

## Reclaiming Roots: Society, Culture, and Ecological Poetics in Northeast Indian Poetry

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### Abstract

The paper aims to present an intricate relationship between society, culture, and nature in select Northeast Indian poets like Temsula, Mamang, Robin, and Kynpham. Northeast Indian Poetry is generally associated with themes of conflict, insurgency, violence, loss of identity and erosion of tribal values. The paper will show how these poems read both land and poem as one, revealing an inherently bio-centric indigenous identity. Northeast Indian poetry offers a healing experience, a return to a sense of place and things normally lost to modern living, positing a unity of mind and nature. Ecological poetics enables these bioregional poets to seek a space for subjective redefinition by rediscovering the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world.

**Keywords:** Ecological Poetics, Nature, Culture, Identity.

### Introduction

Northeast Indian Poetry has attained prominence in the last two decades although the seeds began sprouting immediately after the independence of the country. The recurring theme that characterizes this class of poetry includes indigenous culture, cultural redemption, insurgency, erosion of tribal values, and violence in its many forms. Choudhury observes that the poetry from this region encapsulates the “struggles, aspirations, and rich cultural heritage” of its diverse ethnic groups, presenting a “poetic counter-narrative to the prevalent discourses of violence and conflict” (78). This perspective highlights how select poets use their literary craft to

address themes of identity, loss, and resilience amid the turmoil of insurgency and cultural erosion.

However, seldom have we appreciated these poems simply as splendid pieces of nature-writing using the framework of ecological poetics. Ecological poetics is a transcendent source of aesthetics involving a complex political, spiritual and moral eco-tone. Ngangom emphasizes that “Northeast Indian poetry acts as a bridge between the personal and the political, using nature and landscape as metaphors for cultural identity and collective memory” (92). His analysis points out how the natural beauty of the region often contrasts sharply with its troubled history, enabling poets to forge a deeper connection between their experiences and the land. Ecological poetics enables these bioregional poets to seek a space for subjective redefinition through a rediscovery of the interconnectedness between the human and the natural world. Using the lens of eco-poetics, the paper will show how these poems read both land and poem as one serving to reveal an inherently bio-centric indigenous identity.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining textual analysis and ecocritical theory to examine how selected Northeast Indian depict the interplay between nature, culture, and society. Drawing from ecocriticism and cultural studies, the research explores how the poets address ecological concerns, cultural identity, and socio-political realities.

### **Cultural Revivalism and Identity in Temsula Ao's Poetry: Navigating Hybridization**

Ao poetry speaks about identity, traditions, hybridization of the indigenous culture with the initiation of christianity, modernity and a desire for cultural revivalism. Ao's exploration of identity, traditions, and hybridization within her poetry aligns closely with the theoretical frameworks of Bhabha. Bhabha posits that hybridization is a crucial aspect of post-colonial identity formation, emphasizing the concept of “third space,” where cultural exchange occurs, leading to new forms of identity (Bhabha 56).

Ao's poetry demystifies and deconstructs the tribal constructs, customs and traditions that regulate their life. Her poetry has a distinctiveness of native literature with a universal appeal. The poem “The Stone-people from Lungterok”, deals with creation of Ao tribes. The poem presents her ancestor in close association with nature, well versed in its secrets and wisdom

along with their extraordinary surviving skills. She describes native people as “the progenitors / And forebears / of the stone people / out of the womb / of the Earth” (Ao, *Stone-people from Lungterok* ll. 1-7).

Her poem “In blood of other days”, shows the effect of colonization and the post-colonial dichotomy and the hybridization of culture, amassed the gradual inflow of Christianity in the region. She writes, “Then came a tribe of strangers / Into our primordial territories / Armed with only a Book and / Promises of a land called Heaven” (Ao, *In Blood of Other Days* ll. 1-4). As marked by Bakhtin, “Hybrid is not only double-voiced, but is also double language; for in it there are not only two individual consciousness, two voices, as there are [doublings of] socio-linguistic, consciousness, that come together and consciously fight on the territory of the utterance”(1981), Ao’s poem “Heritage” expresses the dichotomy when the poetic persona witnesses the cultural artefacts of her tribes made a subject of display in the European museum. This rings the alarm bell suggesting a threat, which poses an inevitable challenge to the question of identity. Ao laments the plight of her cultural artifacts, stating, “They languish, these uprooted / treasures of my heritage / caged within imposing structures / in designated spaces” (Ao, *Heritage* ll. 1-4).

Ao’s poems serve as a dialogue between the past and present, revealing the tensions and negotiations inherent in her cultural identity. She hints the mere stage of doubt, depression and alienation in the slow transformation of the rich old legacy of Ao’s culture and traditions. Ao questions the relevance of age and knowledge, writing, “Anyway, what has age to do with dying / And of what use this irrelevant knowledge / When they are already pledged / On a one-way journey / To their destiny?” (Ao, *Nowhere Boatman* ll. 24-28).

Ao’s poem “The old storyteller” narrates the origin of the oral tradition demarcating how, “society can preserve its knowledge from one generation to another, making it possible for the future generations to reconstruct their cultural identity.” (Assmann, 2011). Ao reflects on the importance of storytelling, stating, “I have lived my life believing / Story-telling was my proud legacy” (Ao, *The Old Storyteller* ll. 1-2).

### Ecological Consciousness and Cultural Identity in Mamang Dai's Poetry

Dai's poetry reflects an inherent connection between nature, culture, and identity, which aligns with the concept of ecological humanism. Ecological humanism emphasizes the importance of human values, culture, and environmental stewardship while recognizing the interdependence of humans and nature. Dai's depiction of the natural world—particularly the mountains, rivers, and forests of Arunachal Pradesh—illustrates the deep ecological consciousness embedded within indigenous cultures, making her work a reflection of ecological humanism (Garrard 5-6).

Dai is a nature poet where she draws inspiration from nature, the mighty mountains, the rivers, and the native people which also act as an immediate reference of her poetic verse. She strongly advocates for the protection of the ecology of her region and gave prominence for the preservation of tradition, culture and identity.

Kate Soper, in *What is Nature?*, distinguishes between nature as a “real” entity and nature as a cultural construct, asserting that our interaction with nature is both material and symbolic (Soper 15-16). Dai's work, particularly in poems like “An Obscure Palace”, illustrates this duality by presenting nature as both a physical and spiritual entity that shapes the cultural identity of her people. Her invocation of animistic traditions and belief in the spiritual power of natural elements connects to Soper's argument about the representation of nature as a dynamic force in shaping human identity and social reality.

Most of the indigenous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh follows animistic faith. Mamang makes an ardent attempt to safeguard cultural identity by personifying the elements of nature as the manifestation of the supreme deity called ‘*Donyi Polo*’ in their traditional terms. Along with the description of the natural landscape and the close harmony of the people with nature, the poems of Mamang also shows the insurgency, violence and tension that have resulted through the hybridization of culture. In her poem “Gone”, Dai writes, “At night we sleep with guns and gulls / Tugging at land and oceans, / And ropes coiled at barren rock / where once flower were to seed / pumping blood and singing voices” (Dai 43).

Her rich imagery and symbols of myths and legends assert the root of the tribal cultural identity. Swarnalatha Rangarajan's “Engaging with Prakriti” emphasizes the central role of

nature in Indian literary traditions, particularly in how it contributes to a deeper understanding of ecological poetics. Dai's intertwining of mythology, animism, and ecological consciousness resonates with the biocentric worldview Rangarajan discusses, where the preservation of nature is tied to the preservation of cultural identity (97-99).

### **Conflict and Identity in Robin S. Ngangom's Poetry**

The poems of Robin are the 'poetry of witness'. In his poem, "Native Land," he gives us the picture of the unending conflict going on between the different forces, its deadly consequence, the suffering of the common people and the helplessness of the poet to change or put to halt the existing disputes. The poet recalls the ethnic clash between Kukis and the Nagas known as 'Joupi Massacre,' and says, "First came the scream of the dying in a bad dream/ then the radio report/ and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five houses razed/ sixteen beheaded with hands tied / behind their backs inside a church." (Native Land, ll 1-5)

In another poem, "Hill" the poet personifies the mountain and records that not only human beings are the witness of all the happenings of the world but even the mother nature is the sole witness of the human creation, gradual evolution, domination, the uprising conflicts and struggles. This aligns with the ecocritical view that "nature is not merely a passive backdrop but an active participant and recorder of human activities" (Buell 49). In Ngangom's poems, nature bears witness to both human achievements and failures, becoming a symbol of the endurance of time and history.

In poem "I am Sorry to see Poetry in Chains", Ngangom compares the glorious past to the corrupted and difficult present and he tries to make people realize their identity, traditions and culture. He observes: "Once prime land, beneficent and fabled / and now playground of black marketers, / heaven for fortune hunters where / none misses a heartbeat / as you feed money, sell honour, peddle justice" (Ngangom 36-40). This reflects the ecocritical concern with how industrialization and modernity affect the natural world, echoing concerns raised by environmental scholars like Lawrence Buell.

The poetry of Ngangam shows the varied conflicts, be it the ethnic conflict or the conflict with mainstream or even the insurgency incumbents. His poetry portrays the violence, the hybridization of culture and longing of the glorious past-customs and traditions.

### **Ethnic Conflicts and Cultural Preservation in Kynpham's Poetry**

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih poems are a record of socio-cultural, political and literary scenario of the region. His poem, "Sundori" deals with the theme of ethnic dissension in his native land. The poem is a monologue and is addressed to a woman Sundori, who aims for peace and harmony in the region. The narrator and his beloved belong to the different ethnic group, so they can't meet each other as there are frequent clashes and violence. Their love stands as a symbol of peace and unity. He says, "Beloved Sundori/Yesterday one of my people/Killed one of your people/And one of your people/Killed one of my people." (Sundori, ll 1-5)

In his poem "Agartala Nights", he satirizes the people and their insensitiveness, keeping themselves aloof from the realities that unfurl before their eyes. Kynpham writes, "Supplant their customs/ reduce their palaces/into lowly assembly houses and tourist destinations/Herd them to the mainstream/ drown them there." (Agartala Nights, Lines 10-13). Nongkynrih's poetry frequently reflects an intense concern for the loss of cultural identity in a rapidly globalizing world. His poem "Agartala Nights" satirizes the cultural displacement and identity conflicts that arise from the influx of immigrants and the erosion of traditional customs (Nongkynrih, Lines 10-13). His depiction of cultural loss mirrors Tilottoma Mishra's assertion that the literature of Northeast India often reflects an "intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery" resulting from interactions with 'other' cultures (xiii).

His poem "Kynshi" longs for the protection and preservation of the pristine natural habitat and wishes for an interventionist approach from his fellow men to safeguard the Mother Nature. This passion for nature is also coupled with the passion for culture. He is in awe with his culture but somewhere he is deeply engrossed at the loss of his rich cultural heritage. In his poem, he laments, "Hills lose their summer green/blasted into rocks/into pebble and sand/and the sand is not spared/This is the sadness with us all/who cannot think beyond possessions/and live

but for a single season.” (Kynshi, ll 40-46) Kynpham’s poetry centers on the preservation of his customs, culture, tradition, and environment.

## Conclusion

The select Northeast poetry articulates the intricate relationship between culture, society, and ecology in the Northeast Indian context. Their works serve as a poignant reminder of the region’s rich heritage and the urgent need to address the socio-political and environmental challenges it faces. Through their evocative language and vivid imagery, these poets not only celebrate the unique identities and traditions of their communities but also critique the ongoing conflicts and ecological degradation that threaten their existence. By reclaiming their roots, these voices inspire a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of culture and nature, urging readers to reflect on the importance of preserving both cultural heritage and ecological balance. Ultimately, their poetry fosters a sense of hope and resilience, encouraging a collective commitment to nurturing the land and its diverse communities for future generations.

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