

## **Ecoprecarity and Urbanization: A Study of Nongkynrih's *The Yearning of Seeds* in Environmental Humanities**

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### **Abstract**

Initially, human alliance with nature was subservient and reverential whereas in recent times with the intervention of science, technological advancement and globalization, human beings have replaced the feeling of reverence with laterality thereby incurring solastalgia and devastation. Besides, avarice has enabled humankind to develop a sort of colonial and lofty attitude that erased the space of Eco spirituality with philistinism. Set in the context of ecology, this paper analyses the poetry collection *The Yearning of Seeds* by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, an eminent poet from Shillong, by foregrounding the intrusion of globalization and modernization, which distorts the indigenous and collective consciousness of nature which in turn complements the erasure of northeastern roots, culture, identity, ethnicity, history etc. It is an endeavor to address the lurking threat of environmental and cultural changes in the northeastern region of India, which might appear far and abstract but in reality too close thereby raising the cognizance of the obligation of humankind to reclaim the genuine passionate bond towards nature.

**Keywords:** ecology, globalization, culture, displacement and precarity etc.

### **Introduction**

The collective body of North-Eastern region, which is comprised of states like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim is notable for elegant, rich, and diversified trajectories of multicultural practices across the world. Apart from being unique in their heritage, traditions and beliefs they are cherished for the culture which is infused and interlaced with Mother Nature as is evident from the alternative names of these states, which are an embodiment of nature as follows, "Dawn-lit Mountains, Abode of Clouds,

Land of Blue Mountains, Himalayan Paradise” (North East India, 2017). The indigenous people of this region lived an exuberantly down-to-earth lifestyle with contentment untainted by the negative vibes of philistinism and urbanization until the dawning of scientific advancement and globalization. With the advent of globalization, the other cultures got to know about their peacefully insulated lifestyle and paradoxically crawled in to give a helping hand in order to enable them to move ahead from their impoverished existence, which is nothing but a neo model of colonialism with the replacement of enlightenment with urbanization. In the name of tourism, study, observation, policy making, and urbanization, political bodies together with corporates furtively assaulted the indigenous day-to-day living and got them distanced from their roots by marking them as “other” in their own land. On the surface level it may appear that other than indigenous trauma and displacement, it has no other serious issues. But in turn it complements grave threats associated with geographical space and climate change which would destroy the life of humankind in one go.

Indigenous writer Kynpham Sing in his acclaimed poetry collection *The Yearning of Seeds* deploys the intrinsic culture of northeastern regions by foregrounding the myriad shades of their lives imbibed in an environment via narrating their festivals, rituals, dressing style, appearance, surroundings etc., to spotlight the pernicious intervention of outsiders who displaced their sense of belonging and oneness with Mother Nature. Besides, Kynpham also highlights how the urbanization plan of bridge, factory and power plant construction distorts the scenic beauty and etiquette of the natural environment and renders benefits only at the cost of indigenous deracination. Set against this background, this research examines the nuances of political bodies that make use of every possible way to manipulate and distort the culture of indigenous people in the name of development by showcasing their bereavement and helplessness. In addition, it also traces how the natural threats associated with indigenous displacement is linked to global challenges of environmental hazard and degradation.

### **Precarity: The Impact of Mankind Tussle with Nature**

Urbanization associated with progression is the first and foremost rival for tribal existence and the natural environment. To materialize the concept of urbanization in indigenous land, progress is used as a trump card by outsiders. Kynpham offers a first-hand portrayal of the

dialectics of progress which is biased and privileged by juxtaposing his intrinsically woven tapestry of culture and the encroachment of foreign forces. The globalization, which avarices for progress looks in terms of materialistic phenomenon thereby turning a blind eye to ecological loss which would culminate in “precarity of slow violence” (Nayar, xix). The title *The Yearning of Seeds* metaphorically used by Kynpham pathetically records the subdued voices of people who yearn to return to their roots and land from where they are banished. Besides, it also manifests nature’s cry to get relieved from the clutches of tyrannical violence of urbanization which merely perceives it as “a body reduced to a totally available object, or, rather a thing objectified by the reality of pain, on which violence is taking its time about doing its work” (Cavarero, 31). To elaborate further, nature is basely perceived and weighed in terms of material value instead of life-sustainable elements which sets the focal point for all crises.

In the poem “The Parking Lot” Kynpham agonizes over the paradoxical connotation of advancement which renders nothing but homogenization and ecological disharmony by describing the construction of a grand parking lot in Shillong as he says, “In Rio/ the world talked/ of global warming/ the ozone layer pollution/ and eroding rain forests. At *Nan Polak*/ the parking lot/ humbled down/ hundreds of our proudest/ pines (4). He intently makes reference to the governmental organization United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) which works for the sustainability and conservation of nature and its resources to showcase its negligence in cutting off productive pine trees for trivial reasons. He sarcastically criticizes that by focusing on major issues which receive wide coverage like global warming, ozone layer depletion and the erosion of rain forests the organization let go of the problems like cutting trees, wasting of rain water, discharge of plastic and industrial hazards which indeed act as a touchwood in igniting those menaces. Besides, the word ‘humbled down’ foregrounds the impuissance of nature which feels shame about its curator humankind who failed to stand up to their moral and legal obligations as Indian Constitution asserts, “It shall be duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life and to have compassion for living creatures” (25).

Urbanization has rapidly changed humankind’s relationship with the land which holds significance in terms of Eco spirituality to indigenous. The land which is comprised of dirt acts

as a source for sustenance and spiritual value rather than being a mere asset. Because nature with all its aura and resplendency bounds them with mystical force and instills a sense of deep reverence not only towards land but all aspects of nature as Higginbotham points out, “all parts of the universe—from the smallest atom to the largest planetary system—as sacred and having some form of consciousness or spark of intelligence” (Higginbotham, 21). But on the contrary, urbanization weighs land only as a mere commodity that is in terms of monetary value instead of an integrating force. In the poem “Shillong By-pass” Kynpham spotlights the contemporary sensational issue of the bypass project, which has been started with the motto to ease traffic congestion and to make India a smart city. Though in one aspect it is regarded as a great achievement, its demerit is something that is not accurately exposed. To construct this bypass many agricultural lands have been confiscated by the government with the promise that they would make a good compensation. But farmers vehemently opposed this project for two prominent reasons. First, it would turn their productive land into sterile and second, it would make them lose the sense of belonging and affinity with the land. Even after violent protest, they are left with no other option other than to consent to what the government offers as he points out, “nothing/ could be spoken against him” (75). This reveals how the government, which is supposed to act as a guarding force for both indigenous people and the land plays the role of an outsider by depriving the basic rights of both living entities.

Kynpham by portraying the plight of farmers who suffer from being landless and without any political support provides an insight that man’s war against another man in terms of money and material space are the foremost causes of nature’s devastation. The powerful body that won the battle against the helpless community thinks that it is victorious in deceiving them, but in reality it is creating a pitfall for whole humanity by incurring nature’s rage. Apart from economic drive and urbanization another reason for mankind to confidently challenge nature is the scientific advancement that dazes beings with the belief that for every problem it has a solution. Indeed scientific advancement is showcasing marvelous progress and unbelievable changes, but in the context of nature, it has nothing to offer other than derangement and demolition as Blake says, “Science is the tree of death” (Burwick, 1986). That is the phrase ‘tree of death’ symbolically forecasts how science lures and convinces humankind to march in the direction away from nature which would culminate in the extermination of the whole world. Because with

the advent of scientific advancement mankind erased the inherent affinity or mystical force that so far guarded nature. Kynpham by making reference to the death of agricultural land picturizes the climatic threat which is encroaching too close by. He also insists on the need to develop land ethics or spiritual affinity which is effective and powerful enough to overcome the animosity of the philistinism craze as Leopold points out, “To turn inside out our concept of land as a commodity we could own, into land as a vibrant, exciting, integrated community of which we are a part of” (Leopold, xv). The phrase that land is a part of beings existence reckons the obligations that we have in treasuring it for generations to come and upsurges the guilt conscience by reminding us of the irrevocable damages and injustices that we have done to Mother Nature.

Apart from urbanization, migration turns out to be the second greatest cause for environmental threats. People migrate for various reasons like poverty, jobs, political reasons, standards of living, environmental challenges, health issues etc. Of all the reasons employment opportunities turn out to be the major driving force in encouraging people to move to the northeastern region as Bandyopadhyay and Chakraborty points out, “There has been a consistent flow of migration in this region because of employment opportunities in tea garden, availability of cultivable land and other related factors” (Lusome, 2020). Though employment opportunities promise livelihood for migrants, they pose a serious threat for the natives in terms of internal migration. Because the migrants who easily get employed reveal the transferred ownership of land from the natives to outsiders who threaten to overpower them. Kynpham picturizes the lurking dread of displacement in the heart of natives who perceive outsiders as spider that weave webs to ensnare them as follows,

I have come to hate its spiders  
creeping nightmarishly into my dreams.  
Thoughts weave ugly patterns  
round its tenants who take pride  
having their neighbours underfoot. I have come to hate them  
like pampered bastards  
and we watch each other/ with baleful eyes from corners. (91)

Displacement of natives has a profound impact on turning the land into infertile because outsiders lack the knowledge about plant species that grow in those soil conditions. Besides, by planting different species they change the very nature and potential of the soil, thereby eradicating the growth of native flowers and fruits of that region which Kynpham highlights in the poem “Only Strange Flowers Have Come to Bloom”. Kynpham makes a reference to pear fruit which has its birth root in Europe, to spotlight the juxtaposition of outsiders’ arrival and the supplanting of native species. He says,

Since David Scott, they have come  
a long way, these pears, supplanting the natives everywhere...  
that I have seen bossing around/ courtyards and private gardens....  
only strangers  
and strange ways have come to bloom in this land. (6-7)

Kynpham agonizes how outsiders intervention and their lifestyle infused with the progressive mentality propelled by globalization endanger indigenous bonds with nature and their livelihood. Furthermore, it paves way to greater peril by starting war and revenge among the peoples, which could adversely destroy ecology.

The goals of urbanization do not stop in confining its boundaries to land but rather transcend beyond in raping water resources as well. The pride of the north-eastern region rests not only on bountiful land resources but also on water bodies which is evident from Kynpham description of the captivating beauty of Kynshi River as follows,

this sovereign river, Kynshi,  
rolling from the hills of Raishan  
with a flat sweeping flow  
so much unlike a hill stream,  
the rare sight of paddy  
flowing with the river, the road playing hide and seek  
with its bends and quaint villages, ranged as spectators on hillsides. (43)

The above lines by the poet describe its past glory which is before the intervention of materialists. The materialists following their arrival established coal mines thereby distorting the

splendor and grace of the river's natural beauty by throwing waste carelessly into it. This decline is emphasized by the poet's plea, it "need[s] to be protected" (43). In addition to coal mining threats, sand quarrying further hampers its productivity and drags it to its defunctness as Sanglyne points out "the high trophic index value of 17 in Kynshi River suggested that the river is experiencing a probable high infiltration of organic pollutants due to sand quarrying and limestone mining" (Sanglyne, 216).

Unlike human beings, every aspect of nature is interconnected. Although urbanization assumes that harming one aspect of nature does not affect others, it inevitably does. This interconnected impact is illustrated by Kynpham in the poem "*Rain Song 2000*", where he presents a grave image of climate change. Typically April is the month of summer in north-eastern region, but on the contrary the poet narrates about a heavy downpour which arrived as an uninvited guest to spotlight the threatening challenges of climate change which has gradually started its encroachment as he says,

The April sky has taken us all by surprise  
spouting incessantly for the last many days.....  
But these are no more than fillers:  
so why is the sky weeping  
a river of unreasonable tears?  
Why is the wind shrieking night and day  
and pines beating their chests in pain. (38-39)

Though drizzle and mild rainfall are seen as a blessing during summer time the poet points out the hidden peril behind such downpours. He highlights that these rainfalls are not natural rather the result of mankind's avarice and negligence towards the ecosystem. Moreover, Kynpham portrays how the indigenous people are forced to bear the burden of natural disasters caused by the actions of the modernized community. That is people driven by a desire for convenience and a consumerist lifestyle, ultimately places the entire existence of humankind at risk, pushing it toward a state of precarity. These changes in climatic conditions in turn give rise to adverse menace to ecological species by inducing bushfires. Though bushfire is regarded as a natural disaster, the poet argues that they are largely triggered by human negligence as its root



cause lies in shifting weather pattern caused by “Global warming, charcoal burning/ the ozone layer, polythene bags/ ecological imbalances, Jaintia coal mines/ timber trade, jhum cultivation/ West Khasi uranium and on and on” (39). The phrase “on and on” subtly reflects humanity’s refusal to feel guilt or turn back, even after witnessing these escalating global threats. It implies a dangerous continuation of destructive habits, with no regard for ecological balance or spiritual responsibility toward nature. By exposing the dark side of progress—achieved at the cost of environmental loss—Kynpham offers a profound insight to contemporary society. He reminds us that no matter how far humanity advances through science, urbanization, or globalization, we remain at the mercy of nature as there is no “sustainability without speaking about the sustainer (nature)” (Vaughan 21).

## Conclusion

Kynpham artfully and lucidly foregrounds two factors that act as a catalyst in brewing human tussle with nature, namely war between fellow beings and war with nature. In the former case, the difference among beings in terms of monetary values serves as a drive cause. Whereas, in the latter scientific and technological advancement which reached its zenith support and motivate mankind to compete with nature. In addition Kynpham’s criticism against progress and urbanization doesn’t mean that he is against it rather he emphasizes that it should not be measured in terms of the construction of a building at the cost of sterilizing productive lands and polluting the ecosystem. That is nature should never take a back seat or be a secondary option in the eyes of philistinism and progress. By portraying the down-to-earth reality of the current ecological crisis of the northeastern region Kynpham evokes the guilt conscience of humanity which has created a trap for their damnation. Besides, by emphasizing the “need to be preserved/ in more than memories” (43) he persuades individuals to return to the beliefs of Eco Spirituality in order to conserve and resurface the lost affinity with Mother Nature not only for the benefit of indigenous people but for the welfare of the entire world.



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