
MYTHS, FOLKLORE, AND ECOLOGY IN NORTHEAST ENGLISH POETRY

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Abstract: Myths, folklore, and ecological celebrations have long been deeply ingrained in the culture and life of Northeast people. The northeast people had a long tradition of oral literature, mythic stories and a deep connection with the pastoral nature. But people of this region seem to be losing their way amidst postcolonial modernity, cultural colonization and social stratification. Many of the Northeast poets have felt the exigencies of their indigenous socio-cultural values and draw their poetry on the values of their traditional folk-myths and ecology. In their poetry, we can sense a common bond of sensibility like a love for their land, folklores, myths and oral traditions which vividly manifest a growing crisis of their roots. Writers like Temsula Ao, Yamlan Tana, Robin N. Ngongom, Easterine Iralu and many more produce a canonical body of poetry that constantly echoes a deep pathos about the local myths, folklore and ecology. The present paper attempts to explore and appreciate the Northeast traditions of folklore, myths and ecology manifested in the poetry of the Northeast writers and then, to highlight the concerns of the poets for local socio-cultural values of the Northeast folks.

Keywords: Myths, Folklore and Ecology, nature, Northeast poetry

Objectives

The objectives of the present essay are:

- To explore and appreciate the traditions of folklore and myths manifested in Northeast poetry in English.
- To highlight the aesthetic values of the inbuilt human-nature bond in the northeast region
- To examine and uphold the concerns of the northeast poets for the degradation of their indigenous culture along with the ecology.
- To probe into the common thematic concerns of the representative poets and then, examine them as part of their resistance to the destructive modernity.

Methodology:

Instead of selecting representative poets from the different states of the Northeast region, my paper finds it useful to discuss the major thematic strands that characterize their major concerns. A good number of poems from various anthologies and books and journals have been taken for critical analysis. They are examined closely with references to the concerns of the poets. Some other primary sources like interviews and notes of the poets have been considered in the context of the arguments of the essay. Secondary sources- journal articles, news articles, critical books, and published thesis have been consulted to substantiate the arguments.

The methodology is exclusively qualitative with an interpretive trope that largely lies on critical observation and interpretive analysis.

Introduction:

When a scholar from outside Northeast states reads or writes about the Northeast people and their land, it always reminds him/her of a terribly disturbed image of violence, insurgency, political and ethnic factionalism. Sometimes, the Northeast region has been unrealistically stereotyped in the intellectual climate of mainland India as something inaccessible, mysterious and more radically the people as outsiders. And this disturbing image of the Northeast overshadows the other image that the Northeast is rich with its ecological diversity, an inbuilt mythical connection between the human and nature, and its tradition of oral culture, mythic narratives, myths, mysteries, and mysticism. The geo-political disturbances negatively affect this rich culture and their ecology disrupting the basic tenets of life movements. It was during the 2000s that the poets felt the need to represent the other images of the Northeast to the world-the portrait of their rich cultural heritage, intertwining myths and captivating folklore and the inbuilt relationship between the people and their ecological surroundings. The poets heavily draw their poetry on these concerns revitalizing the cultural significance of their myths, folklore, and ecology. Writers like Robin S Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Temsula Ao, Mamong Dai, Pradip Kumar Patra, Ananya Goha, and Saratchand Thiyam delved deeper into the concerns of cultural devaluation, ecological destruction and ethnic marginalization with repletion of the stereotyped representations of blood, violence, death, and displacement.

Poets writing in English depict the tradition of myths, mysteries and mythic human-nature relationship and expose the realities of socio-cultural devaluation inflicted on the land and ecology amid the twentieth century. Professor Nigamananda Das writes that the Northeast poetry in English discloses “the myths, mysteries and visionary gleams of the passionate neo-romantics, who amidst the realities of late twentieth-century aesthetic indeterminacies...with deep nostalgia to remind the youth of days of innocence and experience, and the mystical blue hills...describing the brave onslaught of legendary Naga heroes on their alien invaders and the unique Utopian vision of the Nagas” (Das 09). In her review of Northeast-poetry anthology, Anamika comments that it is the Northeast poetry that discloses to us the real picture of the lesser-known region of India. Poetry “does drive this point home to us that neither newspaper nor the emporia-approach to cultural studies leads us anywhere. Poetry is the most reliable of all guides who could lead us deep into the hinterlands and the inscapes of the lesser known regions” (191). Mamang Dai echoes a similar tone for this concern:

...we realise the need to identify ourselves again as belonging to a particular place, a community; and some signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as members of a particular community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we reposed belief in the 'word' as composed in our myths and legends. In the world of our ancestors this was the art of the storyteller, the medicine man, the orator, the priest. Everyone knows the stories, in one form or another; and it is this knowledge that links the individual to a group. Perhaps this is why if you asked someone to tell you a story they

would say there was nothing to tell, because now the stories are inseparable from the routine of daily life, the customary practices of a community... They are not even perceived as stories anymore but as beliefs determining a way of life (Mamang Dai 2)

This is how the poets of the Northeast feels for the myths and folk culture of their land and people.

Discussion:

The Northeast is best known for its incredible natural beauty, ecological diversity, bucolic inhabitants and unique traditions. But the Northeast witnesses their value systems drastically transformed into something where the tradition of storytelling, their mythic narratives, heroes, and villages life were losing their meaning. The transformation of the mystical pastoral land into an artificial sophisticated modernistic society happens to take place with the cost of the tradition of their myths, folk culture and their habitat ecology. A nostalgic tone of the beautiful past mixed with myths and mysteries frequently echoes in many of the anthologies of Northeast poetry. In the editorial note of the Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast, Robin S. Ngangom outlines the memories of their past that frequently echo in many of their poems. In a review of the anthology, Anamika comments,

Poets in this anthology all draw from the same mythology, the same folk-motifs, the same moral geography where the same gods and ghosts, animals and birds, almost the same flora or fauna (even the tiniest insect) live together in a strange amity - under the same roof as if - fighting and cursing similar oppressions, angst and calamities (192)

Robin S. Ngangom himself a renowned poet from Manipur has written many poems in English and portrayed the glorious past of his childhood and comments that his Manipur is not now that sacred land as before. In his essay "Poetry in the Time of Terror", Robin S. Ngangom comments, "naturally, the Manipur that I ritually go back to every year is not the sacred world of my childhood, because",

Childhood took place
free from manly fears
when I had only my mother's love
to protect me from knives,
from fire, and death by water.
I wore it like an amulet.
Childhood took place
among fairies and weretiger
(A Libran Horoscope)

The poet does not find those days of childhood full of fairies and mysteries anymore. And he has a suspicion that the people still remember those days of peace in their pastoral land.

I ceased thinking
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmothers' tales
of many winter hearths at the hour

of sleeping death, I didn't want to know,
 if they ever learnt the magic of letters.
 And the women heavy with seed,
 their soft bodies mown down
 like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
 ("Native Land")

His poetry turns out to be a strong voice of those beautiful days and the present dystopian society by presenting a contrasting picture. Robin also realizes that the present region is left with little of their tradition and the left-over has been contaminated, deformed and distorted with the predicament of modernization.

The uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the Westernized, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant materialism, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament, make the picturesque Northeast especially vulnerable to tragedy (Poetry in the Time of Terror 171)

Robin has felt that the poets of the Northeast should uphold their traditions to keep them alive through generations. The poet writes, "What is tradition and our history/ but death with a long memory?/ For how long will we make/our forefathers walk as ghosts?/When we conceal tradition/ as if it were an old man's wrinkles,/ or a syphilitic scar/ we will forsake the values we cherished/ courage, fidelity, openness" ("The Book of Grievances"). Robin S. Ngangom's poetry has become a significant representation of the literary traditions and contemporary voices from Northeast India as he celebrates the ecological and mythic glory of their land that intertwined the traditional pattern of life.

Temsula Ao, another well-known poet from Nagaland state of the Northeast region also heavily draws upon the myths and culture related to nature. Her poetry often reflected her experiences growing up in a tribal folk and the challenges faced by the folks because of modernity.

The tribal folks had lived their life in a balanced natural environment with their folk and myths the pastoral nature, and they had a deep relationship with the pure balanced nature. Their land has now changed, and their folklore and myths are forgotten. They are alienating themselves from their sacred homeland. This resulted in a drastic transformation in the habitat, and they have lost the magical connection with their nature forever. Temsula witnesses a pathetic transformation on her land and the people. As she says,

The sounds and sights
 Have altered
 In my hills
 Once they hummed
 with bird-songs
 And happy gurgling brooks
 like running silver
 with shoals of many fish

But today, I no longer knew my hills
 The bird song is gone
 Replaced by the staccato
 of sophisticated weaponry
 The rivers are running red,
 The hillsides are bare
 And the seasons
 Have lost their magic. (Songs of Many Moods 49)

The poetry of the Northeast poets like Temsula Ao and many others do not celebrate or worship nature and their traditional culture rather expose the negative changes brought upon their nature and the abuses inflicted on it, which create deep scars on their mother nature. Poets like Temsula Ao try to revive traditional values by celebrating the myths and folklore of their land and people in their poetry. Her poem “Soul Bird” describes the myths of the Naga people that the people live in the form of a bird after their death as the soul is believed to take the form of a bird. Temsula Ao sings, “They are chanting prayers,/ But I watch a lonely hawk/ Soaring/Amidst the swirling blue...” This myth is an example of the tradition of the Northeast folk on their pastoral land. When they find the bird hawk they believe that this is the last appearance of the dead person on earth: “See that keening bird in the sky? / That’s your mother’s soul/saying her final goodbye.”

Mamang Dai of Arunachal Pradesh exposes a deep nostalgic sense when she tries to remember the past of her life with the tribe and the nature. She mourns in her poem “Sky Sons”

We left the tall trees standing
 We left the children playing
 We left the women talking
 and men were predicting
 good harvests or bad
 that winged summer we left
 racing with the leopards of morning. (“Sky Song”: River Poems, 22)

Niranjana Chakma, another Northeast poet from Tripura draws her poetry on cultural identity, devaluation of their tradition and nature. She tries to promote the recent attempt of people to preserve their traditions and their pastoral habitat against rapid modernization and urbanization. The poem “Ballads of the Forest” shows Niranjana Chakma with a melancholic mood as she is worried for the devastation of their land and living beings,

Devastated birds then get confused overwhelmingly
 Would they go back to their routed nests
 Or whether they would go in search of grains!
Recently, regarding their identities and legal rights
 A tumultuous debate was held in Geneva
 ... (“Ballads of the Forest” 76)

Niranjana Chakma depicts challenges their people are going to face in the near future for their life and habitat. She voices the necessity of a movement for the preservation of their traditional values. Apart from those discussed poets, there are poets like Pradip Kumar Patra, from Assam, Easterine Kire from Nagaland, Chandrakanta Murasingh from Tripura, Desmond Kharmaphlang from Meghalaya who explore similar concerns in their poetry for the degradation of their indigenous culture along with the ecology and highlight the importance for a serious attention on this.

Conclusion: The present paper explores the common thematic concerns of the Northeast poets and highlights the importance of the delicate balance between human existence and the environment as depicted in their poems. Their poetry creates a large canonical body of literature that shows a sense of collective love for a timeless tradition of myths, folklore, and oral tradition. The paper tries to delineate the sense of collective love of the Northeast poets for their sociocultural values, myths, folklore, and ecological legacy and upholds their works as a strong resistance against such growing devastations on their land and culture in the mid of postcolonial modernity, cultural colonization and modern urbanization.

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