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REFLECTIONS OF ECO-FEMINISM IN SOME SELECT TEXTS OF TEMSULA AO, RATAN
THIYAM AND MITRA PHUKAN

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to do an ecofeminist reading of three famous North-eastern writers' writings namely Temsula Ao's 'These Hills called Home: Stories from War Zone', 'Laburnum for My Head', Ratan Thiyam's 'Manipur Trilogy' and Mitra Phukan's 'The Collector's Wife'. These writers belong to three different states but still their texts display the same notion of ecofeminism in them. Their works display the dehumanised and devalued condition of women and nature at the hands of dominant patriarchal social set-up. The texts reveal woman and nature as marginalised and discriminated by the patriarchal society which imposes some common attributes in them. In addition, the texts also highlight the two paradoxical sides of woman—both as victors and victims. Sometimes, the women emerge as victorious in the tussle between insurgency factions and Indian military while on the other hand women fall easy prey to the sinister designs of some opportunists. The article tries to understand the way woman makes their presence felt by their stance in decision making and how they become the backbone of their household. As primary source I have used the select texts to highlight the notion of ecofeminism. Secondary sources in the form of books, journals etc. have been used for theoretical underpinning of the concerned issues. The study is descriptive and qualitative in nature.

Keywords: ecofeminism, patriarchal, insurgency, military

INTRODUCTION

Northeast India English literature is relatively a new domain. This corpus of writing is a recent thing in comparison to the literatures in English from other parts of India. As a discourse of self-expression, it took shape casually in the eighties and the nineties of the twentieth century, while Indian provincial writing in English began in Bengal much before Independence. The writers writing at present are the first generation of writers who dealt with, among all the core issues, the most dominant and recurrent theme of woman- nature relationship in their works.

As an academic discipline, this woman-nature relationship is termed as 'eco-feminism'. It is an activist and academic movement that is used to describe a feminist approach to understand ecology. According to

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "Eco-feminism is defined as a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society". Eco-feminism views that racism, classism and sexism are interconnected and liberation of women cannot be fully achieved without the liberation of nature and vice versa. The term was first coined by Francoise d' Eaubonne in her book 'Le Feminisme ou la Mort (1974). It holds the view that patriarchy is responsible for the exploitation of women and the destruction of nature. This systematic exploitation of both women and nature has been there since the long past. Nature has been subordinated to 'the master subject' that is meant to be explored, exploited and used to the optimum extent. This can also be said about women who have been considered to be inferior to their male counterparts.

Eco-feminism always contends that there is a deep-rooted connection between women and nature. Accordingly on the basis of these connections, Eco-feminism is broadly divided into six types. They are – liberal eco-feminism, cultural eco-feminism, social eco-feminism, socialist eco-feminism, radical eco-feminism and spiritual eco-feminism. Despite the presence of different branches of eco-feminism, they all share one common premise that there is a close connection between the domination of nature by humans and the oppression of women by men. All of them have the common goal of liberating both women and nature and to create a new society without any hierarchy or environmental destruction as such.

The proposed research paper attempts to showcase eco-feminist concerns in select works of three celebrated North-eastern writers. They are – Temsula Ao from Nagaland, Ratan Thiyam from Manipur and Mitra Phukan from Assam. The texts selected for study are 'These Hills called Home: Stories from War Zone', 'Laburnum for My Head' of Temsula Ao, 'Manipur Trilogy' of Ratan Thiyam and 'The Collector's Wife' of Mitra Phukan. Besides issues like identity crisis, nationhood, insurgency, ethnic violence, self-assertion, search for roots, migration, exile etc. myriad forms of eco-feminist concerns have a dominant place in the writings of the above mentioned writers.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the proposed research article is to make an eco-feminist reading of some select texts of three North-eastern writers. There is no doubt that nature-women relationship and the basic tenet of eco-feminism pervades through all writing from North-eastern writers. By definition, eco-feminism contends that both nature and women are exploited, tortured and made to suffer by human beings and male-dominated society respectively. In the name of development and scientific advancement, human beings constantly cause damage to nature and thus pose as great threat to flora and fauna of natural world. Women's status has also remained the same throughout the ages. Women very often become victims of violence in both patriarchal and matrilineal social set-up. They are always marginalised and treated as 'other' by the dominant male group. The research paper under study seeks to highlight the above issues in a detailed manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methods are the methods that the researcher adopts for conducting the research studies. The current study uses qualitative methods and is based on in-depth analysis of the concerned texts. It is descriptive in nature where the researcher studies and attempts to understand the texts from an eco-feminist point of view. The paper attempts to describe systematically the invariable link between nature and women and highlights miserable living condition of both nature and women taking some select texts into consideration. The study is also explanatory that strives to clarify why and how there is a relationship between nature and women in terms of their marginalised oppressive state at the hands of dominant 'self' here the human beings in general and men in particular. In preparation of this research paper both primary and secondary data have been applied. Secondary data are used in the form of reference books, journals, magazine volumes, internet etc. Close and rigorous studies of texts are made as primary data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is a search and evaluation of the available literature in a given subject or chosen topic area. It surveys the literature in the chosen area of study. It then synthesises the information in that literature

into a summary. It critically analyses the information gathered by identifying gaps in current knowledge; by showing limitations of theories and points of view; and by formulating areas for further research and reviewing areas of controversy. Finally, it presents the literature in an organised way.

Of late, a plethora of academic exercises are found to have been done on North-eastern literature. Various scholars have already done several research works on various strands of eco-criticism like eco-feminism, ecology, eco-politics etc. The proposed research work attempts to study some select texts of chosen writers from the perspective of eco-feminism which is in some respects different from the works that have been already done in the past. These previous works are mentioned below as part of review of literature.

Dr. (Mrs.) Indu Swami in her article entitled 'Tarnishing the Purity of Nature= Defloration of woman: Analysing Interconnections between Nature and Women in Tamsula Ao's Poetry' deals with the status of women and non-human nature on four vital aspects viz. the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are interconnected; these connections must be uncovered in order to understand both the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; feminist analysis must include ecological insights; and a feminist perspective must be a part of any proposed ecological solutions. The paper seems to be limited in scope since it entails eco-feminist study only in the work of one writer.

Mr. Debashis Baruah in his Phd thesis entitled 'Contemporary writing in English from India's Northeast: A Study in Ecopolitics' deals with the aspects of eco-politics entailing eco-mysticism, eco-feminism and the like in the works of select writers who can be said to be representative among those writers who write in English or whose works have been translated into English. This research work attempts to study some select prose writing, poetical compositions and plays of some North-eastern writers. This research work takes up the works of several writers but without going into detail in any one them. Thus there seems to be some lacuna where further research work can be meticulously done.

Dr. Sadaf Shah in his research work 'Woman and Nature: An Eco-feminist study of Indira Goswami's' highlights the eco-feminist concerns in 'The Blue-necked God' by Indira Goswami, most popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami. The study concerns with eco-feminist viewpoints as portrayed in the said novel. This research work is too concise to do an eco-feminist study in proper sense. Indira Goswami is one of the celebrated writers of North-east India and there are multiple texts by her where one can find out eco-feminist principles.

INTERPRETATION

One of the common features of North-eastern literature is that it has the expression of common political, economical or social problems such as the problem of insurgency separatist movements or the issue of rampant corruption in the bureaucracy. Geographically, the three writers selected for study belong to three separate states but they all share some common and recurrent themes in their writings that bind them in one single thread. Besides issues like identity crisis, search for roots, self-assertion or claims for a political space, it is the ecology of the region and feminist concern that predominantly seem to reflect in their literary works. In Tamsula Ao's short story collection "These Hills called Home: Stories from War Zone" we notice the saga of ordinary people in an atmosphere of violence and bloodshed. The author here talks about the predicament of children, housewives, older people or even the militant in a violent atmosphere of insurgency. Ao believes that in such a war zone "there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms." Almost all the stories of this collection of stories depict an eco-feminist perspective where women's position is often marginalised and devalued at the hands of patriarchal society. They are shown as victims of violence at both emotional and physical level. The ecology of the land is also at a hazardous state as human beings exploit and destroy natural resources for their own selfish motif and desire. In this celebrated work, we notice the simultaneous subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature. In the select texts, it is very much evident that women are mostly presented as victims of violence that occurs between Indian military and the separatist insurgency factions. How marginalised sections of the society like women, children, and elderly people have to face unprecedented violence and suffering in conflict prone state of Nagaland is very exquisitely highlighted in the works of Tamsula Ao. Besides, the subjugation and ill-treatment of women at the hands of both state functionaries and own patriarchal social set-up is another significant issue in her writings. Despite overarching

plight, the women make their presence felt by subverting the notion of patriarchal set-up and deep seated culture and tradition of the society. In 'Laburnum for my Head' another short story collection, Temsula Ao depicts a deep understanding of the human condition and illustrates different facets of ordinary men and women's life. An analysis of the women characters of her stories reveals the strength of women in different human situations. She portrays them with their variegated swings of mood, the ebb and flow of joy and despair. However, this picture of women would remain incomplete if we fail to realize how intimately they are integrated with nature. In 'Laburnum for my head' there is a story by the same title. The lady protagonist has a passionate wish that instead of a silly headstone she wants a laburnum tree planted on his grave. Indeed after death she wishes the tree to bloom once in a year over her crown. The attachment and inextricable link between a tree and the character is very much conspicuous by the way she feels obsessed with it.

Ratan Thiyam's 'Manipur Trilogy' is a collection of three plays namely Wahoudok (Prologue), Hey Nungshibi Prithivi (My Earth, My Love) and Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama (Nine Hills, One Valley). All these plays are interwoven with a strong thematic concept and focus on Thiyam's interpretation of a drastically changing world and need for acquiring traditional wisdom. The plays encompass a wide spectrum of human evolution right from the birth of the universe, based on the myths of the Mieties to the modern times, broken up in four distinct episodes; the birth of the universe, the creation of living beings, the outset of human civilization and the modern times. All these three plays strongly voice ecological concerns. Thiyam himself says, voicing his concern for the environment, "The human race has come a long way, especially due to technological advancements, but in the course of our development, we have somehow lost touch with our emotions. The more we become advanced, the more our society is forgetting its traditions, roots and the importance of human relationship." (Thiyam 2008: 111-12). The first play namely 'Prologue' (Wahoudok) has several references to the ecology of our planet. Thiyam states that the beautiful earth is now under threat because of human being's exploitation. The narrator reminds the people about the beauty and bounty of nature quite a number of times. The eco-mystical tone which emphasises on mutual love, respect and dependence between varied objects of nature and human beings is also drawn in the play. Along with its bountiness, nature is also shown in dilapidated state because of development and technological advancement made by man. The condition of women as next and unequal to man is also evident in this play. The second play named 'My Earth, My Love' (Hey Nungshibi Prithivi) also powerfully voices ecological concerns. The play addresses a very important global issue like terrorism and shows how it can lead to environmental degradation. It depicts how wars, battles and armed exercises of nations for attaining superiority have polluted the planet apart from doing manifold harms to human civilization. The narrator contends that in order to live in a perfectly ecological way, a new ethic is to be developed in which anthropocentrism should give way to eco-centrism. Just like the plight of nature, the condition of women is also in a deplorable state. In fact, they are the worst sufferers. One of the women characters speak of this pathetic condition of women throughout the long history of human civilization which is dominantly patriarchal. The character's speech can also be seen as the voice of Nature:

War, you have made us prostitutes.

War, you have made us prisoners.

War, you have made us bonded slaves...

Women and Children are fed to war...

(Manipur Trilogy, tr. Tayenjam Bijoy Kumar Singh)

In this way the play can be studied from an eco-feminist viewpoint. There are also some other occasions where women characters speak of the miserable plight of women throughout the long history of human civilization, which is dominantly patriarchal. The last play called 'Nine Hills, One Valley' (Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama) also strongly express ecological concerns through its powerful dramatic voice. The last play in Thiyam's trilogy entitled 'Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama (Nine Hills, One Valley) has a powerful dramatic voice that also strongly expresses ecological concerns. The playwright is much concerned of the incidents of terror and war in the global scenario and their devastating effect on human civilization. Regarding eco-feminist elements, we find

both women and the environment being treated synonymously. Eco-feminist ideals can be noticed when women are made to suffer a lot due to genocide, political instability, unemployment, extortion etc. They both are the innocent victims of terrorism and war waged by the patriarchal society all around the globe. The playwright believes that in order to recreate a world of peace and harmony, nature as well as women are to be restored. Therefore, in the play finally it is the women, the mothers, the sentinels of tradition who play a pivotal role in restoring an order in the society.

Mitra Phukan's novel 'The Collector's Wife' is the touching story of a young lady called Rukmini and her inner state of mind. It is based on the inner life history of Rukmini set against the atmosphere of terror, violence and insurgency. The novelist here deals with these issues and people's sense of insecurity posed by the illegal migration from Bangladesh to Assam. The novel also deals with ecological issues; particularly the feminist ideas are very much noticeable across the novel. Indeed the novelist uses the ecology of the region as a means to attain a self-identity. Rukmini, the protagonist is declared infertile and barren by her husband and their consulting physician. This label of barrenness and infertility and her gradual depression and isolation can be studied as violence against nature or the natural order. There are also many occasions in the novel where Rukmini feels a close affinity with Nature. There are many occasions in the novel where the novelist deliberately uses images, metaphors and other references from the natural world to reflect the private world of Rukmini. Indeed, there is a reference where Rukmini not only finds a similarity with the river rather she becomes the river herself. Another significant point about Rukmini is the role of a 'New Woman' challenging the constructed patriarchal domination in the society. She shatters all barriers and overthrows the label of barrenness by becoming impregnated by another man. In a way the novel has a strong claim of studying from an eco-feminist perspective. Moreover, our traditional rituals have always a male perspective in them as they have been framed by the male-dominated society where the female voice is often silenced. This patriarchal attitude also finds an ironical reference in the following passages of the novel:

"The dead, if they were female, were consigned to flames amidst a crowd of men. Rukmini sometimes wondered if the souls of the just dead women missed the company of other women at this juncture."
(The Collector's Wife- Mitra Phukan)

Rukmini always feels lonely because of her husband's round the clock official commitments. In order to get out of this boredom she joins a college as part time lecturer but even then she somehow cannot enjoy teaching teenage students of the town. She experiences frustration not to have any child even after ten long years of marriage. However, she manages to get a mental poise when the pristine beauty of surrounding nature seems to assert her identity as a self-contained entity. She gets an epiphanic vision towards life which comes to pass only when she allows herself to get immersed in the natural surroundings to which she has so long been associated with:

"The complications and complexities of their lives, the hatred, the violence, the suspicion and pettiness that coloured Parbatpuri, were dwarfed in the face of this marvellous, all-encompassing melody all around her. And all she had done was to leave her house, take just a few steps down the road, in order to see things with such sudden clarity." (The Collector's Wife- Mitra Phukan)

CONCLUSION

All the texts selected above for study bring forth issues both perennial and contemporary. Issues like war and violence, death and destruction, oppression and exploitation, anxiety and crisis of identity are always an integral part in the lives of people hailing from the regions of Nagaland, Manipur and Assam. In the midst of all these circumstances, women are the worst sufferers. They lead a very deplorable and pathetic life and are at the receiving end of all attacks and criticisms. The proposed paper thus highlights the interconnectedness between nature and women through the lens of ecofeminism. Indeed, ecofeminist argue that the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to overcome this, one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualise the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one's culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organisation to bring about new social forms.

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