“Re-visiting Nature”: An Eco Critical Reading of Arupa Patangia Kalita’s Stories “the loneliness of hira barua”

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Abstract: It is clearly perceived that the beauty of nature has always been a very alluring and enthralling subject for the writers since ancient times. Many writers try to encourage a deeper appreciation of the natural world, its beauty and purity, its relevance to human needs, and also for the threats to both whom live within it. There are bulks of writers in the contemporary world who have successfully portrayed the very perception of ecology, wilderness, pastoralism in their writings to bring home the awareness of the fact that nature is boon for mankind. But men fail to introspect over this and often get into conflict, resulting chaos for themselves. Like the other writers of the mainstream India, North East India is no way remaining passive in this regards to exploring the relationship between man and nature. Among so many other writers, one of the most vocal from Assam is Arupa Patangia Kalita who has a good number of works to her credit. She is one of the leading voices in contemporary Assamese literature who won the Sahitya Academi Award in 2014. The present paper will focus on the collection of short stories reflecting humanitarian outlook and sincerity of the author from an eco critical approach. The stories in the collection vividly demonstrate the ongoing agitations and violence of indigenous people which leave a deep impact on the nature and the environment for polluting and spilling of innocent blood in the peaceful region. The beautiful nature that was so dear and integral part of these indigenous people is no more the same since the agitators have exploited it to turn it into a plethora of images of mountains, hills, rivers, myths, traditions and culture of the people of the region.

Keywords: Ecology, conflicts, agitations, indigenous, environment...etc

Introduction:

Eco criticism, as a separate school of literary criticism started to emerge in 1990 with American literature. It is an interdisciplinary approach that deals with the study of relationship between human being and nature or environment. One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to ecological aspects. Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach which is known by a number of other designations, like “green (cultural) studies”, ecopoetics” and environmental literary criticism”. The term ‘eco’ derives from Greek ‘oikos’ which means ‘house’ and the term ‘critic’ comes from ‘krites’ which means ‘judge’. Thus, ecocriticism deals with the expression of judgement upon the writings which reflects relation between nature and man. It is a school of thought which focuses on a critical reading of literary texts in relation to environment, nature, and literature. Hence, we can say that ecocriticism studies the relation between literature and environment. (Nayar 2013, 242). It is in a way deconstructs the relationship between nature, culture and literature. The Oxford English Dictionary refers the German” oecologie” as the first appearance of “ecology” in 1876 which meant “ the branch of biology that deals with the relationship between living organism and their environment”. Jonathan Skinner, the editor of the journal Ecopoetics, says:

“Eco” here signals- no more, no less- the house we share with several million other species, our planet earth. “Poetics” is used as poesis or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative act (nor vice versa). Thus: ecopoetics, a house making (skinner, 2002).

Some critics opine that the word ‘ecocriticism’ was first coined by writer William Ruecket in his essay ‘Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism’ in 1978. Here, he defines ecocriticism as the ‘application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. But this study got its real momentum during 1990s when a series of literary conferences widely discussed about it. Earlier theories in literary and cultural studies focussed on issues of class race and gender but the late 20th century has encountered a new threat that is ecological disaster. Harold Fromm and Cheryl Glotfelty define ecocriticism in the Introduction of the book edited by them, The Ecocriticism Reader (1996).

Just as Feminist examines language and literature from a gender Conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of Production and economic class to its reading texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.
English literature has immensely dealt with the relationship between man and nature and investigated about the issues concerning the environment and attitude towards nature. Chaucer’s Pilgrimage to the Canterbury Tales begins with a description of the return of the spring and describes the April rains. Shakespeare’s plays use the imagery of nature, gardens, harvest, and storm to convey his ideas. Robert Frost, Alfred Tennyson, T.S. Eliot, and other Romantic poets like William Blake, P.B. Shelley have also shown their ecological concern through their writings. William Wordsworth, famous as a lake poet, praises the beauty, purity and honesty of nature and complained about the injustice done by the city dwellers. He writes:

But oft in lonely rooms and ‘mid the din
Of towns and cities, i have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet...
Nature never did betray the heart that loved her” (Tintern Abbey)

Eco critics and NorthEast India:

Northeast India is very rich for its geographical location, flora and fauna, composite culture of different tribal or racial groups living in the lap of nature. So, the literature of Northeast India is the manifestation of different aspects, distinctive traits and the understanding of the region as well as the relationship between the people and the environment. The poetry of this area has emerged from the region for its deep ecological pattern which highlights the concept of sublime ecotone in nature. Poetry from the region is varied as varied are their languages and culture but there are affinities in their landscape and the geographical and social situations. Thus, Chandrakanta Murasingh, a renowned poet from Tripura, in a conversation conducted for Poetry International Web said:

“In poetry we hear the shrieks of the victims caught in this vicious conflict (yet) as the poetry here develops in the lap of hills and descends there in a cascade of rhythm it retains its own identity...The face of time has been engraved on the poetry of Northeast.” (https://www.poetryinternational.com)

The writers like Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangan, Temsula Ao, Mona Zote, L. Chandle and R. K. Madhurib Indira Goswami, Mitra Phukan, Janice Patriat, Arupa Patangia Kalita have shown the impact of nature, environment in their writing. Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh searched for her ancestral roots in rivers, trees and Mountains, in her works like The Black Hill (2014), Escaping the Land(2021), The Legends of Pensam(2006). Temsula Ao from Nagaland asserts the identity of her people through the metaphor of trees, mountains and animals and has compared the body of a woman and its violation with the landscape and its devastation. She says:

“Cry for the river/ muddy, misshappen/ grotesque/choking with the remains/ of her sister/the forest/ No life stirs in her belly now/ the bomb/ and the bleaching powder/ have left her with no tomorrow.”(Mishra, 2011)  

L Kamal Singh from Manipur sings the beauty of Canchipur, the old capital of Manipur. Saratchand Thiyam, a contemporary poet of Manipur compares his violent struggle of life with the images of nature. Robin Ngangan comments on the aesthetics of experiences, the hills of Manipur haunt him and he passionately celebrates this ecological beauty in nature. Desmond Kharmaowphlang from Meghalaya sets out on a journey to a remote village of Pahambir in quest of his cultural root. Mona Zote from Mizoram wishes to protect the rich natural and cultural diversity of her land. Indira Goswami in her “The Blue-Necked God” (1976), Mitra Phukan in her ‘The Collector’s wife” (2005), Uddipana Goswami, Jahnvi Barua, Janice Pariat, have enough evidences of references to the ecological wisdom that is if nature is harmed it becomes furiously violent in the form of flood or other natural calamities.

Textual Analysis of ‘The Loneliness of Hira Barua’:

The paper attempts to examine the different aspects of ecocriticism reflected in the story loaded with the elements of trauma and its displacement in the collection of short stories, ‘the loneliness of hira barua’ by Arupa Patangia Kalita, one of the most powerful female voices of the north-east India. Originally written in Assamese and later translated into English by Ranjita Biswas, the stories skilfully portray the attachment of characters with nature and their sense of belonging that Hills rivers, birds, landscape share common affinity.

Arupa Kalita has articulated the theme of trauma and conflict emerged as a result of insurgency in her story collection and a good number of the stories are set at the backdrop of nature, rural background and the Forest of Assam. Treatment of the themes of interconnection between man and nature didn’t get that importance before and it was left untouched. Assam has a very terrible history of militancy arising from various socio-political -economic aspects which aim to segregate themselves from main stream. Writers of different class have witnessed the evolving uprising from the very near and have made efforts to respond by producing works of impression to record those experiences. But along with these the beauty of nature, exploitation and degradation on nature and environment are also represented in the literary works by the contemporary writer like Arupa Patangia Kalita. She is one of those who tried to record the impact of disturbances on the nature and environment and other ecological aspects as well as day to day life of the common folk. Her remarkable short stories collected in Written in Tears (2015), The Musk and Other Stories (2017),
and The Loneliness of Hira Barua(2020) narrate the impact on nature during the dark days of agitation and militancy witnessed from close quarters in Assam.

Arupa Kalita in her Story collection ‘the loneliness of hira barua’ incorporates the different elements of environment or nature like the blue hills, trees, paddy field, clouds, mist, sun, brook, animals, pigs, chickens, buffaloes, birds to describe her characters as well as the events presented in the stories. The story ‘The Girl with Long Hair’ narrates about an indigenous tribal girl Mainao who is the product of her tribal culture and traditions deep rooted to the nature. She is a cheerful girl with small twinking eyes and rounded limbs taunt with the sun and rain and she loves to be in close connection with the nature around her. Kalita gives a detail analysis of her personality:

Mainao stands on her toes, on the threshold of youth. She is a cheerful girl with small twinking eyes and rounded limbs taunt with the sun and rain. Her complexion is a sunburnt brown, with tints of copper-red... There is enough rice in the greenery, cattle in the shed and plenty of Areca nut trees and betel leaf creepers in the kitchen garden.(Ranjita,p. 7)

Mainao is so attached to the soil, the trees and her tribal customs that she loves to spend her days by weaving an Aronai Sador and her traditional Shawl, and along with it she enjoys the home made moisture of Hibiscus petals or Jetaka leaves to decorate her hair. Mainao is basically a happy-go-lucky girl she doesn’t remain remorse during Durga puja festival, and enjoys it to the fullest even if there is a restriction from the agitators hiding in forest. Kalita mentions how these tribal honoured the God Bathow which has a connection to nature -

There is a small shrine dedicated to God Bathow in a corner of the courtyard, which she swabs to a perfect red. Next to it is a Sewali tree. She can see its base covered the white flowers in the morning, giving out a heady fragrance heralding the autumn festival. (P.10)

Another story The House of Nibha –Bou describes the traumatic situations of Nibha -Bou due to the insurgency and the extortions of a huge amount demanded by the separatist dismantled her peace of life. The writer gives the name Nibha-bou to her not because she is relative but just to show the respect to a wife of an elder brother. The location of her house is guided by the two aromatic bakul trees that guard the gate leading to it. Nibha-bou was very fond of gardening and she brought the saplings from her maiden home. When she was a child she used to play with pebbles, leaves, and flowers instead of the usual dolls, girls of her age liked. It shows how a baby feels and perceives about nature and the beauty and purity in the bonding between a child and nature gets skilfully reflected.

As a child she liked to play with pebbles leaves, and flowers instead of the usual dolls girls of her age she liked...when she was a little older, Nibha added flowers and leaves to the basket to play with. (p17)

Similarly, the story ‘Ayengla of the Blue Hills’ also narrates the similar connection of characters with nature, their fondness with the natural aspects. Ayengla is a happy woman who lives amidst the blue hills with her husband, two children, paddy fields, and a chang ghar with pigs and chickens. She loves the blue hills that rise behind her house and the hills seem to shine like jewels under the sun.

She loves the blue hills that rise behind her house. On most days, they are covered with cottonwool clouds... these hills have also given them a lovely little brook.(p.26)

Ayengla is so distressed to know that the people in the jungle have planted a landmine to attack the Army patrolling group. The bloodshed and the devastation caused on both mankind and nature is beyond her understanding which left her with sleepless night. After the bomb blast villagers barely stepped out of their house and the harvest and the gardens were all empty with no attention.

The weather, too, had been dark and overcast of late, with thick curtains of mist all over...The Jawans did not allow anyone to harvest their crop and even burnt whole paddy fields to prevent those in the jungle from getting their share. But those men continued to come out of the jungle at midnight all the same.(p.28)

In the story, ‘Suagmoni’s Mother, The Story Teller’ Arupa Kalita gives an account of a story of a child who becomes the victim of a bomb blast by a militant group on India’s Independence Day at parade ground in Assam. The child Suagmoni is named after the aromatic fine rice, her mother usually narrates a story of ogress where she makes references to “yam, jackal, cowherd, bakul tree, paddy field, borpitha, komal saol, cowdung heap, heap of dog poop” etc which give an ecocritical background.

In another story, ‘Surabhi Barua and the Rhythm of Hooves’ we get a reference to the beautiful nature and its atmosphere.

The wind was a stream of darkness among the trees caught in the madness of the storm. The overcast sky looked like a sea. In that sea the moon was a ghostly galleon boat. The water took on a purplish tone. The road was like a ribbon of moon light. (p.53)

The harvest festival of Assam ‘Bhogali Bihu’ is celebrated with great enthusiasm amidst nature; animal and rural atmosphere and organic foods and indigenous recipe are prepared in a very traditional way. The writer is able to bring out that in her story titled, Scream. The fasting during Uruka night of the feast is another example of the close attachment with nature because during that
night the village folk prepare a small hut made of bamboo, thatch, and leaves and it is erected by the people themselves to celebrate the festival.

The people of Assam were celebrating the harvest festival of Bhogali Bihu. Rice meals with fish and mutton curry, flat rice and yoghurt with jiggery filled everyone with the spirit of celebration and enjoyment. (p.115)

The story ‘The Man Who Planted the Palm Trees’ shows the optimism of people rising above their circumstances. Living in the mist of strife and tussle there is still hope which can illuminate the crippled human mind so the Palm trees are being planted.

They can still plant palm trees, even while standing at the door of death; they can still water the apple tree knowing fully well that the world would be destroyed the next day. (p.157)

Generational rift and unfamiliarity to one’s own kin is explored in ‘No Escape from Hell’ and A Cup of Coffee for Aunt Brinda’ where children, now adults, choose paths defines by consumerist greed, materialism and selfishness leaving their parents frightened, helpless, and alone. (saikia,p.26)

Another story ‘The Half–Burnt Bus at Midnight’ narrates the terrible story of a bus entering the town at midnight that was set ablaze by a group of insurgents. Arupa Kalita tries to express her concern that violence and agitations wrecks the beauty and purity of the trees, flowers and environment. She is deeply moved by the terrorist’s activities taking place in her region which has directly affected the humanity and nature simultaneously because the hideout of these groups of people was the nearby peaceful hills and the field of bloodshed for them was her village, market place and the human habitancies.

Conclusion:

Arupa patangia kalita’s writing weaves universal themes of trauma, suffering, nature and environment. She gives a detail account of the small joys of life, description of flowers and festivals, the indigenous food stuffs like pitha, bor pitha, and recipe of creepers like vedailata have given an additional impression to prove her close bonding with nature and environment. Her writing style varies for she has the calibre to portray folk to modern, tragedy to comedy, virtues to vice skilfully in her stories. Her stories are mainly focused on the conflict surrounding the beautiful land of Assam and she admires and loves to portray the beautiful nature, landscape of her own place. She places her characters in the centre of the beautiful landscape in the form of realism. It can be concluded that literature has potential and a driving force for reshaping human thinking about the burning ecological issues and the writers like Arupa Patangia Kalita from North East India has that serious urge to bring this into light. We must feel encouraged to think and introspect about how literature in this modern time can be a guiding force to transmit profound ecological values.

Works Cited: