomes crucial. Ecocriticism is, therefore, a part of the general globalisation in the world. In Tosic's words, "Out of his *unconscious*, he moves towards the conscious effort to create a work of art whose structure will help the formation of the *unconscious* in the recipient or *spatial unconscious* in the case of ecocriticism." Here, ecocriticism makes man realize that apart from his identity related to his immediate environment or space, he is a part of the whole human race whose space must be protected or preserved. Ecocultural habitat, thus, becomes a combination of the physical and social, individual and global (Tosic, 2006). North-East India, with its seven states, is always in a tension of a cleft identity, one strand of which leads to ethnicity and the other one is in a process to avail national identity in the true sense of the term. The inhabitants of that geographic space do not feel ready to attain a national identity at the cost of ethnic extinction. The contradiction lies in the fact that they are in favour of losing the boundary to be a part of a larger national system but only with a distinct mark of their ethnic identity. Their poetry not only raises a voice of grievance against the central policy for this imposed alienation but also one in favour of equal maintenance of sub-ecosystems within the periphery of human civilization:

> "The 'largest democracy in the world'./ Sounds good on paper; not too good/ For those who, in a land that professes/ To deny the presence of a mainstream, still has little rivulets and brooks/ Furiously trying to keep pace with the river,/ side-lined, side-racked, side-stepped,/A minority in a majority world/ You look at me, and you see/ My eyes, my skin, my language, my faith./You dissect my past, analyse my present/ predict my future and build my profile./ I am a curiosity, an 'ethnic' specimen./ Politics, history, anthropology, your impressive learning/ All unable to answer the fundamental question--/ What does an Indian look like?'/ -- An Indian looks like me, an Indian is Me" (What Does An Indian Look Like, Mishra, 2011).

Language is a central issue of every discipline as it holds the essence of that very field. Ecocriticism or especially ecopoetics, being an interdisciplinary space, deals with the issue related to language in a sensitive way. Etymologically, the word 'ecology' having the prefix 'eco' derived from the Greek word *oikos* (meaning 'house' or 'dwelling') and suffix 'logy' derived from the Greek word logos (meaning language) suggests an inescapable connection in human experience between nature and language. As we come to know nature through visual signs and sensual symbols, ecocriticism tends to anticipate the mode of its linguistic structures from the design through which structuralist critics of myths and archetypes examined symbols. William Howarth shows how ecocriticism examines the linguistic ability to point things in nature:

> "Ecocriticism, instead of taxing science for its use of language to represent (mimesis), examines its ability to point (deixis). More developed in Asian than European languages (Liu), deixis locates entities in space, time and social context. Through deixis, meaning

develops from what is said or signed relative to physical space: I – You, Here – There, This – That" (Skinner, 2002).

Apart from the fact that the language of poetry itself is the language of nature as it mostly speaks through symbols, English poetry from North-East India abounds with the linguistic reference of ecopoetics in its thematic content and structural devices. Mamang Dai's poem "The Voice of the Mountain" is a remarkable instance in this context where mountain speaks to the people of the land through various signs and symbols:

> "We live in territories forever ancient and new,/ and as we speak in changing languages/ I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree/ and try to make a sign./…/My voice is sea-waves and mountain peaks,/ In the transfer of symbols/ I am the chance syllable that orders the world/ instructed with history and miracles" (Mishra, 2011).

Another excellent abode for language of ecopoetics is Robin S. Ngangom's "poetry" where he tells about the great poets of the past who wrote poems in collaboration with the nature:

> "Like the great poets/pardoned by time/I wanted to gather words/from arrows knocked in a turquoise sky./I wanted to catch words in my embroidered bag,/rainy words spattered, thrown about/by the march wind, I wanted to collect/ pebbly words from riverbeds, smooth,/geometrical consonants of primary colours./ I wanted to unearth roots and herbs/ and compound a word-salve, I wanted/ to forge words on an anvil./ I wanted to be a wordsmith." (Poetry; Mishra, 2011)

Jelica Tosic argued that language diversity is also threatened as for some political and linguistic reasons English has become superior to other languages. Here, she draws reference of Lawrence Buell concept of *literary hazard*. The word *hazard* is not associated with linguistics or literature, but with environmental protection. But Buell has used this word *hazard* to express the urgency of the situation that English, in spite of being incapable of expressing everything through its own linguistic structure, has become a global language and, thus, destroys or rather damages the scope of linguistic diversity in the world. (Tosic, 2006) In North-East India some states except Assam and Manipur (who already have their written literature as well), have a heritage of rich oral literature. The states that did not possess any written form of literature, adopt the English language as their written medium but in spite of writing poetry in English they do not feel this foreign language to be their own and, therefore, lament for their linguistic rootlessness:

> "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." (An Obscure Place; Mishra, 2011)

Pollution is another issue which knows no boundary either in ecological context and linguistic context. In the linguistic context, it is caused by the uncritical import of new lexical units or words and new syntagmatic or syntactic structures from other languages, notably English. (Tosic, 2006)English language in this heterogeneous land has not homogenized the written literature of these states. Every poet has shaped this language in his or her own way. The diverse experiences of Mamang Dai, TemsulaAo, Rabin S. Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Mona Zote, and Cherrie L. Chhangte and the cultures they write from, inevitably shape the vocabulary,

the cadences, even the sentence structures of their work, by dint of the different languages they call their mother tongue. "Tapu", a poem written in English by Mamang Dai bears the linguistic reference in its title as *tapu* is a dance performed by male members of the Adi community. Temsula Ao in her poem "The Spear" used a native word "genna" to mean unclean, sacred, as well as taboo:

> "Next I erected the circle of *genna*/ around the still and bloody duo/Praying fervently that other predators/ would know the sign and steer/ Clear of the spear-blighted spot." (The Spear; Mishra, 2011)

Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, in his poem "Letter from Pahambir" has used a native word "diplin" to mean a wooden board for egg-breaking ritual:

> "See this diplin, spattered with/ good red mud? Have stored centuries/ of prayers for harvest, a hunt…" (Letter from Pahambir; Mishra 2011)

As an ecopoem is an ecotone where the boundaries between different ecological species become blurred, ecopoetics actively believes in the reconstruction of the relationship between the human being and the animals. Liberationist perspectives tried to nullify the hierarchy between animals and human beings. Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom* gives a reference of John Berger who criticised the fact that animals are always gazed at by the human world. According to Berger, the ever-extending knowledge of the human beings separates them from the animals and it is knowledge that becomes an index of our power which never allows us to be gazed at by the animals (Garrard, 2013). Mamang Dai's poem "The River" spontaneously deviates Berger's statement and shows a different perspective of an ecology where a human being becomes an object to be gazed at by a river, an elephant, a lion, a horse and even by a peacock:

> "Do not stay too long by the river./ The river is a wayward god,/it is an elephant, a lion,/ sometimes they call it horse;/ one summer we thought it was a peacock,/turning in the yellow dust/ that filled our eyes with gold" (Ngangom, 2009)

Temsula Ao's poem "Soul-Bird" focuses on the "lonely hawk" and the metamorphosis in which the bird has been treated as the bearer of a human soul becomes the central tension of the poem. Instead of enjoying the privilege of being the 'gazer', the human characters of this poem have actually shown their eagerness to reciprocate with the hawk and to some extent to be 'gazed' at by the bird:

> "See that keening bird in the sky?/ That's your mother's soul/ saying her final goodbye…" (Soul-Bird; Ngangom, 2009)

The eco-philosopher R. Willis assesses the relationship between humans and animals in terms of two linguistic figures of speeches:

> "The distinctive peculiarity of animals is that, being at once close to man and strange to him, both akin to him and unalterably not-man, they are able to alternate, as objects of human thought, between the contiguity of the metonymic mode and the distanced, analogical mode of the metaphor". (Willis, 1974 p. 128)

These two modes of axial relationship between human being and animals are better shown in Desmond Kharmawphlang's poem "Poems During November" where the metonymic association of a human being with "a fox" and "the ravines" has been placed as the cohabitants of the same hill and yet the animals' apparently unchanged life-style in the juxtaposition of human life heading through a period of political turbulence has been described with a metaphoric distance:

> "The rains still weep on these hills,/ Filling the thin air with softness,/ Sending a fox howling halfway down/ The ravines" (Poems During November' Mishra, 2011)

Robin S. Ngangom's poem "Curfew" has portrayed a picture during a curfew where the birds in the nature react in a humane way as they too cease flying in a period of political turmoil:

> "There are no birds in the sky/ only endless space"(Ngangom, 1994).

"The First Rain", another poem by Ngangom, reflects the liminal space, space created by 'ecotone' where the poet identifies his existential crisis with the crisis in the animal world:

> "An animal threatened with extinction/ needs a lair for his mate and his young,/ I'm not different./ I need the morning for its bright blood/ and I need to seize the night." (Mishra, 2011)

Space, or what Lawrence Buell terms as *the where*, is a necessary precondition of any existence and in the ecological sense it exhibits the interdependence of the non-living, abiotic components (physical and chemical) and other living, biotic components. (Buell, 2001)Alan Gilpin in his *Dictionary of Environment and Sustainable Development* specified the definition of physical environment as including "the built environment, the natural environment, and all natural resources, including air, land and water." Gilpin also cited a section of the European Union definition of the environment as "the combination of elements whose complex interrelationships make up the settings, the surroundings and the conditions of life of the individual and of society, *as they are or as they are felt*."Jelica Tosic gave importance to this definition for several reasons. Firstly, it throws light on the interdependence of all the elements comprising one human life. Secondly, it alerts a human being against ignoring the things and beings around him that are not of immediate concern to him. Finally, it gives emphasis on the subjectivity in assessing one's environment. Here, she has also refers to Lawrence Bull's phrase "environmental imagination" which conveys the message of how the physical environment shapes imagination and of the definition of environmental perception given by *Collins Dictionary of Environmental Science* where Collins has spoken of "the cultural geography of a region".(Tosic, 2006)

In the 1960s and then onwards from the 1970s, the course of "nature" poetry as a doorway into meaning of the human subject's life becomes problematic as the nature has changed from a

perceptible, exploitable other to something intrinsically affected by humans. According to Mercella Durand, a close 'concentration' upon systems as systems can lead to the animation of poetic processes. In Ecopoetics we always observe a lucid yet wild fusion of structure of poem with structure of matter/energy – things. Things are not limited here to those conventionally marked as "natural"—*i.e.*; tigers, lambs, rivers, mountains—'but expanded to include all beings, objects, systems, and locales—water reservoirs, the insides of televisions, invasive purple loosestrife, "africanized" bee populations, subway tunnels—in a levelling of value between and of subject and object'.(Skinner, 2002)

Durand has clarified his notion of 'concentration' by citing reference to Baudelaire's concept of 'surnaturalism', that is, "a state of perception which intensifies the existence of things, makes them hyperbolically themselves." He has explicitly stated his preference in taking the original concept of 'concentration', *i.e.*; 'mental acuity sense' to clarify the notion of his poetic ecological system which, being linguistically self-contained, self-sustaining and recycling, animates both word and perception with the idea of action. He argues that concentration upon spaces and landscape leads to poetry and, poetry leads to further concentration upon spaces and landscape (Skinner, 2002).

The poets from North-East India maintain this spatial 'concentration' religiously in their poetry:

> "They have slain the wild cat/and buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep" (An Obscure Place; Mishra, 2011)

Here, the poet's concern for the wild cat and hornbill is neither as much subjective as it seems to be, nor is it a shadowed unconscious of the poet's psyche. Those wild animals, men, women and other natural elements become 'hyperbolically' themselves in Ngangom's poem "Poem During Christmas" where the poetic self, the drunkards and dogs create the triangular possibility of enjoying solitude or suffering from loneliness on the vagabond roads in Christmas night:

> "Woman much desired/ tonight stars hang from Christmas pines/ and earth and firmament/ extend a warm unfathomable hand./When only drunkards and dogs/ own the vagabond roads/ I came riding the night/ in taxis of loneliness" (Ngangom, 1994).

Mercalla Durand's "linguistically self-contained, self-sustaining" ecopoem reminds us of Ngangom's effort to write a poem in which the words do not owe to nature for their birth and survival:

> "I wanted to harvest words/ which grow on their own, words/ which die without tawdry funerals;/ of creepers and vines, stars and stone,/ wisdom and folly, flowers and moss." (Poetry; Mishra, 2011)

Christopher Arigo in his essay clarifies the notion of "reversed sublime", the sublime as "the aesthetics of vastness, magnificence, power and fear" (Arigo). The sublime is not experienced as an awesome spectacle of tranquillity or overwhelming beauty of the natural scene solely. This reversed sublime which is the tension between the tranquillity and beauty as juxtaposed with human intervention in the landscape, often in its most destructive form becomes one of the most

exciting tropes in current ecological writing. R. K. Madhubir, a poet from Manipur, is noticeable in handling this trope of reversed sublime in his poetry with a dignified style:

> "Everybody's heart tugging by nuclear holocaust/everybody's hair raising by starwar/everything now doing by computers/moving the roads now instead of engines/in the age you are picking sparrow-dung as coins/encroaching like pahom for a few more steps" (The Timebomb and Other Poems; Madhubir, 1987)

Again, being provoked by Christopher Arigo, a very crucial and relevant query may be raised after such a long discussion about ecopoetics in the context of English poetry from North-East India: can ecopoetics be a site of reclamation of our lost connection with the natural world? Or is it the result of the interrupted connection? I think it is worth-stating that the ecopoem, as it occupies the tensioned space, has the potential for reshaping thinking about ecological issues and the poets of North-East India are indubitably aware of their responsibilities in naturalizing this process. They encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications.

Works Cited

Arigo, Christopher. "Notes Towards an Ecopoetics: Revising the Postmodern Sublime and Juliana Spahr's This Connection of Everyone with Lungs",(https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/essays/arigo.html) Accessed on 26/04/2017

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nded . Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002 [1995]. Print.

Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. London: Picador, 2000. Print

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Print

——*Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2001. Print

Chandra, N.D.R. Das Nigamananda, *Ecology, Myth and Mystery – Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India,* Sarup& Sons, New Delhi, 2007. Print

Ed Misra, Tilottoma, *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India-Poetry and Essays*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011. Print

Ed Ngangom, S. Robin &Nongkynrih, S. Kynpham, *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*, Penguine Books India, New Delhi. 2009. Print.

Ed Glotfelty, Cheryll& Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, University of Georgia press, Athens, Georgia, 1996. Print

EdSkinner,Jonathan.*Ecopoetics*No.2,Fall,2002.(https://ecopoetics.files.wordpress.com/2008/06/eco2.pdf) Accessed on 26/04/2017

Garrard, Greg, *Ecocriticism-The Critical Idiom,* Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2013. (https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/pg/masters/modules/resourcefictions/garrard.pdf) Accessed on 26/04/2017

Hutchings, Kevin. "Ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies", University of Northern British Columbia, 2007. Print

Madhubir, R. K. *The Timebombs and Other Poems,* Bhagya Publication, Imphal, 1987. Print.

Ngangom, S. Robin. *Time's Crossroads,* Disha Book, Hyderabad, 1994. Print.

Phillips, Dana. "The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America". Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. Print

Rueckert, William. *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,* Athens: University

Of Georgia Press, 1996

(http://course.sdu.edu.cn/G2S/eWebEditor/uploadfile/20140304190631008.pdf

Willis, R. *Man and Beast*, London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1974. Print

Tosic, Jelica. "Ecocriticism – Interdisciplinary Study of Literature and Environment", UDC 502. 12, Facta Universitatis, Series: Working and Living Environment Protection. Vol. 3, N.I, 2006. (http://facta.junis.ni.ac.rs/walep/walep2006/walep2006-06.pdf) Accessed on 26/04/2017.

V, Shoba. &Dr.Nagaraj, P. "Ecology in Relation to Ecocriticism", Indian Journal of Applied Research. Vol: 3, Issue: I, January, 2013. (https://www.worldwidejournals.com/indian-journal-of-applied-research(IJAR)/file.php?val=January_2013_1357046093_cf1fd_33.pdf) Accessed on 26/04/2017.