



Climate, Conflict, and Displacement in Northeast Indian Literature: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract: *This paper examines the interconnected themes of climate change, conflict, and displacement in Northeast Indian literature through an ecocritical framework. Drawing on theories of ecocriticism, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, and postcolonial perspectives, it analyzes select texts to demonstrate how displacement operates across ecological, cultural, psychological, and political dimensions. The study highlights how environmental degradation, manifested through deforestation, flooding, and erosion, interacts with socio political instability to produce complex forms of human suffering and migration. Literary narratives reveal both tangible and intangible impacts of displacement, including identity transformation and cultural dislocation. Ultimately, the paper argues that Northeast Indian literature serves as a vital archive of environmental crisis and resilience, offering nuanced insights into the relationship between environment, power, and human experience.*

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Climate Displacement, Northeast Indian Literature, Slow Violence, Environmental Conflict*

Introduction

Concerns about an accelerating environmental crisis have given rise to an emerging perspective on how we deal with literature as it pertains to the planet's physical environment. Ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii), and more broadly "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human itself' (Garrard 5). These two definitions expand the boundaries of literary investigation so that we no longer consider literature simply for its anthropocentric nature but instead include the entire ecological system in which either a human being or a nonhuman being exists in order to draw conclusions about the relationship between both types of life forms. So, in that regard, literature does become an important place to explore and represent environmental realities. The migration of people from one location to another due to climate-related reasons has become increasingly important in recent years. People have been dislocated from their traditional communities and homes and forced into new communities due to adverse environmental conditions resulting from flooding, deforestation, and ecological instability. These dislocations are not limited to the physical aspects of being outside of one's own community and home; they also include the cultural and psychological aspects of being displaced and separated from



the community and home to which one feels connected; the social fabric that creates a connection between people, places, and their histories or memories of events. Rob Nixon explained the impact of climate-related dislocations and forced migration on people and societies through his notion of slow violence, which he describes as, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). Nixon’s definition of slow violence reflects the cumulative and often undetectable nature of environmental harm that is being experienced by marginalized communities over an extended period of time. The idea of toxic discourse, as presented by Lawrence Buell, focuses on society’s cultural and representational aspects of an environmental catastrophe that are missing from or undermine the broader environmental movement as it attempts to establish one common environmental narrative. Buell writes, “if anything like a universal environmental discourse is to come into being, toxic discourse is certain to be one of the key ingredients” (Buell 35). and places emphasis on the extent to which we communicate, interpret, and perceive environmental threats or hazards, including the exposure of people to environmental hazards through literature and how that shapes our understanding, cognition, and attitudes toward the environment. The relevance of Northeast India is heightened when exploring the aforementioned theories. This area is home to rich ecological resources, but is experiencing serious ecological catastrophes from continued flooding, riverbank erosion, deforestation, and instability of the ecosystem. The ecological issues are compounded by the presence of political conflicts, insurgencies, and government interventions – all of which result in the production of unique forms of displacement due to both ecological and sociopolitical displacement. Gill asserts, “A silence that in much of this region now stands shattered by the sound of guns and a host of armed militancies” (Gill 1–2). These occurrences provide further justification for presenting an ecocritical perspective on postcolonialism; when examining the causes of ecological crises, the definitions surrounding those crises must include elements such as power dynamics, inequity, and historical disenfranchisement. The paper analyze *The Forest Guard* by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, *A Hunter’s Story* by Monalisa Changkija, *Innocence Wears Another Look* by Vanneihluanga, and *The Conflict* by Arupa Patangia Kalita in order to illustrate that the phenomenon of displacement in Northeast Indian literature is multilayered, existing within the ecological, political, and cultural contexts. The aforementioned literature indicates that while there are tangible indicators of environmental degradation, there are also intangible narratives associated with that degradation. Through the lenses of ecocriticism, slow violence, and postcolonialism, this study argues that literature produced by Northeast India is crucial in documenting the ongoing environmental crisis; therefore, the exploration of these narratives allow us to gain a better understanding of the interconnectedness between environment, power, and human experience.

Forest, Belonging, and Control in *The Forest Guard*

In *The Forest Guard* by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, the protagonist negotiates his journey of self-discovery through his relationships with other characters within the narrative and also utilises nature (the forest) as both physical and symbolic references to develop who he is. Timothy Morton argues, “To write about ecology is to write about society, and not simply in the weak sense that our ideas of ecology are social constructions” (Morton 30). Within the narrative, themes of memory, loss, identity and transformation are explored. More specifically, the protagonist’s experiences create opportunities to interact with and to form relationships with non-human elements of the landscape that contribute to his identity development. Iovino



and Oppermann argue, “the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies” (Iovino and Oppermann 1). The text demonstrates that an individual’s identity is continuously influenced by their relationship with the environment. The protagonist’s bond with nature marks a transition from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric way of understanding the world. His deep connection to the forest is built upon a value system that emphasises conservation as opposed to viewing nature merely as a resource. At the same time, the forest represents the protagonist’s feelings of disconnection and loneliness, as it reflects his state of mind. As he exists apart from traditional societal constructs, the protagonist uses the forest as a place to reflect upon and address issues relating to purpose, belonging, and moral obligations. Timothy Morton states, “the ecological thought is the thinking of interconnectedness. The ecological thought is a thought about ecology, but it’s also a thinking that is ecological” (Morton 7). Forest is a place of struggle/conflict - both exterior and interior- as well as being threatened by poaching, exploitation and lack of institutional/regulatory oversight, at the same time as being the backdrop for the protagonist’s interaction with his past as a hunter/poacher. These two concurrent conflicts allow for an understanding of identity as an unstable, constantly evolving entity that is shaped by conflicting ethical imperatives and the contradiction in lived experience. Additionally, these conflicts are displayed through the analogy of the disconnect between state authority over the forest and indigenous understandings of the ecology of the forest. Lefebvre notes, “To speak of ‘social space’, therefore, would have sounded strange” (Lefebvre 1). Through Gomseng’s role as a forest ranger in *Pakhui* Wildlife Park, the narrative critiques the inherent contradictions that exist within state-supported conservation schemes. Forest rangers have been mandated to protect wildlife, but state authorities simultaneously allow powerful individuals/companies to exploit forest ecosystems for their own profit. These contradictions present in this story complement earlier arguments that illustrate how state-sponsored conservation establishments create barriers to achieving true conservation outcomes due to the disconnection in power and authority between state officials and Indigenous peoples with respect to the management of forest ecosystems. Hazarika notes, “Over the decades, a sense of deep-seated grievance and alienation between states and the various communities inhabiting them has also grown” (Hazarika 3). In this context, Gomseng is faced with many difficult ethical and moral decisions. He has to end up enforcing regulations that protect the environment that limits access to many Indigenous Peoples and communities who have an incredibly deep and spiritual connection to the land. For them, the forest is alive and is home to them. The story highlights the impact of these imposed regulations on Indigenous Peoples and highlights the knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous Peoples regarding the environment. The transition that Gomseng makes from being a hunter of animals to becoming a forest guard shows that he is changing how he sees the world, moving from one of destruction to one of creation. At the same time, this transition shows the larger problem that exists when you compare what the state is doing with regard to conservation versus the individual commitment to conservation by the state and local people (in other words Federal and local governments do not always walk the talk). The journey taken by Gomseng and how his identity is formed shows an example of how individuals can fulfill a role of ecological responsibility by creating a different way to live that goes beyond failed environmental institutions. The forest presents itself as a key theme of both environmental resistance and responsibility – resisting forces of exploitation and demanding an ethically responsible way of managing these relationships. Questions of justice, belonging, and ecological balance become intertwined within this space. Relph argues, “there are profound psychological links between people and the places which



they live in and experience” (Relph ii). In light of these issues, the story describes a call for a new conservation model that is both inclusive and sustainable; one that acknowledges the symbiotic nature of the relationship amongst Indigenous peoples and their environment while addressing issues beyond Indigenous-centered ecological concerns. Additionally, the forest contains cultural and personal identity, embodying the collective memory, knowledge systems, and traditions of Indigenous peoples. The forest is not only a physical resource; it also acts as an important cultural landscape that contributes to the identity of both Indigenous peoples as individual members of a cultural group and as part of a broader, collective culture. Through their development of alternative conservation paradigms, *The Forest Guard* critiques dominant conservation paradigms by redefining the development of identity as an ecological, ethical, and political process that arises from the dynamic relationship between humans, nature, and power.

Tradition and Ecological Ethics in *The Hunter’s Story*

Monalisa Changkija’s short story, *The Hunter’s Story*, examines the conflict between culturally established practices and ecological preservation through the protagonist Chuba’s journey. The protagonist initially considers hunting to be an essential part of indigenous peoples’ cultural identity, a part of their cultural heritage, an important survival mechanism, and something that gives them prestige. This story is establishing that hunting practices are causing the destruction of wildlife and the destruction of a balanced environment. Elizabeth Kolbert observes, “Having discovered subterranean reserves of energy, humans begin to change the composition of the atmosphere. This, in turn, alters the climate and the chemistry of the oceans” (Kolbert 2). In the story, Chuba has an epiphany when she encounters the collective voice of the forest, represented by the Grand Lion, as well as the other living creatures of the forest. This epiphany represents both an ecological awareness and a moral awakening for Chuba, as the creatures of the forest express their collective suffering as well as the interconnectedness of all living things. Bladow and Ladino note, “place profoundly shapes our emotional lives” (Bladow and Ladino 2). This encounter helps establish that the creatures of the forest are not only a resource for Chuba, but rather possess an active moral presence that contradict the anthropocentric (human-centered) beliefs of humanity and require accountability. A dramatic transformation in Chuba’s understanding of the environment occurs at this moment. Prior to this incident, Chuba viewed the forest solely as a source for sustenance. However, he has now learned to view the forest as a shared community of living things that deserve to be treated with dignity and care, and this insight has changed the way Chuba perceives his relationship with other living beings. Chuba’s decision to stop hunting does not just signify a change in his personal values, but represents a radical shift in his value system—from one that is based on domination over nature to one that emphasizes living in harmony with the natural world. In this regard, Chuba’s journey represents the potential for ethical and ecological rejuvenation. In addition to being representative of Chuba’s personal journey, Chuba’s story captures an issue that many indigenous peoples face today: reconciling the cultural legacy of their ancestral peoples with the current need to preserve the ecological integrity of the earth. Amitav Ghosh argues, “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 6). The story expresses that the only way for people of indigenous ancestry to maintain their cultural traditions is to adapt their cultural practices; however, that adaptation must take into consideration the current condition of the earth so that their practice continues to contribute to the long-term health and sustainability of the planet. Furthermore, the text makes the assertion that ecological awareness does not exist at a single point in time that is static. Rather, ecological awareness is developed as an ongoing process



through the means of contemplation, empathy, and experience. Chuba's evolution as a person to become socially and environmentally responsible exemplifies that individual empowerment can create communal change by raising community awareness of environmental issues. Through his actions in the field of conservation; his pursuit of education about his culture has allowed him to discover new methods that are based on rational reasoning rather than through social traditions. In the end, *The Hunter's Story* advocates for the coexistence of cultural heritage (or way of life) with the concept of conserving natural habitats. It recognizes the historical importance of many ancient cultures and provides an impetus for re-evaluating those practices from an ethical perspective in relation to the current ecological crisis facing our world. The narrative presents Chuba's journey as a well-articulated description of how to achieve sustainable living through an appreciation for nature, a willingness to adapt to cultural changes, and an acknowledgement that humanity plays an important role in the overall ecology of the planet.

Subtle and Emotional Displacement in *Innocence Wears Another Look*

Through the book *Innocent Wears Another Look* by Vanneihluanga, the author explores the relationship of the themes of loss of innocence and internal displacement as two processes experienced concurrently which result in transformation of one's identity and view of the world. In the experience of the main character, Mazama, we see a progression from the unthinking childhood innocence of the past to an awakening to the complexities of living. Mazama is introduced as a bright and energetic child who is highly engaged in a very competitive environment (he is "big") and a carefree person who is full of energy; he exhibits all of the qualities that typify a child who is innocent in their approach to the world. However, the vibrancy of the innocent child is abruptly interrupted when he shoots and kills a bird with a catapult as an attempt to show his friends that he is deserving of their recognition, and that he is capable of providing food for them has a catapult. The death of the bird is a significant event in Mazama's life; it forces him to confront the more fragile nature of life, the impact of his actions, and the irreversible consequences of his actions. Tuan notes, "Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (Tuan 3). The death of the bird is not only the time that Mazama loses his innocence, but it is also the beginning of Mazama's displacement from himself; Mazama is no longer emotionally connected with the individual that he had been prior to the death of the bird. Guilt, uncertainty, and increasing recognition of moral accountability are all results of Mazama's internal dislocation. Psychologically, Mazama demonstrates a change from a simple to a more sophisticated mode of living by moving from naive engagement with life to a more thoughtful, morally conscious way of being in the world. His innocence does not disappear, but it is reinterpreted as an increasingly complex existence that will carry a greater sense of responsibility and emotional dimension as he develops a greater sense of accountability for his actions and takes notice of this in his reflections on himself and the world around him. Displacement occurs within a family, just as it does in Mazama's case, and also on a larger scale through societal structures. Mazama's family is also economically dislocated from their home because of their lack of money; this has created a state of dislocation from reality and produced a sense of alienation and loss of direction. Economic dislocation is a mirror for Mazama's internal dislocation, and the two are closely combined; thus, the dislocation of one's family and the dislocation of society are inherently related. McAdam argues that, "movement in response to environmental and climate change is a normal human adaptation strategy" (McAdam 1). Another example of an internal displacement of social dislocation can be seen in Valtea, the truck driver. Valtea is



depicted as having an obsessive desire to injure other living beings, which is a sign of his disturbed mental status. Valtea's actions foreshadow his eventual contribution to the accident that killed Mazama. Valtea's overwhelming guilt after the accident further emphasizes the far-reaching and pervasive ramifications of human actions, which serve to support the moral narratives of this novel. The bird works symbolically as a representation of purity, sensitivity, and the transitory aspect of existence; therefore, its death alludes to that of Mazama's own. Through this cyclical aspect of the narrative, both the inevitability of demise and the interrelatedness of all living existences are accentuated. Furthermore, the truck accident connotes modernity's invasive nature; thus, introducing a chaotic element into a previously stable community, magnifying confusion and separation from one's environment. Ultimately, the narrative illustrates how the concept of innocence manifests itself as fragile and fleeting, with its presence being altered by contact with society, ethical dilemmas, and life experiences. However, while the destruction of innocence occurs, it also allows for a change in consciousness; the new understanding is more able to endure, is contemplative of the past and present, and is more aware of what constitutes good ethical conduct. Additionally, the depiction of internal displacement emphasizes the emotional and psychological difficulties associated with maturation; parallelly, they occur within subventions of transitional change brought upon by social and cultural evolution. Therefore, the narrative *Innocence Wears Another Look* depicts the act of losing one's innocence as not just an experience that only affects the individual, but rather as a multifaceted issue that is influenced by the actions of the individual, societal conditions, and the conflict that arises between traditional and modern practices.

Conflict and Environmental Crisis in *The Conflict*

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Conflict* illustrates the interconnectedness between environmental degradation and socio-political conflict, depicting a formidable climate-conflict nexus in which flood erosion and violence are entwined as co-dependent forces. Anna Tsing observes, "The world's climate is going haywire, and industrial progress has proved much more deadly to life on earth than anyone imagined a century ago" (Tsing 2). Through the use of two different contexts (a physical and social landscape), the novel presents examples of how ecological instability and social conflict shape the experiences and suffering of humans; these combined environmental crises exacerbate the occurrence and escalation of the conflict. Flood erosion is a natural disaster that continually impacts many of the villagers living in the story's setting, removing the land they grow their food on, destroying their livelihoods, and displacing entire communities. This emphasizes that environmental destruction in the text extends beyond physical damage to reshape cultural understanding and lived experience. In addition to the tangible effects of erosion, the authors also use erosion as a metaphor for instability and fragility; the erosion of their land parallels the psychological and emotional erosion experienced by people who live under a constant threat of violence. The repetitive cycle of flooding, created by an imbalance in how the Earth's water cycle operates, reflects the level of vulnerability all people face from environmental disaster, making life on Earth fragile and inconsequential. The use of violence is very present in all aspects of the story, whether it be through different types of ethnic and communal violence or human-animal violence. Deforestation and destruction of habitats mean the displacement of wildlife, especially elephants, which are then forced into human settlements to find food. This creates violent conflicts that represent more than just local instances of violating natural balances. Fassin asserts, the "refugee question" is one of the most vexing of our times (Fassin x). Simultaneously; the fragmentation of the social fabric created by social and political unrest



such as insurgency, mistrust and inter-communal violence creates a climate of fear and instability. The connection between flood erosion and violence is a key part of the narrative's critique. Environmental degradation leads to an increasing scarcity of resources, particularly through the diminishing of arable land and the diminishing of livelihoods. Because of this lack of resources, competition rises between communities, thereby creating ethnic and communal tensions. This also demonstrates how ecological crises are contributing factors for the creation of conflict. Displacement, because of floods and from violence, destabilizes even further through the disruption of the social fabric and the deepening of cycles of alienation and violence between the groups. The story illustrates the cycle of instability in which the environmental stress of climate change and violence are inseparable: environmental degradation creates conflict; due to ongoing conflict, effective responses to ecological crises are impeded. This creates an ongoing and sustained environment of vulnerability where there is no easy restoration of either environmental or social balance. The story also emphasizes how people show courage through the main character, Bani, who is shown to exhibit great courage by adapting to life as a homeless person living in a part of the world full of violence, and to be able to overcome both of these obstacles that is, homelessness and living in this environment of violence. Her journey demonstrates how it is possible to carry on despite the conditions that can be described as "broken" from a person's emotional and ethical perspectives, as the act of surviving in an environment such as the one where she lives is an act of resistance against all of these traumatic circumstances. Bani's experience sheds light on the connection between climate change, displacement and the effects of violence upon this population living in Assam and the extent to which these three aspects of reality interact. In linking ecological disruption to the instability of the social fabric of a community, the story expands the boundary of how literary discourse can address the environmental crisis we face and illustrates that climate change is not just a natural event, but rather, it is a socio-political issue and an issue that has affected how we view ourselves, our relationships with others and our existence in general. As Huggan and Tiffin assert, "no social justice without environmental justice; and without social justice—for all ecological beings—no justice at all" (Huggan and Tiffin 10).

Conclusion

Displacement in Northeast Indian literature is a multi-faceted experience rather than a single, solely physical occurrence; it has ecological, cultural; psychological and political consequences. Analyzing these selected works revealed how destructive behaviour towards the environment, such as deforestation; flooding from erosion and destruction of habitat are interwoven with power dynamics, identity formation and social conflict. In *The Forest Guard*, the tension created by state-initiated conservation and traditional ecological knowledge epitomizes how environmental governance marginalizes local communities and fails to provide ecological sustainability. *The Hunter's Story* reflects the ethical dilemma of reconciling tradition with sustainability, illustrating that ecology can be recognised due to the degree of reflection and moral awakening that occurs as a result. *Innocence Wears Another Look* uses the loss of innocence to convey an internalised form of displacement, whereby the trauma suffered as a result of this loss parallels larger social and cultural shifts. Ultimately, *The Conflict* best demonstrates the relationship between climate change related problems (environmental degradation) and violent retributive behaviours, particularly how climate change exacerbates resource scarcity; displacement; and communal conflict creating a cycle of instability. Overall, these narratives reinforce the premise that displacement in the northeastern United States should be seen as a connected process driven by both material realities and



intangible experiences. This paper argue that the literature from northeastern India is an important archive of environmental crisis and human resilience; they document both the visible evidence of ecological degradation and reflect emotional, ethical and cultural changes resulting from this degradation. The works confront dominant (often homogenizing) narratives about environmentally related issues by highlighting localized, place-specific experiences and perspectives of indigenous peoples. This paper also argues that literature produced in northeastern India has an important place in rethinking the relationship between humans and the environment. It calls for a more ethical and inclusive approach to understanding ecologically based thought which encompasses all elements that are interrelated (nature, culture and power) and places the experiences and voices of those impacted by environmental change at the forefront.

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