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ECO-PHILOSOPHY IN THE CONTEMPORARY POETRY IN ENGLISH FROM INDIA'S
NORTH-EAST

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary poets of North-east India are the first generation of writers arising in the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century. These poets belonging to different spaces, languages and religions share some common features in their poetry. An overarching presence of nature, concern for the contemporary events, representation of traditional myth and legends, the search for an identity, all this informs contemporary poetry and gives it a unique flavour. The predominance of nature is much of the distinctiveness on contemporary poetry. But these poets are concerned less with the sensuous manifestations of nature than with the spiritual that they find under-laying the beauties of nature. Nature for them is not a passive objects that is to be explored, exploited and consumed, but a dynamic force that is to be loved, preserved and taken care of. They opposes anthropocentric view of human beings towards nature and believes that it should give way to eco-centrism. This eco-philosophical concept pervades in the post colonial poetry in English from India's North-east. They tries to arouse eco-consciousness among the human beings through their poetry to motivate them to live ecologically. Then only human being would march forward to safeguard and protect nature. The present paper is a study of the contemporary poetry in English from North-east India from eco-philosophical perspectives that has great relevance in this era of global ecological hazard when ecology has been exploiting each and every moment of life not only in India but also all over the world.

Key Words : Ecology, eco-philosophy, mysticism, hazard, under-laying, anthropocentrism.

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INTRODUCTION

Before analyzing poetry in English from India's North-east, my paper briefly discusses the concept of ecology and eco-philosophy. The term ecology can be referred to the scientific study of the mutual relationship and interdependence of each and every objects of the entire eco-sphere of the universe. The German biologist Ernst Haeckel defines ecology as the science of relationship of the organism to the environment.

Eco-philosophy implies the realization of the underlying mysteries of nature and to feel oneself as a part of it which leads to the union with the Ultimate Reality that inspires one to live ecologically like a mystic's way of life. Eco-philosophy believes that beneath the wonders and beauties of nature, there lies a greater meaning- the Ultimate Reality. The concept of eco-philosophy can be linked to its pantheism that is the belief that God is everywhere even in the minor creatures of the universe which we mostly neglect for God has created all of them. The poetry of Rabindranath Tagore manifests this pantheistic philosophy specially his magnum opus *Gitanjali* where he with the wings of natural motifs, images and symbols flies for the realization of the Absolute. Since each and every creature of the entire ecosphere is the creation of the Ultimate Reality, every creature has the equal right to live in the environment. No one is superior to the other. Human beings also cannot claim superiority over the other animate and inanimate creatures of the universe. They are only part of it. They have to co-exist with the other creatures of the universe. This is the concept of eco-philosophy. It tries to bring among human beings a sense of reverence and love for nature.

The afore-discussed concepts of ecology, eco-philosophy will be applied as a basic tool for analyzing the eco-philosophical aspects in the selected poems written in English of the poets of North-east India. Since it is strongly felt that these aspects are available in their poetry, the extent of availability and validity will be verified in the proposed study and will establish them as canonical eco-poets of North-east India.

Interpretation

Ecological consciousness is one of the dominant features of contemporary poetry in English from India's north-east. Ecological motifs, images, symbols, abound in their poetry that lends grand source of beauty and aesthetics to their poetry. Like the poetry of the Romantic Age of English literature, their poetry returns to nature. It revives pantheism and said that nature is divine. Their poetry enshrines the basic Indian ethos and values of nature to be compassionate to nature and to live in harmony with it. Since ancient times a holistic view of the universe as well as the entire eco-system exists there in Indian traditional values. Some of the creatures, organisms of nature are worshipped in Hindu religion and these are linked with the deities of God. Again, the Hindus have been worshipping a species of plants 'tulsi' from time immemorial and consider it to be very pure and holy. They believe that the purity and sanctity of tulsi plant purifies the whole environment of its surroundings. This is the manifestation of eco-philosophy that has been practicing in Indian society with all sanctity since ancient times. Even in the scriptures of Hindu religion such as *Rigveda* there are hymns glorifying and worshipping nature. These Indian scriptures of thousand years ago speak of the preservation of nature. This eco-philosophical tone finds expression in the poetry in English from India's North-east. There are myths and legends relating to nature among the tribal communities of North-east, e.g. the Aos of Nagaland believe that when a person dies, the soul takes the shape of a bird, or an insect. The sighting of birds specially of hawks is considered to be the last appearance of the dead to the loved one of earth. This eco-philosophical concept exists among the tribal natives of Nagaland in their traditional myths and legends. This eco-philosophical idea of human-nature relationship, the oneness of the human beings with the nature is best manifested in the following poetic lines of Temsula Ao's poem 'Soul bird',

They are chanting prayers,
But I watch a lonely hawk
Soaring
Amidst the swirling blue

Wings darken
The whiteness
Of the rushing clouds. (Ao 1-7)
The climax of the poet's emotion finds expression in the following lines,
'See that keening bird in the sky
That's your mother's soul
Saying her final goodbye. (ibidem 32-32)

Such myth and legends, rites and rituals relating to nature also exist among the Nyishis of Arunachal Pradesh. They believe that tigers and human beings are born brothers. They are united with one another though both of them have developed different physical features. This myth is the manifestation of eco-philosophy which in recent terminology is known as spiritual ecology. This eco-philosophical ideas considers the human soul as part of the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world. It inspires to feel oneness with every object of nature.

Ecological humanism (eco-humanism) is a theoretical coinage to humanize ecology and to give humanist/human dimensions to ecology. Ecology in its multiple manifestations essentially refers to the physical macro nature and the human spiritual world including all moral and ethical values that govern the human activities (Das 2011 : 181)

The following poetic lines of Mamong Dai echoes such eco-philosophical concepts,

My brother, oh! My brother!
Have mercy for our destiny (Dai 51)

The contemporary poets of North-east India are the lovers of nature. They love the hills, rivers, valleys, mountains etc. the entire eco-space of their respective spaces. The post colonial poetry in English from India's North-east is the voice of those poets of North-east India who could not represent themselves in the colonial period. They had to depend on the west to express themselves culturally. So in the post colonial period, poetry became the powerful medium through which these poets could represent themselves and tell their own stories of loneliness deprivation, ravages of war, insurgency and show their love and consciousness for ecology of their lands. Thus literature became an important medium for these poets to create a 'place' and 'space' for themselves and acquire an identity of their own.

The ecological motifs, symbols, of the respective lands of the poets abound in their poetry which renders their poetry canonical. Nature forms the backbone of poetic imagination of Pradip Kumar Patra, a notable poet from Assam. Nature acts as vital catalectic force for his creative regeneration. It is a spiritual guide to form his self. Pradip Kumar Patra, a lover of nature in all her moods, finds a leaving presence in nature which forms the 'soul' of his moral being. He believes that one must enter in to communion with this 'soul' in order to appreciate the meaning behind the mysteries of nature. This eco-philosophical concept finds expression in the following poetic lines of Patra's poem 'Summer Implications',

The Summer Night with her thirst
Quenched by the rain holds me in
Her lap for healthy dreams to dream
and healthy life to leave with no
allowance of any symptomatic
snores and sleep working (Patra 26-31).

The 'water' imagery is a recurrently occurring image in the poetry of the poets of North-east region writing in English. For Patra, a 'rain' has become a positive symbol of life,

What the rain says
Is an experience
Of a long life time
.....
The rain talks to silence;
Hardly have I seen silence
Smiling at the tree; (ibidem 1-3, 6-8)

The image of monsoon plays significant role in Patra. For him monsoon stands for spiritual transcendence. The following poetic lines of Patra echo the eco-philosophical concept,

During the monsoon
the horizon looks dreamy.
The stork that flies

along its breast
loosens my emotion
and instills in me
inspiration and joy
leading to grandeur.

The horizon which looked
dull and insipid
appear mythical after being
swift away by the monsoon (ibidem 34)

River is a pivotal motif in Mamong Dai's poetry also. Mamong Dai is a well known poets from Arunachal Pradesh who resigned herself as IAS Officer to become full time environmental activist. Like Patra, Mamong Dai also believes 'a living presence' in nature. She believes nature is not a passive objects, but a dynamic force. Such believes of Mamong Dai finds expression in the following lines of her poem 'the River',

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 (Dai 1-7)

The contemporary poetry in English from North-east India bear similarity with the poetry of the Romantic Age of English literature. In Romantic age, poetry was return to nature. Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly are well known nature poets of romantic age. Nature for Wordsworth was a 'friend, philosopher and guide.' Wordsworth intellectualizes and spiritualizes nature in his poetry,

It was Wordsworth's aim as a poet to seek for beauty in meadow, woodland,
and the mountain talk, and to interpret this beauty in spiritual terms. He is
forever spiritualizing the moods of nature. (Rickett 308)

As a poet of nature, Wordsworth is concerned more with the spiritual than being marvel at the external beauties of nature that he finds under laying the sensuous manifestation of nature. The poet believe the primrose and the daffodils are symbols of nature's massage to man. This feeling is a manifestation of pantheistic philosophy or eco-philosophy. Pantheistic philosophy believes presence of God everywhere. Both Wordsworth and Shelly spiritualizes and intellectualizes nature. The cloud for Shelly is nature's myth of flawless beauty,

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and the streams;
I bring light shade for the leaves when lain
In their Monday dreams.
From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds every one (Shelly 1-6)

Ananya Goha, a renowned poet from Meghalaya is another canonical eco-poet. Note of eco-mysticism pervades in her poetry also which finds best manifestation in her poem 'Tree',

Now I am alone
alone as the tree
with its drooping
dismembered self
planted for nocturnal years
near the window of

a peregrinating house
 the tree is taciturn
 knows the sun, the hills
 the moon and the speckled stars

The tree stands anonymously
 refusing to mingle with the ambiance
 even when the stormy sky
 threatens to shake ramparts
 in the whirlwind

Views landscape
 with its gnarled
 spreading branches like tentacles
 melting in to fistfuls of waiflike tears

We are alone the two of us
 waiting patiently for the hawk (Goha 1-21)

These contemporary poets are equally aware of the degradation of nature due to reckless attitude of human beings towards nature. Ecology has been disturbed. Modernization and industrialization has made human beings to forget the age old bond they share with nature. They has started destructing nature to meet their own selfish ends. They has started viewing nature as an objects, a resource i.e. to be consumed and to be used to the optimum limit. This changing attitude of human kind towards nature due to scientific inventions has compelled the post colonial poets to be conscious about the future of both nature and the civilization. Easterine Eralu, poet from Ngaland, laments the ecological degradation due to industrialization in the following lines of her poem 'For Justin-pierre',

Some day you will ask
 why the birds no longer sing
 and the flowers as sweet
 as I said they used to do;
 why the rivers no longer have fish,
 and the trees, green leaves,
 and wonder all the rainbows went.

One day, my son
 when you come to ask me
 what colour was the sky
 before it turned grey
 I will no longer have the answer. (Eralu 1-12)

Insurgency, ravages of war are also some of the dominating themes of post colonial poetry in English from India's North-east. Mona Zote, a well known poet from Mizoram speaks of the negative impact of insurgency on the native tribes and ecology of her region in her poem 'Rez',

A boy & his gun : that's an image will do
 to some up our times
 to define the red lakes
 and razor blade hills of our mind. Out here *this place never*
Changes, never will (Zote 1-5)

Saratchand Thiyam, a well known poet from Manipur speaks of the horrors of insurgency in his poem 'Gun Muzzle',

In what direction a gun pointed
 There's bound to be news
 Of blood and tears
 Blood waiting to gush
 Tears waiting to fall.
 When a gun's muzzle has been trained.
 When that youth who journeyed seeking light
 Returns covered with a white cloth
 Who'd like to receive him?
 Gun muzzles too face is other some times
 And grief becomes the lot of ordinary people. (Thiyam,
 translated from Manipuri by Ngangom. 1-12)

A good number of critical works on poetry in English from Northeast India have already been done by scholars and researchers so far. Following are some of the major critical works on the subject.

Das, Nigamananda. *Mosaic of Redemption: Essays on Poetry in English from North-East.*

Cuttack: M.G. Publications, 2004.

This book categorizes the poets of Northeast India state-wise and elaborately deals with the themes and their poetic style. It critically examines the works of these poets from an ecological perspective.

Chandra, N.D.R. and Nigamananda Das. *Ecology, Myth and Mystery: Contemporary*

Poetry in English From Northeast India. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2007.

This book is a critical discussion of English poetry from Northeast India in terms of ecology, myth and mystery. Apart from a general introduction to the poets from this region this book also presents critical reviews of their poetic works based on theories on Ecocriticism.

Sen,Geeti (ed.) *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The Northeast.* New Delhi- India

International Centre, 2006.

This book is an introduction to the poets from Northeast India as well as an analysis of their works. It also discusses in detail the themes and subject matter of their poetry along with the poetic devices they use.

Nigamananda Das. ed. *Matrix of Redemption: Contemporary Multi-Ethnic literatures in*

English from North-East India,2011

This work contains critical essays on various aspects of writing in English from Northeast.

Another author Debasis Baruah studies contemporary literature of North-east in his work, 'Insurgency, Peace and Quest for Identity : A study of contemporary writing in English from India's North-east' : *peace, conflict and North-east India* ed. Lachit Baruah & Ajanta Rajkhowa. Guwahati : Purbanchal Prakash (62-71),

Findings

Analyzing the contemporary poetry in English from India's North-east from eco-philosophical perspective it was found that these poets from different spaces, cultures, languages, shared a common bond. They had deep connection with their lands. Predominance of nature was strongly felt in their poetry. The traditional myth and legends, rites and rituals pervaded in their poetry. These poets were also concerned about the contemporary events like insurgency, war, exploitation of nature etc. These common traits weaved together the contemporary poets of North-east India writing in English. Hence it can be said that the contemporary poetry was not fully mystical though there was heights of mysticism in it. Here they differed from the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore who depicted the world of mysticism in his poetry. Contemporary poetry was multi-faceted voices. Hence it can be established that contemporary poetry is not fully eco-philosophical though echoes of philosophy pervaded in the poetry, rather contemporary poetry can be

justified as canonical echo poetry which aims at arising eco-consciousness among human beings to increase their love and reverence for nature that will inspire them in greening the self.

Conclusion

The contemporary poets of North-east India have been trying to bring revolutionary change in human understanding regarding nature. These poets could realize the fact that to survive in the earth, maintenance of ecological equilibrium is mandatory. To maintain this ecological equilibrium human population has to negotiate and share space with other species of the universe. But our 'Mother Earth' is under threat now where nature is being destructed and polluted all over the world its and every moment. This has made future of the civilization bleak. The present generation of human beings should very much concerned about it. They should try to bring radical change to themselves and should come forward to safeguard and protect nature.

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