

Ecological and Ecomystical World in Plays in English from North-East India

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Abstract: The states of North-East India have quite a good number of plays written in their own respective vernacular languages. But the works of some of the Manipuri and Assamese playwrights have been translated into English and these have shown how successfully this literary genre has been explored by these playwrights. These plays exhibit local colours, local sense and sentiment, deal with some of the core issues of the region, and at the same time, they have a universal appeal. The world of these playwrights, is the very world around them; but ecology, myths and legends, tradition, and mysticism form a vital part of their world. This reminds of their rootedness to their tradition and culture and even being a part of the corpus of Indian drama, these also make them essentially Northeastern Indian playwrights. They are recognized with an identity of their own because of their legitimate, powerful voice. Ratan Thiyam explores through the vibrant world of Manipuri tradition and culture. He rediscovers the folklore, myths and legends of Manipur and bestows on them a contemporary meaning. Ecological concerns are strongly voiced in his plays.

Keywords: Eco-feminist and eco-mystical ideas, ecological equilibrium, folklore, myths, legends.

Manipur has a rich theatre tradition. After its interaction with the British Indian Empire in the 19th century, people were exposed to western drama. The introduction of western education in Manipur during the last quarter of the 19th century also influenced the advent of a new group of playwrights into the scenario-playwrights such as Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh (1895-1966), Lamabam Kamal (1900-1934), Sorokhaibam Lalit Singh (1983-1955), Arambam Dorendrajit Singh (1907-1944), Ashangbam Minaketan (1906-1995), Hijam Angahal (1892-1943), etc. But it is Ratan Thiyam in whose hand Manipuri theatre has achieved a new dimension. He is a playwright of high calibre, a director, actor, poet, novelist, musician as well as a painter. His is a respected name in the realm of Indian drama, whose plays have been staged all over the world. He set up the Chorus Repertory Theatre in 1976 that has immensely contributed to the development of Manipuri theatre.

Ratan Thiyam explores through the vibrant world of Manipuri tradition and culture. He rediscovers the folklore, myths and legends of Manipur and bestows on them a contemporary meaning. Ecological concerns are strongly voiced in his plays. The plays of Ratan Thiyam “present a

remarkable juxtaposition of traditionalism and the demands that a remorseless technological world takes on all of us. And through presentation of opposites and conflicts, he puts across the clear message that unless mankind resists war, halts the rat race of a frenetic existence and reverses the destruction of the only planet that we have, there is only doom in store for us.... His lament of the diverse ways in which we have destroyed or perverted the world of today is heard against the backdrop of angst presences in the mythical world of Manipuri deities and damsel, of mothers and wise men. In the ultimate analysis, his plays represent the victory of abiding traditional values over the present world of wars, conflicts, violence, greed and inequity.” (Bezboruah 2008:1). Thiyam voicing his concern for the environment, says, “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.” (2008: 111-12).

The plays in Thiyam's *Manipur Trilogy* are *Wahoudok* (Prologue), *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* (My Earth, My Love) and *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills, One Valley). *Wahoudok* is a play with four scenes that tells, the Metei traditional myths regarding the creation of the universe. At the beginning of the creation there was a vacuum full of darkness. Then the Almighty cried “Hoong”. “Hoong” is a term used for invoking gods at the start of incantation; it is also used as an explanatory word meaning 'No'. As soon as the lord cried 'Hoong', suddenly a halo of seven colours appeared and there was light everywhere like it happened also in the Bible as God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Genesis: Chapter I). He went on creating the celestial bodies, animals and plants. Then following the advice of Mother Goddess, the sons of God created human beings in the image of their Father, the Almighty God, like that in the Bible, “God created man in his own image”(ibidem). Thus human civilization flourished on earth and they went on enjoying the bounty of nature and the earth was a perfect paradise for human beings. In due course of time human population increased that put pressure on food and natural resources. Human beings started fighting one another for a share of the ever-diminishing resources in order to survive. Scientific and technological development failed miserably in liberating human beings from such a disaster. This war for survival eventually brought political and economic crisis that led to a crisis in tradition and culture. The earth was no more a paradise, rather, it became an entity under constant threat of extinction. People started introspecting. They went back to the history of human civilization for a solution in order to face these challenges before them. The worried, helpless people called upon their forbears, the seven wise men and the seven nymphs who had helped in creating human beings and who were lost in oblivion by that time. They prayed their forbears to save them from this disastrous condition. This is the story in brief in *Wahoudok* told in four episodes: The birth of the Universe, the creation of living beings, the outset of human civilization and the modern

times. The play tries to justify the need of practising traditional values as it is tradition, culture and age-old values that enable human beings to fight against the hazards of so-called modernization. Speaking on the importance of tradition, Thiyam says in an interview with Kavita Nagpal and Geeti Sen, “it is by the use of tradition that you try to drive away the civil factors.” (Sen 2006:242).

The ecology of our planet has been talked about in *Wahoudok* time and again. People have been reminded of the beauty and bounty of Nature quite a number of times. The Narrator in the play says, “See, how beautiful is the earth/Green, black. Saffron and white colored / Ranges of hills.” (Thiyam 2008:41). He speaks of the entire ecology of the earth. He speaks about the oceans, the green forests, the varied flora and fauna of earth. But this beautiful earth is now under threat. Human beings' exploitation has brought on ecological imbalance. “In the race of civilization, in the passage of time, grudge among nations have become very frequent. Killing and wanton murder arresting and kidnapping would happen more frequently, news of wars and devastations would reverberate in all the four directions and eight corners.” (ibidem 38-39). But this should be stopped in order to create a peaceful planet in which all creatures can live peacefully. The ecology of the earth is to be maintained as “there is no paradise better than the earth.” (ibidem 42)

The ecomystical tone is well heard in this play. The varied coloured hills, the clouds, different kinds of trees, flowers, fruits, and different species of animals, birds and insects are mentioned. All these, along with human beings are integral part of the ecological web. Mutual love, respect and dependence is must in order to maintain the ecological balance. This is what eco-mysticism tells us. It is the way of living ecologically like a mystic's way of life. Spiritual Ecology advocates the growth of an ethical sense that enables human beings feel an empathy with nature, to observe closely its mysteries and to act for its preservation. *Wahoudok* is a manifestation of this ecomystical spirit.

The second play in Thiyam's trilogy is *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* (My Earth, My Love). It 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 has also references to Manipur suggesting Thiyam's sense of belonging to his native land. The play unfolds the dark pages of the history of human kind. Human history has been a witness of a number of horrendous events. It has witnessed hundreds and thousands of people died in the concentration camps during the Nazi regime in Germany and the revenge of the Russians when they raped fifty thousand German women, the Japanese attack of the Pearl Harbour and the American retaliation by atomic bombarding in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the genocide during the Khmer Rouge regime in Kampuchea, the terrorist attack and devastation of the twin towers of World Trade Centre in Ground Zero. Besides all these, human history has also witnessed the devastation of Manipur by the Burmese. The play introduces the characters of seven celestial nymphs taken from

Manipuri myths and legends, representing the peace-loving citizens of the world in general. They pray to the Almighty to restore harmony and peace in the world.

Ecomystical ideas have been well exploded by Thiyam in this play. Wars, battles and armed exercises of nations for attaining superiority have polluted the planet apart from doing manifold harms to human civilization. They have been posing a threat to the very existence of the earth. "Do you hear, the Emperor called "War" has vowed to devastate the Earth? Wake up, open your eyes." (ibidem 69). The devastation created by human beings has destroyed nature and the ecological balance: "...one 'Earth' devoid of morning and day, with the sky covered by the vultures, turned by human beings, is created. In the garden of heaps of dead bodies, one is searching for varieties of flowers..." (ibidem). But in order to live in a perfectly ecological way, a new ethic is to be developed, in which anthropocentrism should give way to ecocentrism. This is the primary concept of ecomysticism and this is what Thiyam tries to express in this play: "The nature of human beings, to think and act for their benefit only, has crippled me..." (ibidem 78).

My Earth, My Love can also be studied from an ecofeminist viewpoint. Here women and nature are presented as synonymous. The wars and other man-made devastations in the history of human civilization have totally a negative impact on the ecology of the planet. Nature has been polluted and exploited by these devastations. Likewise, women are also made to suffer. 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 ...
The epic of the Earth and voluminous
Chapters of thousands of pages would not be
sufficient to describe the woes and sufferings
of women alone. (ibidem 73).

The very process of creation is under threat. The future of civilization is bleak as both women and nature, that sustain life, are polluted:

"Oh! I'm at a loss. / Submerged in my blood, / Growing in my
womb / / It's a leftover of some inhuman
and / Characterless one." (ibidem 74).

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. Here, in this play a mystical valley is encircled by ranges of hills, which is supposed to be paradise once. But during the passage of time this valley has been robbed of its glory and

tradition due to unfortunate turn of events. Genocide, political instability, unemployment, extortion, corruption--- all these have become day- to- day affair in this land that is posing a great crisis before it. The common people are at a loss whose tradition and rich cultural heritage are at stake. The Seven Wise Men, who have been lost in oblivion so far and who are supposed to save the people and the land from this present crisis, call upon the celestial nymphs, the mothers, to help them write a new book of wisdom that may help the people to go back to their roots in order to rediscover themselves. After completing the book that contains the wisdom of freedom, peace, religion, politics, human rights, traditional culture, etc., the Seven Wise Men disappear leaving behind this book to the younger generation. Towards the end of the play mothers sing lullabies to their children stating the glorious history of the land and all these past happenings. The play ends with lamps lightened on the hill tops and in the valley to enlighten and remind the people of their glorious past. The burning lamps also enlighten the people with a desire to bring back those peaceful days once again.

Thiyam in his other plays explores Manipuri myths, legends, tradition and culture as is done in this play. In the 'Prologue' the rites and rituals performed by the Seven Old Women, the sentinels of Manipuri cultural tradition, show Thiyam's use of his native tradition. The 'Chant' at the very beginning of the play is reflective of the myths and legends of Manipur. Throughout the play Manipuri folk culture has been intelligently exploited and explored though that makes the play a richly colourful one. The playwright is very much concerned of the ecological degradation of the land. He has been referring to this crisis in the play time and again: "...Peepul tree was on fire; dead bodies were floating in a row in the river ;..." (ibidem 87). People are proud and in praise of their native land which was once enriched with the bounties of nature, they say:

Ah! Much adored oval-shaped land
Where golden rice plants sway forming
undulating waves, / a land encircled by nine ranges of hills
like a necklace studded with gems, / O beloved golden motherland,
the best of all. (ibidem 94)

But that beautiful land is now chaotic. The ecological balance has been disturbed by untoward events. It has become a cursed land where "people's minds are divided, all are irritated" (ibidem 88) or where "The sound I hear is that of a mournful voice, children were swimming in the river of blood, with no one to save them, they were calling for their mothers before being drowned." (ibidem). Due to these unfortunate happenings "the land is heading for utter chaos that will result in war." (ibidem)

The play advocates a revival of traditional values, cultural heritage and ancient wisdom in order to resist the evil forces. This quest of the people in search of their roots will enable them to rediscover themselves in a chaotic situation where people are facing identity crisis. "Identify crisis, a

sense of alienation are some of the dominant features of contemporary politics in the Northeast. Racial autonomy, cultural and linguistic conflicts, the problem of insurgency have been ravaging the region. All these find artistic expression in the works of the writers writing in English from region. There is a conscious urge, in their works, of going back to their roots and it is used as a means of asserting an identity of their own.” (Baruah 2010: 63). This is what is reflected in this play by Ratan Thiyam. The playwright is also concerned of the incidents of terror and war in the global scenario those have been leaving a devastating effect on human civilization. The play has references to a number of such terrorist incidents happened in different parts of the globe such as Dar-es-salam, the United States, Afghanistan, Iraq, Cuba, Tunisia, Karachi, Indonesia, Russia, Morocco, Spain, Istanbul, Saudi Arabia, London, etc. All these violent events have a long lasting devastating effect that has ravaged human civilization as well as has destroyed the ecological equilibrium of the globe. In the same interview with Kavita Nagpal and Geeti Sen Thiyam says that even sitting in Manipur he thinks about Indo-Pak relationship, about the Gaza Strip, about Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan or about a bomb blast in Bali (Sen 2006:230). This concern, both local and global, of Thiyam as a playwright, heightens the effect of his plays. He is voicing the sentiment of the common people:

With prayer to the Almighty
let's make a beautiful new ideal world,
manured with goodness and love,
where gentleness and peace prevail. (Thiyam 103)

In order to create such a world human beings must develop an ethic of living together with each and every objects of nature with complete harmony. They have to realize the mysteries of nature. The playwright recreates the mystical world of nature with the help of some touching images:

Dusk has fallen, the crimson sun / has set behind the hills. (ibidem 106)

Or

Look, manifesting as the history of many eons,
the peace of many ages, / the hilltops are standing. (ibidem)

Or

Night dew has turned into tears / of bamboos and trees...(ibidem)

An understanding of this mystical world of nature would make human beings feel an empathy towards nature, inspire them to live life in a perfectly ecological way by letting “the dwellers of hills and valley co-exist.” (ibidem 107). This ecomystical fervour is dominant throughout this play. The play may also be studied from an ecofeminist standpoint. Throughout the play women and the environment have been treated synonymously. They both are the innocent victims of terrorism and war waged by the patriarchal society all around the globe. In order to recreate a world of peace and harmony nature as well as women, are to be restored. And 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. This is also suggestive of human civilization's journey towards

nature to restore an ecological equilibrium. Another major Manipuri playwright is G.C. Tongbra who tries to expose the anomalous condition in the society and envisions a better life through his plays. He, as a playwright, believes that to sustain life is the fundamental question of human beings and challenges the issues of morality, law or justice as impediments to the life of the exploited class of the society. C. Tongbra's *Taj Mahal* (1972), said to be his masterpiece, revolves round the lives of some downtrodden people. Kebal a blind beggar, Ranimata, his daughter, Yadav, a hotel boy and Rajmohan, a bus handyman--- all are slum-dwellers. All of them have dreams in their eyes of living a dignified life like human beings in the true sense, but they cannot afford to live such a life. Both Yadav and Rajmohan have fascinations for Ranimata and they disclose this time and again. Rajmohan is a thief who, getting a chance, snatches valuables from rich people. Chitragupta, an artist with somewhat a peculiar temperament lives in a Kala Mandal. He dreams of breaking the Taj Mahal into small portions and hopes to distribute those portions to the poor people who are homeless. Rajmohan and Ranimata go to him and request him to make them Shahjahan and Mumtaz with the help of his artistic power, even for few moments. Rajmohan murders Sanarei, a rich woman and loots all her valuable possessions and gives these to Ranimata. In the Kala Mandal while Rajmohan and Ranimata are playing Shahjahan and Mumtaz and thus feeling the taste of a royal, majestic life, police comes and arrests Rajmohan for the crime he had committed. Eventually, Yadav takes charge of Ranimata at the request of Rajmohan who is to be hanged. Rajmohan says that Shahjahan inherited immense riches from his forefathers, who were emperors of a vast and rich empire. Likewise, ordinary people like them inherit poverty, grief, struggle, hunger, etc. Shahjahan, being an inheritor of immense riches could build the Taj Mahal. But they cannot afford to build a monument like the Taj even if they want to. But it is significant that the Taj Mahal was, in the real sense, built by the blood and sacrifice of the labourers, the forefathers of the ordinary people like them. Yadav and Ranimata build two pillars in front of the Temple of Art in the memory of Rajmohan. They also make a bell hanging between the pillars that reminds of the hanging body of Rajmohan.

Ecofeministic ideas can be marked in the play. Ranimata, one of the female characters is the prototype of the socially downtrodden class of women; she is a slum-dweller, a beggar who is utterly dissatisfied with her present condition of life: "The creator of this world must be surely an evil-hearted, prejudiced character." (Tongbra 2000: 41). She is in love with Rajmohan, a vagabond, and aspires to live a prosperous life even momentarily as she believes that she and her fiancé have the right to dream as they are also human beings: "....We both destitutes are still human beings." (ibidem 53). But after Rajmohan is pronounced death sentence by the court of law, it is Yadav who takes charge of Ranimata. She does not have a choice of her own. It is as if mandatory for her to take a support from a male as she is insecure being a woman. She is a daughter of someone (Kebal's), a beloved of someone (Rajmohan's) and a wife of

someone (Yadav's), but she does not have an identity of her own. This silencing of the voice of Ranimata by the social set up, which is essentially patriarchal, is, in a sense, the silencing of the voice of the women folk as well as of nature. The play has a reference also to Rajmohan's mother by Rajmohan himself: "I did not recognize my mother,....I had many fathers." (ibidem 54). This is also very much expressive of ecofeministic fervour.

Bus stop is a play written by another important playwright of Manipur Athokpam Tomchau. The play begins with a woman waiting for a bus. A woman is waiting for a bus to go to the city. Her dramatist husband is busy writing a play without paying any attention to her. They don't have a cordial relationship between them and she decides to part with him and leaves for the bus-stop. A traveller appears in the bus-stop and they go on talking on various topics in order to pass the time. Their conversation is a commentary on the modern way of living – a selfish, monotonous and a meaningless kind of life. A gentleman comes to the bus-stop and he is killed by a man just before their eyes. But neither the woman nor the traveller wants to engage themselves in a problematic situation and do not help the dying person. Instead, they bet on whether the person is dead or alive. But just for a moment the woman is awakened by her 'feminine' qualities and wants to help the person. But again she becomes selfish reflecting herself as a typical modern human being. They all leave the dying person without extending any help. The husband, who is a dramatist, who speaks of the downtrodden in his plays, also does not want to show his responsibility as a human being and leaves the helpless person. The dying person knows he is going to die but is uncertain of himself. He wants to die. The play portrays the modern predicament that is full of cut-throat policies, meaningless rat races, rampant corruption in all levels and so on. These have been creating confusion all around and not only human beings, but the entire ecosystem also is disturbed:

I have come from that place / Tension is very high there,
There is a drama of skeletal phantoms
In the river of blood (Tomchau 2000 : 72)

The ecological crisis posed by the changing values in the name of modernization is well depicted:

It is the end of the earth, the end; There is
war between the progenies of Darwin, the
situation is worsened! It is terrible! What
Shall we do now if the flames of war engulf us? (ibidem 72)

A note of ecomysticism is heard when living peacefully together with environment is emphasized in the play:

....Light up the pine torches, pick up the fallen
grains one flesh of lightening and you'll see
stray coins on the flour. This mud house might
fall when it so desires. But do not stop decorating
the same, with new ornaments. (ibidem 73)

The play reiterates the need to develop a new environment ethics that

can restore peace and harmony:

The condition of your environment has
charmed you, it protects, promotes, threatens
And destroy; / Taking a stand within the silent zone of
Your heart just stands forth with a plan. (ibidem 76)

The woman in the play feels sympathy for the dying man even for a moment. It is suggestive of the 'feminine tenderness' both in women and in nature because both of them sustain life on earth. This can be interpreted in ecofeministic terms.

Leipaklei (A Tender Earth – Flower, 1988) is another notable Manipuri play written by Arambam Somorendra (1935–), a notable playwright of the post-War era, who attacks the hollow pretensions of the middle class and envisages a better society where human beings can live an unburdened life. *Leipaklei* is the story of a helpless destitute woman called Leipaklei. She has been in intense love with Ibotomba, but under some untoward circumstances she has to marry Chandrababu, who has gone to Macockchung to live with another woman abandoning Leipaklei. Leipaklei with her little girl has to live a life of misery and hardship. Thoiba, a rich but amorous contractor visits Leipaklei every now and then and proposes her to marry him which she strongly refuses all the time. She only thinks about Ibotomba, her only and real love. Finally, Ibotomba arrives all of a sudden, after being a prisoner of war for many years and Leipaklei gets a new meaning of life. Being a woman, Leipaklei is treated by the male-dominated society just as an object-----an object to be exploited, enjoyed and used for one's own interest without giving her an option of her own. Leipaklei is doubly burdened as she is a woman and also a poor woman. Above all, her loneliness as a poor woman makes her a soft target of the male gaze. The helplessness of such wretched women find expression while Leipaklei says: "I am a woman and cannot challenge you. I live a very poor life." (Somorendra 2000:91). Ecofeministic ideas may be seen in the objectifying of women as an entity who does not have a meaning without a man: "You cannot live alone, mind you. Women are meant for men." (ibidem 90), or "A woman belongs to a man." (ibidem 107). Exploitation, domination, poverty are some of the major problems faced by women in any society. The patriarchal social set up has methodically placed women at the periphery. They have been reduced to such a condition where they are even unable to voice their sentiments. The pathetic condition of the dominated section finds expression in the following lines uttered by Leipaklei: "It is such a difficulty to stay with this small child alone. It is such a poor life. There is no other help except my own personal effort. In the meantime, men do not leave me in peace because I am a woman. I have suffered greatly under their hungry looks. I could not show my mettle as I live alone in poverty..." (ibidem 105)

Myriad views of ecology have also been presented through this play. The description of the natural objects is also a description of the ecology of the region: "... The fields are all green, ... look at the colour of the sky, the patches of white clouds, are not they beautiful? The air is also so fresh,..."

(ibidem 97). Nature has an important role in moulding human behaviour. It is because of the age-old relationship between human beings and nature. This notion of the human- nature bond has also an echo in the play: "... with the beautiful aspect of nature in front of them I thought all people would seem good." (ibidem 97). The mysterious aspect of nature has also been presented: "Nature also has different aspects ..." (ibidem 97). Ecofeminist and ecomystical ideas are thus artistically expressed in the play.

A Soul, Still Wishing to Stay Alive is another play from Manipur written by Wairokpam Kamni Singh (1948-), who is concerned about the loss of human values in the modern society. The play revolves around the dead body of a young boy who naturally had hopes and aspirations in life. His mother breaks down at the untimely death of her son, vultures are gathered near the body to have their own share of it. Bones and skeletons, the lamenting voices---- all are personified and presented symbolically. Even the soul of the dead boy that still wishes to stay alive, has a symbolic presence. The play is a commentary on the contemporary time where the age-old human values have been degenerated, where human beings become hostile to one another. Every individual is as if in a war with him/herself, with another individual, or with nature as a whole: "Man hunted man like a beast of prey, and he who still wants to stay alive, met his end at the hands of a hunter." (Singh 2005:46). The blood- thirsty nature of human beings in this degenerated modern times can also be marked from such images like:

The droplets of blood sticking on the bones,
let's suck even those completely,
let's suck those completely dry. (ibidem 51)

Human beings are mechanized. They become so insensitive that even death of a fellow human being cannot arouse pity in them. Their only concern is to get a "profit from the dead." (ibidem 46). In such an insensitive, mechanized society women have to suffer more. The desolate condition of women in modern times is echoed in the following lines:

My own mother, / survives alone, a true widow.
Whenever anyone among you hungers for fresh human flesh,
don't divide her, don't devour her. / She has no one to call her own,
She lives, because she's born human. (ibidem 49)

Because of her wretched condition and the treatment meted out to her, the mother here can also be synonymous to Mother Nature. Hanuba, the old vulture says that it was born a human, then turned into a dog, and then, in present times, turned into a vulture. This metamorphosis has great symbolic significance suggesting the degeneration of life of that entity who is dissatisfied of its present living: "born a human, I am no longer content to live." (ibidem 56)

Echoes of ecomysticism are recurrently heard in this play. There are suggestions that in order to make an end to this overall degeneration in modern living, and to revive the good old days of the past, going back to nature as a solace is a must. Human beings can peacefully survive on this earth only by identifying themselves with nature: "Let my soul enter the

immobile trees and the bamboo, grass and reeds.”(ibidem 59). Human beings must feel empathy for nature and consider nature as a part of their selves:

As we, the living beings suffer,
the immobile trees and bamboo, grass and reeds also have
limitless miseries. / Only when you are born as one of them,
will you come to know their suffering and discontents.

Will you be able to feel their sufferings and discontents. (ibidem 60)

Nature is not a passive object only to be explored, exploited and consumed for the benefit of human beings. Instead, nature is a dynamic entity and is to be revered, preserved and taken care of: “All the living beings in this world, whether mobile or immobile, have to accept the inescapable duty of life. It's the law of nature.” (ibidem 60). Such ecomystical ideas embodied in the play enshrine Deep, Shallow as well as spiritual ecology.

Ganesh Gogoi (1907-1937) was an eminent Assamese poet and playwright. His *Sakunir Protisodh* (Revenge of Shakuni) is a remarkable play in the history of Assamese drama for its theatrical consciousness as well as unique treatment of the subject matter. Its story is taken from the *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic and its protagonist is Shakuni, the maternal uncle of the 'Kauravas'. Shakuni has been instigating the 'Kauravas' against the 'Pandavas', their cousins. It is he, who, in a treacherous way, aided the 'Kauravas' to defeat the 'Pandavas' in the great game of chess that eventually led to the battle of Kurukshetra. But Shakuni had a specific purpose. In reality, he wanted the defeat of the 'Kauravas' as he had a great revenge to take against them. Shakuni, along with his father and his ninety nine elder brothers were once put to prison by Dhritarashtra. His father along with his ninety nine brothers starved themselves by feeding Shakuni with their share of food. They wanted Shakuni to survive so that he could avenge the injustice showed to them by Dhritarashtra. So Shakuni took the revenge by letting the 'Kauravas' defeated and killed by the 'Pandavas' in the battle of Kurukshetra. *Revenge of Shakuni* ends with the death of Shakuni who dies a happy and a fulfilled man. The play can be studied from ecofeministic ideologies. As the story is taken from the *Mahabharata*, it is interesting to note that recent concept of ecofeminism dates back even to the age of the epics. Ecofeminism believes that nature as woman/mother has been exploited and treated as a passive object by the patriarchal society. The ecofeminists are of the opinion that the notion of womanhood is a social construct and women have been without a 'space' in all ages of human history. A close study of the play *Revenge of Shakuni* opens up many such issues that strengthen this claim of the ecofeminists.

In the play there are three female characters viz. Gandhari, queen of Hastinapur and wife of King Dhritarashtra, Padmaa, wife of Karna and Draupadi, wife of the 'Pandavas'. That they are marginalized in many occasions can be seen even in the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi had married to the five brothers of the 'Pandavas' where her consent was never asked for; but she was a wise lady who surely had a say of her own. The wisdom

of Draupadi can be marked in one occasion in the play where she is counseling and encouraging a dejected Arjuna with her wise words: "This accidental defeat can't demoralize our force. It rightly prevails; if the judgement of right and wrong is the prevailing order, then the greedy Duryodhana will definitely meet with a faithful end." (Gogoi 2006 : 134) Like Draupadi, Padmaa, wife of Karna, the illegitimate elder brother of the 'Pandavas' and the great general of the 'Kauravas' has been silenced and kept in the periphery, far from the centre of action. But she was also an intelligent lady whose opinions and observations could have mattered a lot during the whole course of action in the battle of Kurukshetra. She is a mute spectator of events and is presented with just one identity, the identity of being the wife of Karna: "You're my husband, my best guru and my lord supreme." (ibidem 115). This is reflective of the concept of womanhood as constructed by the traditional patriarchy. Her 'feminine' quality also comes out when she comes to know how Kunti, Karna's mother abandoned Karna immediately after his birth: "Oh God! How cruel a mother can be to sacrifice motherhood for femininity -" (ibidem 117). But it is the women who suffer the most. Their sensitivity aggravates their sufferings. Anything happened in the world of nature might be a premonition of any happening in the world of human beings, and, significantly, this could even be perceived by a woman. During the battle of Kurukshetra, Draupadi has a mental disturbance and this trauma has been expressed with the help of images from the world of nature:

Why do I feel something ominous?
My heart is trembling /Why is the melody doleful?
Why is melancholy echoing all around?
Why is the air heavy with / a strange, doleful tune?
The autumn dew / that sits on plantain leaves
Instead of glinting --- why do they appear as tears? (ibidem 134)

Gandhari, mother of the 'Pandavas' has also been going through such mental traumas. Being a woman and a mother she sustains life, but becomes mentally devastated after loosing her sons in the battle. It is Gandhari the mother who has a wise counseling to Duryodhana, her elder son to stop the war, to live together with the 'Pandavas' peacefully: "Then stop this fight. I lost everything. Now I'm left with you and Dushasana only. Arrest further misfortunes befalling the race. Stop this war son; stop this." (ibidem 122)

She is voicing here the sentiments of a woman as well as a mother. But she is never listened to with serious attention neither by her husband Dhritarashtra nor by her son Duryodhana, the representatives of the patriarchy. But it is she who suffers the most: "... The agony of a bereaved mother is beyond words to make you feel what it is. I groomed one hundred lads in mirth and merriment. I am in bereavement of ninety-eight of them at their prime. They filled my heart with joy, which is now deserting it. How much more I have to bear?" (ibidem 123). Gandhari is sad, frustrated and upset. Her mental agony is externalized when, in a course of discussion, she says to her husband: "Who can stand

unperturbed at the untimely sad demise of my hundred sons except the two? To that stonehearted father what penalty can a lady inflict, Maharaja?" (ibidem). This may be seen as a voice of protest against male arrogance or domination.

Arun Sarma (1931-) is one of the major Assamese playwrights of the post-Independence era who has a distinct voice as a dramatist in the scenario of Indian theatre. His famous plays like *Ahar*, *Nibaran Bhattacharya* and *The Wolf Boy* have been translated into many Indian languages and they have been included in the volume of hundred best Indian plays compiled by Sahitya Akademi. His *The Wolf Boy* is a typical modern play presenting doubts, conflicts and contradictions in the backdrop of a complex set up. Prof. Ashok Choudhary, a genetic scientist goes to Ramsang forest in search of an endangered tribe known as the 'Wolf Men', a human species that has acquired some of the wolf-like qualities because of its long-term association with the wolves. Prof. Choudhary recovers a child of that species whose parents have been killed by the wolves and brings it along with him. He christens this child as Romu and brings it up with utmost care and love like his own daughter Reema. Romu, at the beginning, behaves like an animal in his manner of talking, eating and other day-to-day behaviour but gradually adopts human nature owing to Prof. Choudhary's and Reem's continuous effort. Professor gets Romu admitted into a very prestigious school along with Reema but has to withdraw him because of public pressure. As people consider Romu as 'non-human' and make it a prestige issue in sending their wards to the same school in which Romu also studies. Prof. Choudhary offers Romu education himself in their home itself, and in due course of time, Romu becomes a great genetic scientist himself. Dilip, son of Nripati Baruah, a politician and a friend of Prof. Choudhary, is an M. Sc. who assists Romu in a research project as per the advice of Prof. Choudhary. Romu develops a fascination for Reema but her marriage is finally fixed with Dilip. The research project becomes successful that discovers newer things in genetic science only because of Romu's hard work. But Nripati Baruah, by dint of his political power, arranges a prestigious award for his son Dilip for this discovery completely depriving Romu of any recognition. Citing 'technical reasons' for not considering Ramu's name for the award, Mr. Baruah speaks of Romu's 'non-human' origin, his lack of a formal education, etc. He also arranges a scholarship for Dilip for pursuing higher studies in the USA. Prof. Choudhary also feels helpless but does not say anything considering the future of his daughter. Thus all of them snatch from Romu the things he actually deserves showing that they are 'wolf men' in the real sense. Finally, Romu takes out a piece of stone, the very piece of stone he had taken with him when he came to this house for the first time. He says that the piece of stone is his very identity that keeps on reminding him of his background and tradition.

The play envisages a human – animal association. The possibilities in such interactions have been explored. Romu, the representative of the

species called the 'Wolf Men' has acquired wolf-like qualities because of his long term association with the wolves in the jungle. That same Romu, after his stay in the human world adopts human behaviour again. This is suggestive of the various interactions between the human world and the world of nature. The 'place' of nature and the 'nature' of place interacts in this situation when wilderness is accommodated in the human world. It surely calls for a new ethic that has a larger 'space'. But the doubts, conflicts and reluctance of the human world to accommodate the wilderness at the very centre can be seen in many occasions during the course of the play. People complain Prof. Ashok Choudhary against enrolling Romu in the same school where their 'human' children are also admitted:

But Ashok, a lot of letters have been received by the Principal of Great Heart School, and a number of people have also complained verbally that they object to this boy being allowed to study with their children. That is the issue raised by the respectable guardians of the town. So it would be best if the boy is taken out of the school...." (Sarma 2005:76)

That Romu has been treated as the 'other' is seen in other such occasions. He deeply loves Reema but it is Dilip, the 'human' who gets her, he discovers revolutionary things in the field of genetic science, but again it is Dilip, the 'human' who gets the award and a scholarship. Romu's taking out of that piece of stone which he brought with him from the jungle, is significant. It may be a token of his protest against the so called human world or may be assertion of an identity.

Ecocritical principles may be adopted in studying the play. It expresses the agony of the rootless people. They have been displaced, in many cases, for the interest of the powerful section of the society. But there is little chance of their rehabilitation. They are marginalized and their voice remains unheard. At the end of the play there is a note by the author that speaks of these things. It says,

In the central theme of this play, the wolf boy represents the plight of minority communities. When an uprooted community also happens to be a minority, its very existence suffers from grave disadvantages. A community may get severed from its roots because of natural calamities, or man-made political and economic crisis. History has established a sad fact about displaced people: their rehabilitation is a difficult process... This play is about the deprivations of rootless people and more." (ibidem 114). "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).

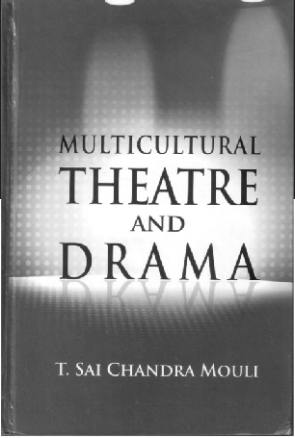
The matrix of ecology, ecofeminism and ecomysticism in the plays from northeast India is very much apparent. The ecological world in the plays of this region is enriched with exploration through ecology enacting the

very idea of ecomysticism, the idea of living together peacefully and maintaining a balance in the entire ecosystem.

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