

2

Postcolonial Ecological Writing: The Trajectory in India's Northeast

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ABSTRACT

India's Northeast being a biodiversity hotspot has been famous for its natural glory from time immemorial. But the colonial regime distorted its glory. As such during both the colonial and postcolonial times there have been several forms of resistance to the colonial forces to safeguard the erosion of the biodiversity and such resistance has been reflected in the literatures of the region. Nature has a significant place in Indian traditional values. It has been worshipped and revered since time immemorial. Basic Indian ethos propagates the idea that human beings and nature share a bond of mutual understanding, respect and inter-dependence. The Indian scriptures speak of preservation of environment and thus to maintain the ecological balance. Then the British came and the age-old values regarding nature and its sanctity were shaken of which the colonised people had to be mute spectators. They were the 'other' compelled to live in the periphery and whose voice was obviously unheard. They began to suffer due to the ecological imbalance. Population growth, environmental pollution and resource depletion have started to pose great threats.

Postcolonial ecological writing in English from India's Northeast constitutes an important discourse. Many of the writers deal with the issues how nature was destroyed, how traditional values became dilapidated, how ecology of this pristine region was degenerated during the colonial period. This corpus of writing having serious ecological concerns, can be seen as essentially a postcolonial discourse. It presents a critique of the colonial perspective of, and the colonial attitude towards, the environment. This body of ecological writing can be said canonical because of its strong

consciousness and deliberate efforts to undo ecological imbalance and propagate ecological preservation in writing.

Keywords: postcolonial ecological writing, India Northeast, Nature, Indian tradition, the colonial gaze, resistance, assertion, canonical

Postcolonial ecological writing is a resistance against the colonial gaze on nature and the rampant destruction of the natural world. Under the mask of development and progress, there was the terrible face of the colonial agenda of exploring and exploiting nature and thereby degenerating it. All the colonies, including India, have a long history of this experience. Postcolonial ecological writing also tries to theorise the ecological and postcolonial concerns in order to address the issues of ecocide derived from the current contexts of the marginalisation of Nature, waste colonialism, environmental racism, discriminatory intellectual property rights, ecocidal globalising scientific technology and the absence of Nature as a category in the theorising of postcolonialism (Nayar 1999: 71). The Northeast part of India being a biodiversity hotspot has been famous for its natural glory from time immemorial. This land of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya is a real manifestation of the eternal Nature. But the colonial regime distorted its glory. As such during both the colonial and postcolonial times there have been several forms of resistance to the colonial forces to safeguard the erosion of the biodiversity and such resistance has been reflected in the literatures of the region.

Nature has a significant place in Indian traditional values. It has been worshipped and revered since time immemorial. Basic Indian ethos teaches to be compassionate to nature and to be in complete harmony with it. It propagates the idea that human beings and nature share a bond of mutual understanding, respect and inter-dependence. The Indian scriptures written thousands of years ago speak of the preservation of nature, environment and the entire ecosystem. The Indian scriptures, which are said to be the repositories of Indian philosophy, speak

of preservation of environment and thus to maintain the ecological balance. The Hindu scriptures, such as the *Vedas*, the *Upanishadas* and the *Puranas* are abundant with hymns glorifying and worshipping and the environment. The ecological concern found in these scriptures written thousands of years ago testify the traditional Indian attitude towards environment. Ecological consciousness can be marked in the following hymn from the *Yajurveda*, one of the four *Vedas*:

*dwou santih, antariksa santih,
prithvi santih, apah santih,
ausadhaya santih, vanaspatayah santih,
viswadeva santih, brahma santih,
sarva santih, santih eva santih,
sa ma santih edhi.*

(Sarma & Rama 1965: 37.17)

This means:

let there be peace in the sky,
peace in the space,
peace on earth,
peace in the water,
peace in the herbal forest,
peace in the world of vegetation,
peace in every creature in Nature,
peace among all gods,
peace in the whole universe,
and then only I can expect peace in me.

(Tr. Debashis Baruah).

The 'I' in the last line stands for all human beings. The importance of the ecological chain of being that says that everyone is dependent on everyone else in the entire ecosystem is beautifully depicted in this hymn. This concern for environment and the ecological awareness in these ancient literatures are amazing that reflect the Indian consciousness towards environment conservation. In the *Rigveda*, the earliest of the four *Vedas*, there are a number of beautiful hymns dealing

with environment and the need to protect with all its purity. One of the hymns in the *Rigveda* says:

*madhu vata ritayate,
madhu ksaranti sindhavah,
madhvirna santoosadhi,
madhu naktumutosaso,
madhumat parthivam razah,
madhu daurastu na pitah,
madhumanoo vanaspatih,
madhumanastu suryah,
madhvirgabo vavantoona.*

(Sarma & Rama 1962: 55)

This means:

sweet do the winds become for the one who abides by the moral law,
sweet do the streams for that one,
sweet do the herbs,
sweet be the night and the dawn,
sweet be the earth and the heaven,
our father, the sylvan god be sweet on us,
sweet be the Sun,
and sweet may our kins become.

(Tr. Debashis Baruah).

This is a holistic view of the universe as well as the entire ecosystem that reflects the traditional Indian values, concept and awareness for the environment and the ecology.

It is quite interesting to note that an animal or a bird or any such object from the world of nature is attached to almost all the Hindu deities: a bull and a snake with Lord Shiva, a rat with Lord Ganesha, a peacock with Lord Kartika, a tiger with goddess Durga and so on. This is very much significant of people's traditional reverence for the animistic world. This reverence for nature is also reflected in people's worship of the natural objects like the Sun, trees, rocks, rivers, fire and many animals. People worshipped those forces and natural agencies from which they were benefited by getting energy and life force. It was

reciprocity, a way of showing gratitude to the benevolent nature. This is the very concept of Deep Ecology and this has been practised with all sanctity and sincerity in Indian society since time immemorial.

Then the British came and there started a new history in India. The colonial gaze of profit and prosperity has started exploiting nature. In the name of progress and development, nature was made to degenerate to the deepest extent. The age-old values regarding nature and its sanctity were shaken of which the colonised people had to be mute spectators. They were the 'other' compelled to live in the periphery and whose voice was obviously unheard.

People gradually started sensing the loss of nature as an aftermath of colonialism. They began to suffer due to the ecological imbalance. Population growth, environmental pollution and resource depletion have posed great threats to human civilisation. To cope with the changing scenario in the environment, people started undertaking various projects like plantation, resource management etc. This is what basically Shallow Ecology is all about. It is predominantly a postcolonial concept.

Postcolonial ecological writing in English from India's Northeast constitutes an important discourse. Many of the writers deal with the issues how nature was destroyed, how traditional values became dilapidated, how ecology of this pristine region was degenerated during the colonial period. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* can be said to be one of the representative postcolonial ecological writings. Arunachal Pradesh is one of the twenty-five biodiversity hotspots of the world where there are twenty-six tribes with one hundred and ten sub-clans with rich culture and tradition, various species of flora and fauna, rivers, hills, forests and valleys. "Isolation has so far been the best protection for the pristine ecology of Arunachal. But Mamang, through the nineteen chapters of the book upholds

how the myriad shapes of pristine ecology and changes during the colonial period and the tribes' life reflect both the cosmic and toxic consciousness. The animistic faith of the people here and their co-existence with the forest ecology and natural world depict the matrix of many mysteries." (Das 2011: 163). Dai's novel is an account of the 'virginity' of the land in the pre-colonial era and also its erosion during the colonial regime. There is a conscious exploration through the tribal myths and legends, rites and rituals in order to restore the traditional values. The revival of tradition only, as the novel consciously tries to project, can help in retaining an identity. It may also help in developing an ethic that inspires and teaches to live ecologically.

Desmond L Kharmawphlang, the poet from Meghalaya echoes the sentiment of the coloniser in one of his poems entitled "The Conquest":

I never get tired of talking about my
home town.
in summer the sky is pregnant,
swollen with unborn rain.
later came the British
with gifts of bullets, blood-money
and religion.
A steady conquest to the sound of
guns began.

Quite suddenly, the British left.
There was peace, the sweet
smell of wet leaves again.

(Kharmawphlang 2003: 134).

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's novel also portrays the doubts and conflicts of the local people with regard to the colonial rule. In his novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency*, the conversation between two characters has a hint on the Janus-faced colonialism:

But don't you see how Christianity and education have widened our outlook, released us from the bondage of a superstitious and parochial existence?" Khating asked impatiently. "Thank god for Reverend Pettigrew and Dr Brock. They opened schools and churches in the villages and gave us new ideas, and the benefits of modern medicines and machines. The government has set up a modern administration, built roads, ended things like head-hunting. Are these not the very things that we wanted? We want builders, not destroyers and cranks.

"Pettigrew!" Ngazek barked out. "He comes here and makes us all cowards. You call his work, work? Because of your ideas people will no longer remain real Nagas. To be modern means aping your masters. Puny white men. Puny black men. Mental slaves. You see the sahibs laugh at you when you ape them. They don't consider you their equals. Are you not ashamed of it?"

(Bhattacharyya 2005: 36).

Arup Kumar Dutta's seminal book on the 'Brahmaputra Ecology' can also be studied from a postcolonial standpoint. There are many places in the book where postcolonial ecological writing has strong presence. It is a historical as well an anatomical study of the river Brahmaputra. It studies the politics, economics, tradition and culture cantering the river. The impact of colonialism on the river and thus on the entire ecosystem cantering it is observed:

The natural vegetation of the basin is as diverse as the terrain, changing from alpine meadows and steppes of the Tibetan ranges to the tropical evergreen, mixed deciduous forests and tropical savanna of tall reeds and grasses of the plains. Within the century, due to increased colonisation and consequent man-induced changes such as deforestation as well as denudation of hillsides for shifting-cultivation, the natural vegetation of the region has suffered a sea-change for the worse. Both in Arunachal and Assam the once dense tropical forests have been woefully depleted due to wanton felling of trees. Though experts differ on the extent of depredation caused by exploitation by man, his contribution towards ecological imbalances leading to climatic aberrations cannot be denied.

(Dutta 2005: 82-83).

These writers are writing with a consciousness. Their works present before us a myriad, mesmerising world of nature, and, at the same time, echo a conscious voice of resistance and assertion. Contemporary writing in English from India's Northeast negotiates varied issues simultaneously. It has to fight against the very notion of 'Northeast', a stereotypical construct, has to assert an identity, and has to create a 'space' and a 'place' for itself amidst political and cultural hegemony. It is quite interesting to note that the ecology of the region is one of their strongest weapons for all such negotiations. The writings in English from this region, having serious ecological concerns, can be seen as essentially a postcolonial discourse. It presents a critique of the colonial perspective of, and the colonial attitude towards, the environment. This body of ecological writing can be said canonical because of its strong consciousness and deliberate efforts to undo ecological imbalance and propagate ecological preservation in writing. It is important to note here that Sally Morgan says in *My Place* (1987), as referred to by Elleke Boehmer, "The trouble is that colonialism isn't over yet." (Boehmer 2005: 246). And here at this point the importance of contemporary writing in English from India's Northeast as a postcolonial discourse lies. It can be studied as a literature of resistance against this neo-colonialism.

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