



An Ecocritical Perspective of Selected Naga Folktales

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is usually defined as the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature in relation to environment. It examines various ways in which literature treats the subject of nature in conjunction with environment and highlights a holistic approach to texts that examines the perceived relationship between man, nature, and environment. Folklore as part of oral literature plays a substantial role in environmental conservation and protection. Valuable lessons in environmental preservation can be gathered from the cognitive and experiential dimensions of folkloric traditions and cultures. For instance, a folktale or a folk belief that reflects close connection between nature and man can be a useful method to inculcate ecological values, knowledge, and ethics among members of the community. Nagaland is home to sixteen major indigenous tribes, known for their rich folklore tradition and strong cultural practices. One of the most important aspects of the people of Nagaland is their close connection and interaction with nature and hence, their socio cultural and economic life revolves around nature. Of late Naga folk narratives have become an important source of literary and cultural studies and this paper is an attempt to explore the environmental and ecological aspects of selected Naga folktales.

Keywords: Nagaland, folklore, folktales, ecocriticism, nature

Ecocriticism is usually defined as the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature in relation to environment. It examines various ways in which literature treats the subject of nature in conjunction with environment and highlights a holistic approach to texts that examines the perceived relationship between man, nature,

ecology, and environment. Ecocriticism tends to examine man as part of an ecosystem and explores the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production. The onus lies in a bond between the human and the nonhuman which generally forms the ecocritical basis of a text. At the same time, Ecocriticism not only pleads for a better understanding of nature, but also interprets the natural world and seeks to protect the ecological rights of nature and a balanced ecosystem. The interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism brings together the sciences and the humanities. The publication of two seminal works in the 1990s, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell marked its official beginning.

The 21st century ecological crisis like tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, deforestation, seasonal disorder, droughts, desertification, loss of biodiversity, contamination of earth's water bodies, air pollution, ozone depletion, global warming, inadequate healthcare, and loss of soil fertility etc., which causes environmental deprivation obliges one to think in a biocentric way as maintained by Jonathan Bates, "It is profoundly unhelpful to say 'there is no nature' at a time when our most urgent need is to address and redress the consequences of human civilization's insatiable desire to consume the products of the earth" (Bate 1991). Hence, in these critical times, human beings must realize that each and everyone has a significant role to play in the maintenance of ecological balance and earth's wellbeing. At the same time, it is not only the scientists, researchers, environmental and climate activists but literary personalities must also play a significant role in the deliberation of environmental consciousness and ecosystem equilibrium. Consequently, literature has a vital part to play in



the restoration of ecological balance, and the study of this interrelationship between literature and environment is termed as ecocriticism.

The anthropocentric attitude of man is clearly “a significant driver of ecocide and the environmental crisis, for society has been madly pursuing project ‘human planet’ without considering that humanity is fully dependent on nature” (Washington 2013). The need of the hour is to develop a holistic approach towards the wellbeing of the earth by replacing anthropocentrism with ecocentrism. For man, there cannot be an existence removed from nature. However, man’s thoughtless actions disturb the equilibrium in nature. The need to realize the integral connection between the natural environment and human beings is of utmost importance to bring about balance and sustainability. As the human world and the natural world is integrally connected, the existence of human life itself is endangered when nature is misused and ill-treated. The ecological wisdom that is attached to ancient folk beliefs, tales and practices may in some way provide an understanding that there is an inseparable bond between man and nature.

Folklore is the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth. It is the oral history that is preserved by the people, consisting of traditions belonging to a specific culture and has been widely accepted as a great repository of traditional knowledge and culture. In this context, Mazharul Islam’s observation is of significance: “Folklore is the experience of not a person, but of the community or the society at large. We may call it the wisdom of the people or the learning of the community. The individual earns knowledge through experience and when experience and knowledge are combined, they voice the same feeling which becomes the feeling of the society. This feeling gets its expressions in the elements of folklore (Mazharul Islam 1970). The different forms of folk expression and practice reflect the lived experiences of a community and hence, they are of utmost significance to the people who own them as the essence of their identity, past, present, and hopes for the future is weaved together in them.

One of the most popular explanations of folklore is found in Alan Dundes’ brief essay, “What is Folklore?” where he disputes the notion that “folk” should be automatically identified with peasant or rural groups, or with people from the past. He argues that contemporary urban people also have folklore and suggests that rather than

dying out, folklore is constantly being created and recreated to suit new situations. He asserts that “folk” can refer to “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is, it could be a common occupation, language, or religion but what is important is that a group have some traditions that it calls its own” (Dundes 1965:2). He provides a list of various types of folklore to demonstrate the large range of the field of study. His list includes the common subjects of folktales, legends, myths, ballads, festivals, folk dance, and song as well as examples of folklore that may not be as obvious such as children’s counting out rhymes, food recipes, house, barn and fence types, sounds traditionally used to call specific animals etc. Dundes stresses that his list is not exhaustive, but merely a sampling of the subjects that folklore scholarship can address, and which merit study for the insight that they provide into specific cultures (Dundes, 1965: 3) and hence, leaves ample scope to move towards a more expansive and inclusive study of folklore. Likewise, the genres of folklore have been categorized as follows:

- Material culture: folk art, vernacular architecture, textiles, modified mass-produced objects
- Music: traditional, folk and world music
- Narrative: legends, myths, urban legends, fairy tales, folk tales, personal experience narratives
- Verbal art: jokes, proverbs, word games
- Belief and religion: folk religion, ritual, and mythology
- Foodways: traditional cooking and customs, relationships between food and culture.

Folklore as part of oral literature plays a substantial role in environmental conservation and protection. Vladimir Propp states that “there is an intrinsic relationship between folklore and literature, between the science of folklore and literary criticism and in its descriptive elements the study of folklore is the study of literature and the connections between these disciplines is so close that folklore and literature are often equated though it is usually acknowledged that literature is transmitted through writing, and folklore by word of mouth” (Propp 1997). At the same time, folklore and environment are integrally related. The folkloric tales, legends, myths, sayings, songs, ballads, dances, music, and poetry can significantly illuminate on the man-nature relationship (Selim 2018). Valuable lessons in environmental



preservation can be gathered from the cognitive and experiential dimensions of folkloric traditions and cultures. For instance, a folktale or a folk belief that reflects close connection between nature and man can be a useful method to inculcate ecological values, knowledge, and ethics among members of the community.

Nagaland is a vibrant hill state located in the extreme Northeast of the country. It is bounded by Myanmar in the east; Assam in the west; Arunachal Pradesh and a part of Assam in the north, and Manipur in the south. Nagaland is home to sixteen major indigenous tribes known for their rich folklore tradition and strong cultural practices. One of the most important aspects of the people of Nagaland is their close connection and interaction with nature and hence, their socio cultural and economic life revolves around nature. From time immemorial Nagas have depended on their natural environment and resources for survival and progress and hence, to this day, they have an intimate relationship with nature which is reflected in their tradition, culture, and belief systems. They believe in the existence of God and spirits in their rivers and forest and therefore, adheres to strict environmental ethos and traditional values while using nature's resources. This belief has been an important key in ecological conservation. The Naga traditional ethos and belief is embedded in deep understanding of nature and environment which guides them to maintain a harmonious co-existence of man and nature. Their relationship with nature is reflected profoundly in their beliefs, myths, folklore, and folksongs and in their attitude towards nature.

Naga folklore which includes traditional knowledge, folktales, folksongs, myths, taboos, legends, and proverbs etc. reflects an intimate understanding of their ecological system. Storytelling is an important means of preserving cultural traditions which is also instructive and educational for the young minds and served as a source of inspiration in fashioning a moral code, giving the whole community a sense of belongingness (Macdonald 1999: 10). Likewise, the rich cultural heritage of the Nagas is preserved in their folktales. Storytelling have been integral to Naga society, however, the written form of these oral narratives has been rendered only in the recent past. Of late Naga folk narratives has become an important source of literary and cultural studies and this paper is an attempt to explore the environmental and ecological aspects of Naga folktales. Naga folktales deal with a variety of themes such as, creation tales, animal and bird

tales, spirit stories, love and marriage, head hunting stories etc. However, one significant aspect of all Naga folktales, myths and legends is the depiction of their close relationship with the natural environment where there is no distinction between birds, animals, and man.

Temsula Ao in "How Man and Animals Lived Together and Spoke Each Other's Language" talks about a time when man and animals lived together in amity and understanding because each spoke and understood the other's language. During this time animals and birds were endowed with the capacity to understand and speak human language. There are also tales about girls falling in love with tigers and trees. There are transformation tales like "How a Boy Turned into a Monkey," "The Two Daughters Who Became Birds," and "How a Women Became the Cuckoo Bird" (Temsula 1999). There are also after life folktales which tells about the Naga belief that when a person dies, the soul is transmigrated into birds, insects or even caterpillars. All of which suggests the Naga perception that all human and nonhuman beings are inseparably and integrally related and therefore, a sense of respect for the other would usher in a healthier co-existence and biodiversity.

In the story, "A Leper Finds Healing," a young man finds magical healing by keenly observing and responding to the interactions among plants, animals, and the environment. By getting closer to nature, and by trying to understand the natural process of nature, he is healed. The Nagas have always believed in the sacredness of the forest and the power it holds. A young man named Lanusang, was once afflicted with a grave skin disease, and he became an outcast in the village. Even his well to do parents could do nothing to ease his lonely life. In fact, even his relatives avoided him, and he was deeply hurt. He decided to wander away to the forest in the hope of finding some solace. As he wandered in the forest, he came upon a cave and decided to make it his dwelling place. Wild beasts, insects, birds, and spirits of the deep forest frequented him but he felt more at ease in the forest where he did not have to bear human unkindness. One morning, he heard an unusual rustle near the stream running below his cave. He looked around and saw a big cobra whose whole body was covered with a rough skin disorder. He felt sorry for the cobra, thinking it must also be suffering like him. While he kept watching, the cobra rummaged around the shrubs and plants near the stream. After some time, it started to chew the leaves of a particular plant that grew among the shrubs and slipped into the deep water. To his



surprise, when the cobra came out of the water, its skin was completely transformed. Lanusang could identify the plant which the cobra consumed. In the hope of finding the same healing as the cobra, he too ate the leaves of the plant and then plunged into the water and to his pleasant surprise, when he came out of the river, he noticed that his skin disease has been miraculously healed (Bendangangshi 1998:1-4).

There are instances in Naga folktales where plants, animals, birds, and even insects could communicate with man. There are several tiger stories common among the Nagas which depicts the close communion man once shared with the tiger. The story, "Three Brothers" speaks of a time when the Tiger, the Spirit and the Man lived together in perfect harmony as brothers. The Tiger was the eldest and the Man was the youngest among them. After their father's demise, the three had to take turns to keep company with their ailing mother. When it was the tiger's turn, the mother became sicker with anxiety because the Tiger used to touch her body to identify the fleshy muscles which he could eat after her death. During the Spirit's turn, the mother used to become more feverish and developed acute headaches. The mother felt at ease only when the Man looked after her because he took care of her with kindness. When the two brothers, the Man and the Spirit came to know of their brother, the Tiger's intention of devouring their mother, they sent him away to the forest (*Folk Tales from Nagaland* 7-8).

In this story, the Tiger represents the nonhuman world of animals and birds; Man, the human world and the Spirit represents the supernatural realm. However, the fact that they all shared the same mother, which could be Mother Earth, fulfils one of the most important ecocritical concepts which highlights the fact that "everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner 1971:29) and that, when one is disregarded and exploited, it affects the whole ecosystem. In this regard, it will be worthwhile to consider the following characteristic features of an environmentally oriented text mentioned by Lawrence Buell: (i) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is inseparably connected to natural history. (ii) Human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest, and (iii) Human accountability to the environment is a part of the text's ethical orientation (1995: 7). Naga folktales do conform to Buell's characteristic features of an environmentally oriented text and hence, deems fit

to be analyzed from the ecocritical perspective as well.

Traditional folklores reflect the natural phenomena and significance of the individual's/community's relationship with nature in their own characteristic way. Folktales, therefore, can also be used as a veritable tool in the effort to bring about balance in the ecological system. Folktale as a creative activity often takes its material from the lived experiences of the people and therefore, can have a psychological impact on society. Folktales as part of a community's folklore becomes a shared activity and therefore, in addition to the entertainment it offers, can play the role of disseminating traditional wisdom that suggests the importance of peaceful co-existence and dependence on each other viz, human and nonhuman.

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