

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

The Withering of Our Hill World: Critiques of Globalization and Modernization in the Eco-conscious Poetry of the North-East

Debasis Samaddar

Assistant Teacher of English,

Chowhatta High School,

Birbhum, West Bengal, India

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.5.5.12

Abstract

This article explores the searing critiques of globalization, modernization and industrialization in the eco-conscious poetry of North Eastern India through an ecocritical analysis of selected poems of Saratchand Thiyam and others. In celebrating the ecological glory of their region, these poets criticize modernization, urbanization, industrialization and irresponsible human behaviour that are continually ravaging the biodiversity and ecosystem of their land. The poets are playing an important role in raising eco-consciousness and eco-sensibility not only among the people of their own region but also in the wider world. The people of the North East revere nature and depict it in their literatures. Although in the arena of world literature the concept of eco-consciousness is a relatively modern phenomenon, a deep sensibility for nature and a harmonious inter-relationship between man and the environment can be seen in the literature of the North East. The eco-centric lifestyle of the people of this region is reflected through their oral or written literature.

Keywords- North-East, Eco-consciousness, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Saratchand Thiyam

The concept of eco-consciousness or a deep empathy for nature is a relatively recent phenomenon in the arena of world literature that emerged in the literary field with the advent of “ecology” and “ecocriticism.” The coinage of the term “ecology” is not certain. In 1857 Henry David Thoreau had said about ecology, but he did not provide any definition. Some biologists have credited it to the German Zoologist, Ernst Haeckel. In 1866 Haeckel used the term “oekologie” and defined ecology “as the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature-the investigation of the total relations of animal to its inorganic and organic environment” (Verma and Agarwal, 1989:4-5). Some modern ecologists have given broader definitions of ecology. Southwick (1976) defines ecology as “the scientific study of the interrelationships of living organisms with each other and with their environments” (Verma and Agarwal, 1989:5).

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

In the mid-1980s, the western scholars began working in the ecocriticism genre. William Rueckert coined “ecocriticism” in 1978 in his essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism.” According to him ecocriticism is the “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world.” (The Eco-criticism Reader,1996:107). Lawrence Buell locates the environmentalist at the front and centre with his definition of ecocriticism as a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis.” (Buell, 1995:430).

Long before the arrival of these concepts, a deep sensibility for nature and a harmonious inter-relationship between man and nature could be seen in Indian classical literature and in the literature of the North East, an umbrella term usually employed for the eight states of India—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. As literature serves as a mirror to society, the culture and eco-centric lifestyle of the North East has always been reflected through their oral and written literature wherein rivers, mountains, forests, and wildlife have influenced the literary persons of this region. NDR Chandra and Nigamananda Das have rightly revealed in “*Ecology Myth and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India*” that Indian English poetry from the North Eastern part of India “is rich in enshrining various aspects of the ecology of the region,” and that it “has been a fashion with the poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness.” The authors argue that these poets have reacted sharply to “the ruthless act of deforestation and oppression of nature in various ways, by destroying the serenity of nature, obliterating the natural environment, killing rare birds and animals, and distorting the landscape and biodiversity” (Chandra and Das, 2007:35).

This article intends to highlight the critiques of globalization, modernization and industrialization in the eco-conscious poetry of the North-East India through an ecocritical analysis of some relevant poems of Saratchand Thiyam and others.

One of the most acclaimed poets from Imphal, Manipur, Saratchand Thiyam was an engineer by profession who began writing poetry at an early age. He has written five collections of poetry in Manipuri language and three travelogues. His first collection of poetry, *Tengali Kaarba Podon*, was published in 1980, and he received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006. His poems have been translated into English by Robin Singh Ngangom and Bijoy Kumar Tayenjam. He is also a broadcaster on All India Radio. Like other North Eastern poets, nature occupies an important place in his poetry. Eco-consciousness and deep feeling for humanity are usually the central themes of his poems.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

In the poem, “Hill,” Saratchand personifies a hill as one of the most powerful manifestations of nature, as an embodiment of patience. The poet imagines the hill as a human being who is standing quietly, wearing a shawl, and tolerating torments without any complaint:

You remain standing and

Don't speak at all.

You can suffer too, neither denying nor affirming.

Wearing a shawl of fire you can stand quietly. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:34-35)

Like in most other NorthEast states, the hill areas of Manipur have witnessed rampant deforestation spurred by industrialization and urbanization which have become a significant ecological issue. Here Saratchand laments the loss of greenery and compares the hill with a bareheaded person:

When it's evening your picture

Can be seen lucidly,

Standing with a clean shaven head. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:34-35)

A similar picture is portrayed by the writer and poet Temsula Ao, an important literary voice from Nagaland, in her poem “The Bald Giant” where a hill is a metaphoric bald giant. Through this metaphor Ao tries to show the bad effects of deforestation that have caused a withering of the hills. Just as the giant became bald, losing his “green cloak,” similarly the hills had lost their past greenery were gradually becoming bald:

All that is now gone

All of him is brown

From base to crown

And his sides are furrowed

Where the logs had rolled

Once I thought him friendly

But now he looks menacing (*Book of Songs*, 2013:175-176)

Later in “Hill” Saratchand describes how with the advancement of modernity, irresponsible activities of so-called civilized people were gradually ravaging the ecological balance in the hill areas and, at the same time, he laments for the past because human beings were now busy in achieving false glory and prosperity. Destroying greenery, they are making a pathway to success:

The hill tracks that go bursting through

Amidst forests once green

Are gradually becoming red

With a group of people

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

Searching for a crown of laurel leaves. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:34-35)

Tiamerenla Monalisa Changkija, poet and journalist from Nagaland, aptly expresses her concern over our insatiable greed for prosperity and its future consequences in her poem, “Environmental Extinction and Star Wars”:

At the rate
we are racing
there'll be no sands
to leave behind our footprints
before the end
of time
.....

At the rate
we're "advancing"
we forget, there is no
place in space
to leave behind
our footprints

at any point of time. (*Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain*, 1993:46)

Almond D. Syiem, a well-known poet from the North East, compares a bare hill with a naked woman in his poem, “On Top of a Hill”. Here both the hill and the woman are victimized by the abnormal human activities:

I'm standing on top of a hill which is
bare like a naked woman, whose breast
have been uncovered

by a ravishing madman. (*Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, 2003:174)

In the poem “Communication”, Saratchand presents a dull picture of nature where the high hills are becoming smaller and the clear mountain streams are turning muddy due to soil erosion resulting from deforestation. The hills are no longer green, they become barren:

The hill, once very high, has become shorter.

The green hill has become barren.

The stream, flowing down, has turned muddy.

The images before me have become duller. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:55-57)

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

This era of globalization improves communication and the North East region is no exception to the change. In the poem, “Destination”, Saratchand criticizes these advancements that have been achieved at the cost of destruction of nature. Today trains travel at a high speed through the heart of the hills, causing deforestation. Consequently, trees are no longer green. They have withered, while bamboos stand dazed:

But in the arms of your green hills
trains moving at great speed
are running faster and faster.

The withered trees and bamboo of autumn
stand dazed,...(*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:14-16)

Again, in the poem “Hill World”, Saratchand criticizes such advancements. Here he emphasizes the ill-effects of modernization and urbanization and at the same time reveals how they are terrifying the innocent people of this area and harming their peaceful life in the lap of nature. Hilltops are no longer free now from human aggression. Helipads are constructed there. Saratchand reveals the reality thus:

On the hilltop’s broad helipad
When the helicopter lands roaring
The girls of the hill world who were bathing
Ran for their homes
Panting. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:22)

Earlier in this poem Saratchand represents how the silence of the hill world is being destroyed by irresponsible human activities. The hill is presented as a symbol of peace and patience. But in the name of picnic and recreation, some so-called modern people are playing loud music and destroying the glory of silence:

Boys and girls of the hill world
Are eating a picnic meal at the foothill
Dancing
Embracing the loud songs of a tape recorder. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:22)

In the final stanza of this poem Saratchand indirectly criticizes the efficacy of the hydroelectric projects in the NorthEast:

The hill world’s mothers stand
Holding torches throughout the night
Facing the glaring lights of the power station. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:22)

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

The negative impact of modernization, urbanization and industrialization on ecosystem are realistically represented by Saratchand in another poem, “The Earth”. Here he presents a very pathetic picture of modernization. He begins the poem by addressing “Mother Earth” who is losing control over her “zoo.” Mother Earth binds everything harmoniously but now that knot becomes “slack”:

Mother Earth!

The zoo in your bosom today
is slack in security.

The long rope you had been
preparing, twisting and twirling
for ages upon your thighs
has now been sucked
into the dark abyss. (*The Waves*, 1995)

The birds are no longer free now. They have also lost their control over the skies:

Little birds
guardian of the skies
once flew in freedom
and came back to you. (*The Waves*, 1995)

With the advance of modernity, birds are now on the verge of extinction. Saratchand considers aircraft and rockets as “iron monsters” that have taken the command of the sky:

The empty skies are today
filled with swarms
of iron monsters that escort
satellites, delivered without check. (*The Waves*, 1995)

Insatiable greed for power leads nations to fight among themselves. Now they are fighting for the “right of orbit”:

.... they quarrel among themselves,
exhort to fight and
strike at one another –
for right of orbit
for feeding grounds
in the sky. (*The Waves*, 1995)

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

In the final stanza of the poem Saratchand presents a very pathetic picture of urbanization and industrialization that are gradually destroying the natural sources of nourishment of our fellow species and even forcing them to bring change in their diet:

The flocks of birds
that once guarded
the independence of the skies
have flown down to you
with pieces of iron
caught in their beaks
for the hungry little ones, in
their nest, instead of fruits
fresh and cool. (*The Waves*, 1995)

Here Easterine Kire, one of the major literary voices from Nagaland, is worth mentioning. In her poem, "For Justin-Pierre", Kire presents such a terrifying situation which we all will have to face in near future if we continue ecological destruction in the same way

Someday you will ask me
why the birds no longer sing
and the flowers as sweet
as I said they used to do; (*Kelhoukevira*, 1982:36)

In the poem "Guwahati", Saratchand presents how industrialization is gradually taking people away from their culture and festivals. People are so busy working in tea gardens and oil-wells that they cannot even participate in *Bihu* which is the major festival of Assam:

when you face those
who are plucking tea leaves
in tea gardens,
who are plumping out mineral oil
in oil-wells.

...

you're crying
for those who could not come and join
your joyous Bihu dance. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:41)

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

Saratchand's poetry not only highlights the ecological degeneration in the North East region but also in the outside world. In his poem, "Kolkata My Kolkata", he presents the ill-effects of urbanization and industrialization in that city. Here he says that the blue sky of Kolkata is covered by the black smoke of factories:

Huge mills factories belching

Black smoke

Has covered the vast sky's ceiling. (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:26-27)

Saratchand considers Kolkata a "wasteland" where small "Boys who should be running jumping / Clutching balls / Arrive before the crack of dawn / To spread their hands near train-windows," where "Toddlers who can hardly walk / Are taught how to dance / To feign tenderness softness weakness / In hovels near the platform / By their mothers," and where "Men without clothes / Places turned into cesspits" (*Sister and Other Poems*, 2014:26-27). If we not become sufficiently eco-conscious in time, then Kire's fear will come true. Kire in her poem, "For Justin-Pierre", expresses her concern thus:

One day, my son,

when you come to ask me

what colour was the sky

before it turned grey

I will have no answer. (*Kelhoukevira*, 1982:36)

Several hydro-electric projects have been constructed in the North East which are causing ecological degeneration. Poets like Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Rajkumar Bhubonsana highlight this ecological degeneration through their poetry. In "An Evening by the Source of the Umkhrah River", Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, the bilingual poet, fiction writer and playwright from Shillong, Meghalaya, highlights the ecological degeneration of the Umiam Lake, locally known as *Dam sait*. Wah Umkhrah and Wah Umshyrpi are two important rivers of Meghalaya that flow through Shillong carrying their waters into the Umiam Lake which was the first hydel project in North East India. Urbanization, industrialization and increasing population are not only making the rivers filthy but also throwing a great challenge to the ecosystem of Umiam Lake. As a responsible eco-conscious poet, Nongkynrih cannot overlook such degradation and here he highlights this burning issue. At the beginning of the poem the poet describes the pollution-free and virgin Umkhrah river when it flows through the hills:

By a lane winding through the hills

'I stroll at leisure' along the Umkhrah River.

Incredibly clear is the water up here,

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

the blue sky snoozes on its bed of white sand. (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011:17)

Nongkynrih highlights the river-centric lifestyle of the locals. He describes how the residents of the Umkhrah river valley are socio-economically dependent on this river:

Patrolling its banks are occasional fishermen;
washing the clean earth from their sturdy feet,
are country maidens, blushing and giggling
on smooth, swarthy water-worn stones. (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011:17)

But Nongkynrih ends the poem quite differently. He reveals the filthy condition of the river while flowing through the urban areas:

Nobody cares that this limpid water,
the bashful maidens, the tuneful pines
are rolling down to the city
where life itself wallows in the filth. (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011:17)

Like the Umiam Lake hydro-electric project of Meghalaya, the Loktak project is also a major ecological issue in Manipur. Loktak is the largest freshwater lake in North East India. It is fed by the fresh water of two rivers—Khuga and Imphal river. It has also a large socio-economic importance to the locals. But the hydro-electric project has caused great ecological degeneration to this area. The Manipuri poet Rajkumar Bhubonsana has raised his voice against the ecological damage due to this project in his poem, “Should Light be Put Out or Mind Kept in Dark”. Here he laments thus:

Before Loktak Project came into existence
it's said there was no light in Manipur
Even after the commissioning of Loktak Project
there is still no light
on the other hand
Loktak Project wastes paddy fields and fishes
causes submergence under water
spoils men
takes away homesteads
makes unavailable
space for working
causes resentment. (*Bhubonsana and Singh*, 2003:101-105)

Therefore, the article explores the critiques of globalization, industrialization, urbanization and modernization in the eco-conscious poetry of the NorthEast through an ecocritical analysis of the

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English

relevant poems of Saratchand Thiyamand others who have raised their voice against the obliteration of nature and, at the same time, emphasized its preservation with care. Besides, they are playing important role not only in creating eco-consciousness and eco-sensibility but also in raising environmental awareness among the people of their own region.

References

- Ao, Tamsula. *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007*, Heritage Publishing House, 2013, pp. 175-176.
- Bhubonsana, Rajkumar and T. Bijoykumar Singh. "Should Light Be Put Out or Mind Kept in Dark" *Indian Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (216) (July-August 2003), pp.101-105. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/-23341140>(Accessed Aug 22, 2020).
- Buell, Lawrence. "*The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*", The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 430.
- Chandra, ND R and Nigamananda Das. *Ecology Myth and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India*. Sarup & Sons, 2007, pp. 35.
- Changkija, Monalisa. "Environmental Extinction and Star Wars", *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain*, Write-on Publications, 1993, pp. 46.
- Kire, Easterine. "For Justine-Pierre", *Kelhoukevira*, J.B. Lama, 1982, pp. 36.
- Nongkynrih, Kynpham Sing. *The Yearning of Seeds*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2011, pp. 17.
- Rueckert, William. "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and HaroldFromm, The University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 107.
- Syiem, Almond D. "On Top of a Hill" in *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, ed. K.S. Nongkynrih and R. S. Ngangom, NEHU, 2003, pp. 174.
- Thiyam, Saratchand. *Sister and Other Poems*, Writers Workshop, 2014.
- Thiyam, Saratchand. "*The Waves*", Poknapham Publications, 1995.
- <http://themanipurpage.tripod.com/literature/sthiyam.html> (Accessed on Aug 22,2020)
- Verma, P. S. and V.K Agarwal. *Environmental Biology: Principles of Ecology*, S. Chand, 2009.