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Ecological Consciousness in Poetry from Northeast India: Landscape, Indigenous Memory, and the More-than-Human World

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Abstract

Poetry from Northeast India possesses a distinctive ecological consciousness shaped by the region's mountains, forests, rivers, rainfall, biodiversity, indigenous cultures, oral traditions, and rapidly changing environmental realities. Rather than presenting nature merely as picturesque scenery, poets from the region frequently imagine landscape as a living archive of cultural memory, ancestral belonging, political history, and ecological knowledge. This paper examines ecological consciousness in selected poetry of Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Robin S. Ngangom, and Easterine Kire, placing their diverse poetic voices within the broader framework of ecocriticism and indigenous environmental thought. It argues that ecological consciousness in Northeast Indian poetry emerges through an intimate relationship among land, community, memory, mythology, spirituality, and identity. Rivers, forests, mountains, plants, animals, stones, rain, and agricultural landscapes become active presences rather than passive settings. The study further examines how environmental degradation, urbanization, violence, displacement, deforestation, and developmental intervention disturb both ecological systems and cultural relationships with place. Particular emphasis is placed on indigenous ecological epistemologies expressed through oral traditions, myths, customary practices, and ideas of reciprocity between human and more-than-human worlds. Although the selected poets differ significantly in style, ethnicity, geography, and historical experience, their works collectively challenge anthropocentric and extractive conceptions of nature. Their poetry demonstrates that environmental loss in Northeast India frequently entails cultural, linguistic, spiritual, and mnemonic loss. Northeast Indian poetry consequently offers an important regional contribution to global environmental humanities by articulating an ecological ethics founded upon relationality, remembrance, responsibility, and belonging.

Keywords: Northeast Indian Poetry, Ecocriticism, Ecological Consciousness, Indigenous Ecology, Environmental Humanities.

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Northeast Indian poetry occupies a distinctive position within contemporary Indian literature because of its intense engagement with landscape, indigenous cultures, oral traditions, political histories, and ecological relationships. The eight states conventionally grouped under the geographical category of Northeast India contain extraordinary ecological and cultural diversity. Mountains, valleys, forests, rivers, wetlands, agricultural landscapes, monsoon systems, plants, animals, and indigenous settlements constitute not simply the geographical setting of the region's literature but one of its central imaginative foundations. Poetry emerging from this region repeatedly demonstrates that relationships with land cannot easily be separated from questions of identity, memory, ancestry, community, spirituality, violence, and historical change. Consequently, ecological consciousness in Northeast Indian poetry differs significantly from literary traditions in which nature appears principally as scenic beauty or as a metaphor for individual emotion. Nature here frequently possesses cultural memory and material agency. Rivers carry histories, forests preserve ancestral knowledge, mountains define belonging, plants participate in everyday life, and animals inhabit worlds shared with human communities. Such poetry therefore offers a particularly productive field for ecocritical investigation. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Lawrence Buell similarly argues that environmentally oriented literature recognizes the nonhuman environment as more than a framing device and understands human history as implicated within natural history (7). These formulations illuminate much poetry from Northeast India, although the region also requires ecocriticism to engage seriously with indigenous epistemologies. Environmental consciousness here is frequently inseparable from oral history, mythology, spirituality, and communal relationships with land. Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's influential anthology *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* provides an important framework for understanding this literary sensibility. In their introduction, the editors emphasize the significance of nature, myths, folklore, community, political conflict, and the cultural distinctiveness of the region. The anthology's very title, *Dancing Earth,* suggests an earth that is dynamic rather than passive. Landscape does not merely receive human action; it participates in imaginative life. This relationship between poetry and place becomes especially important because the Northeast has frequently been represented from outside through categories such as frontier, borderland, tribal territory, insurgency zone, or exotic natural paradise. Poetry from within the region complicates these representations by transforming landscape from an object of external observation into a lived and remembered world. Mamang Dai's poetry provides one of the clearest examples of such ecological consciousness. Rooted in Arunachal Pradesh and the cultural world of the Adi community, Dai's poetry repeatedly invokes rivers, mountains, forests, mist, rain, trees, birds, stones, and ancestral landscapes. Her *River Poems* is particularly significant because the river becomes both an ecological presence and a cultural metaphor. Water embodies movement, continuity, memory, and belonging. Rivers existed before individual generations and continue after them, thereby placing human life within a temporal order larger than itself. Yet Dai's river is never simply an abstract symbol. It belongs to an actual geography inhabited by communities whose identities have developed through relationships with particular waterways. Her ecological imagination therefore resists the separation of nature from culture. A river can simultaneously be an ecosystem, a geographical pathway, a cultural archive, and a spiritual presence. This relationality is fundamental to indigenous ecological consciousness. In Dai's writing, forests similarly function as more than collections of natural resources. They carry stories, memories, ancestral associations, and forms of knowledge transmitted through generations. Environmental destruction therefore threatens more than biodiversity. It can disrupt cultural memory itself. This connection between ecological and cultural survival is particularly evident when Dai's poetry is read alongside *The Legends of Pensam,* where human communities inhabit a world permeated by natural and supernatural relationships. Although a prose work, *The Legends of Pensam* illuminates the indigenous cosmology underlying Dai's poetry: nature is not external to human existence but participates in a network of relationships involving community, ancestors, animals, spirits, landscape, and memory. Such a worldview challenges the anthropocentric assumption that the nonhuman environment possesses value primarily through human utility. Temsula Ao's poetry similarly articulates a powerful relationship among landscape, cultural memory, and indigenous identity. Writing from the

historical and cultural experience of Nagaland, Ao repeatedly engages with mountains, villages, forests, agricultural life, oral traditions, and memories of violence. In her poetry, land can become both home and witness. The landscape carries traces of political conflict and social transformation, but it also preserves continuities deeper than particular historical events. Ao's *Songs That Tell* reveals the significance of storytelling and song as modes through which communities remember themselves. The ecological dimensions of her poetry cannot therefore be isolated from cultural history. Indigenous environmental knowledge is transmitted through language, stories, rituals, and everyday relationships with place. When these relationships are disrupted, cultural continuity itself becomes vulnerable. This relationship between environment and cultural survival is central to contemporary environmental humanities because it reveals the inadequacy of understanding ecological loss purely through scientific measurements. Forest loss can also be memory loss; disappearance of traditional agricultural landscapes can be loss of vocabulary and practice; displacement from ancestral territory can sever relationships among language, identity, and ecology. Ao's work repeatedly suggests this multidimensional significance of place. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's poetry introduces another important ecological perspective. Rooted in Meghalaya, particularly the cultural landscape of Shillong and Khasi experience, his work negotiates the relationship between natural beauty and the pressures of urbanization, social change, and modernity. Meghalaya's hills, rain, forests, waterfalls, plants, and changing cityscapes form an important imaginative background to his poetry. Yet Nongkynrih frequently refuses picturesque romanticization. The environment is experienced within contemporary social realities. Shillong, for instance, is simultaneously a beloved place and a space affected by urban pressures, violence, changing relationships, and environmental transformation. This tension is significant because ecological consciousness cannot simply idealize a pristine premodern landscape. Contemporary environmental experience is shaped by cities, roads, waste, consumption, population movement, and developmental aspirations. Nongkynrih's poetic imagination therefore reveals the difficulty of sustaining meaningful relationships with nature within rapidly transforming social spaces. His work broadens Northeast Indian ecological poetry beyond conventional images of untouched forests and mountains and directs attention toward the ecological consequences of modern urban life. Robin S. Ngangom's poetry similarly connects landscape with memory, exile, violence, and belonging. Writing from Manipur while also reflecting experiences of displacement and residence outside his native place, Ngangom frequently represents home as an emotional and ecological geography. The landscape of Manipur becomes inseparable from memories of political instability and personal belonging. In poems concerned with homecoming, land acquires an almost bodily significance. To return home is not merely to cross political boundaries; it is to return to remembered hills, vegetation, weather, language, and relationships. Ecological consciousness here intersects with displacement. Place becomes most visible when one is separated from it. This suggests an important dimension of environmental imagination: ecological attachment is not always produced through uninterrupted residence but can intensify through exile, migration, and memory. Ngangom's poetry therefore expands the meaning of environmental consciousness beyond direct nature description. Landscape can inhabit memory even when the individual is geographically distant from it. Easterine Kire's literary imagination, although widely recognized through her fiction, poetry, and oral-cultural work, also provides an important perspective on ecological consciousness in Nagaland. Her engagement with Naga oral traditions foregrounds intimate relationships among land, agriculture, community, plants, animals, seasons, and inherited knowledge. Indigenous ecological consciousness often operates through practical knowledge rather than through explicit environmental theory. Knowing when to cultivate, which plants possess particular uses, how seasons change, where animals move, and what stories belong to specific places constitutes an environmental epistemology. Such knowledge is embedded within cultural practice. Kire's work helps illuminate how Northeast Indian literature preserves these forms of localized knowledge against the homogenizing pressures of modernity. The ecological importance of oral tradition becomes particularly evident across these writers. Walter J. Ong's discussion of oral cultures emphasizes memory, repetition, performance, and communal transmission as important mechanisms for preserving knowledge. In Northeast Indian contexts, oral narratives frequently contain information concerning origins, landscapes, plants, animals, customary practices, sacred sites, and human obligations toward the

environment. Myths and folktales can therefore function as ecological archives. Modern literary writers who incorporate oral traditions into English poetry perform a complex act of cultural translation. They preserve aspects of indigenous knowledge while transferring them into written literary forms capable of circulating beyond their original communities. This process also raises questions about what can be preserved and what may be altered when oral knowledge enters print. Nevertheless, the presence of oral traditions significantly differentiates much Northeast Indian environmental poetry from conventional Western nature writing. The poet often speaks not merely as an isolated individual confronting nature but from within inherited networks of communal memory. Myth is similarly integral to the ecological consciousness of the region. Modern rationalist epistemologies frequently separate myth from empirical knowledge, but indigenous cultures may understand myth as a means of articulating relationships among people, places, animals, ancestors, and spiritual forces. Graham Harvey's discussion of animism as a relational worldview offers a productive conceptual framework here. Rather than reducing animism to an allegedly primitive belief in spirits, Harvey emphasizes relationships of respect among human and other-than-human persons. Many Northeast Indian literary texts reflect comparable relational structures. Mountains, forests, rivers, animals, and ancestral presences participate in meaningful networks. Such representations challenge what Val Plumwood identifies as the human/nature dualism characteristic of dominant Western anthropocentric thought. Plumwood argues that radical separation between humanity and nature has historically contributed to environmental domination. Northeast Indian poetry frequently offers an alternative imagination in which humans remain embedded within ecological and spiritual relationships. Yet it would be misleading to romanticize indigenous communities as inherently or uniformly ecological. Contemporary Northeast India experiences deforestation, mining, urbanization, infrastructural development, changing agricultural practices, population pressures, waste, biodiversity loss, and other environmental challenges. Literature from the region registers these contradictions. Ecological consciousness does not necessarily imply an untouched harmony between people and nature. Rather, poetry often records the tension between inherited ecological relationships and contemporary transformations. Roads may provide necessary connectivity while simultaneously altering landscapes. Urban growth may create opportunities while reducing green spaces. Modern education may expand intellectual horizons while weakening the transmission of local ecological knowledge. Development may improve material conditions while threatening forests, rivers, and community relationships with land. Northeast Indian poetry becomes especially significant because it can hold these contradictory realities together without reducing environmental questions to simple opposition between tradition and modernity. The relationship between ecological consciousness and violence constitutes another distinctive feature of the region's poetry. Political conflict, militarization, ethnic tension, and displacement have affected several parts of Northeast India, and landscapes sometimes become witnesses to human violence. Rivers, forests, roads, villages, and mountains can carry memories of death and fear alongside natural beauty. Ecocritical reading in this context must recognize that environmental and political histories overlap. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is useful for understanding environmental harm that occurs gradually and often remains less visible than spectacular political violence. Deforestation, pollution, erosion, resource extraction, and ecological displacement may transform communities over decades. Poetry possesses the capacity to make such gradual losses emotionally perceptible by connecting them with particular places, memories, and lives. Environmental degradation thereby becomes not an abstract statistical problem but a lived cultural experience. The recurring significance of home in Northeast Indian poetry is also ecologically important. Home is frequently imagined through landscape rather than architecture alone. Rivers, hills, trees, forests, fields, rainfall, and seasonal rhythms become components of belonging. Ursula K. Heise's discussion of "sense of place" provides a useful framework for understanding such attachments, although Northeast Indian poetry adds the crucial dimensions of indigenous memory and political history. Place is meaningful because generations have inhabited, narrated, cultivated, named, and remembered it. Environmental consciousness therefore involves protecting not merely generalized "nature" but particular relationships with particular places. This localized attachment does not prevent broader ecological significance. On the contrary, Northeast Indian poetry demonstrates how global environmental problems become comprehensible through local

experience. Climate instability, deforestation, species loss, urbanization, and environmental displacement acquire emotional meaning when experienced through a specific river, forest, mountain, village, or species. Aldo Leopold's land ethic proposes enlarging the moral community to include "soils, waters, plants, and animals" (204). The ecological consciousness of Northeast Indian poetry often resonates with this expanded moral community, but indigenous perspectives also extend beyond Leopold by emphasizing ancestry, spirituality, storytelling, and cultural memory. Land is not simply an ecological community to which humans should ethically belong; for many indigenous traditions, humans already exist within inherited relationships with land. The challenge is therefore not merely to create ecological belonging but to preserve, renew, and adapt relationships that modernization may be weakening. Poetry becomes one means of accomplishing this task. By naming rivers, remembering forests, retelling myths, mourning environmental loss, and recording local ecological experience, poets transform literature into an act of environmental remembrance. The use of English in this poetry is itself significant. Many poets from Northeast India write in English while drawing upon indigenous languages, cultural concepts, myths, oral rhythms, and localized environmental knowledge. English, historically associated with colonial administration and education, is thereby transformed into a medium for expressing indigenous ecological experience. This linguistic appropriation enables local landscapes to enter national and global literary discourse without necessarily surrendering their cultural specificity. The environmental imagination of Northeast Indian poetry consequently challenges both literary and geographical hierarchies. Regions frequently treated as peripheral become centres from which ecological knowledge is articulated. Rivers and mountains conventionally represented as remote landscapes become intellectual spaces capable of contributing to global environmental thought. Ecological consciousness in Northeast Indian poetry can ultimately be understood through four interrelated concepts: relationality, memory, place, and responsibility. Relationality recognizes that humans exist within networks involving animals, plants, rivers, forests, ancestors, and communities. Memory preserves the cultural knowledge embedded within these relationships. Place gives ecological experience geographical and emotional specificity. Responsibility emerges from recognizing that inherited landscapes must be transmitted rather than merely consumed. Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Robin S. Ngangom, Easterine Kire, and other poets from the region differ considerably in style, cultural background, and literary concerns, and they should not be reduced to a single homogeneous "Northeastern" identity. Yet their works collectively demonstrate the remarkable importance of environment to literary consciousness in the region. Their poetry reveals that ecological degradation is rarely only ecological: it can simultaneously become cultural loss, historical forgetting, spiritual displacement, and erosion of identity. At a time marked globally by climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, urban expansion, and aggressive resource extraction, poetry from Northeast India offers an important environmental intervention. It asks readers to reconsider the assumption that humanity exists separately from the landscapes it inhabits. Rivers carry stories, forests preserve memories, mountains anchor communities, animals participate in shared worlds, and oral traditions transmit ecological responsibilities across generations. The ecological consciousness of Northeast Indian poetry thus transforms literature into an ethics of attention and remembrance. Its deepest insight is that the survival of landscapes and the survival of cultural memory are profoundly interconnected. To preserve the earth is therefore also to preserve the stories, languages, identities, and relationships through which human beings have learned to belong to it.

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