



Anthropocene Conflict and Reconciliation: Literary Responses from India's North east

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Abstract

It is usually suggested that anthropogenic impacts increased after the rapid rise in industrialization during the period of European colonization throughout the world. Following this, the introduction of colonial modernity and subsequent changes in cultural practices also contributed to the rise of the Anthropocene epoch in many ways. These impacts and effects, however, are very nuanced, evading categorization and separation through recognizable borderlines. On the contrary, these transformations remain located in grey areas where religion, tradition and modernity intersect in peculiar ways. This article analyzes such issues as represented in literary texts from India's North east region. For this purpose, four short stories were chosen. Although these literary texts are not entirely representative of the North east Indian culture or society with which they deal, they do encapsulate the general tendency that prevails in these societies. These four short stories, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's "The Forest Guard," Arupa Patangia Kalita's "The Conflict," Vanneihluanga's "Innocence Wears Another Look" and Monalisa Chakgkija's "The Hunter's Story" deal with ecological issues. The article does not simply attempt to discuss the ecological issues highlighted by the authors but rather shows how cultural practices mutate over time in response to Anthropocene pressures, thereby aggravating the global environmental crisis as manifested regionally.

Keywords

Anthropocene, colonization, North east India, short fiction

Introduction

Instead of looking at India's North east as a geographical designation, it has often been looked at either as a homogenous identity or as a cluster through terms like "Northeast" and "North-East." The use of a homogenous connotation or a hyphenated position seems to have several political implications. These implications may appear to have only geopolitical relevance, but in the context of the region it can also be related to anthropogenic impacts. From being a frontier of a colonized territory to its present-day balkanized form, the history of North east India is deeply connected to the immense resources available in the region. This article connects the myriad and chequered socio-political upheavals of the region to the anthropogenic affects visible in the life and literature of North east India. It is usually suggested that anthropogenic impacts increased after the rapid rise in industrialization during

the period of European colonization throughout the world. Following this, the introduction of colonial modernity and subsequent changes in cultural practices also contributed to the rise of the Anthropocene epoch in many ways. These impacts and effects, however, are very nuanced, evading categorization and separation through recognizable borderlines. On the contrary, these transformations remain located in grey areas where religion, tradition and modernity intersect in peculiar ways. This article analyzes such issues as represented in literary texts from India's North east region. For this purpose, four short stories were chosen. Although these literary texts are not entirely representative of the North east Indian culture or society with which they deal with, they do encapsulate the general tendency that prevails in these societies. These four short stories, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's "The Forest Guard," Arupa Patangia Kalita's "The Conflict," Vanneihluanga's "Innocence Wears Another Look" and Monalisa Chakgkija's "The Hunter's Story," deal with ecological issues as observed by the editor of the anthology. The article does not simply attempt to discuss the ecological issues highlighted by the authors but rather shows how cultural practices mutate over time in response to Anthropocene pressures, thereby aggravating the environmental crisis.

Ecology of a Frontier Colony

With the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, Assam was annexed to India as a frontier of Bengal (Biswas 2021). With the discovery of tea plants in this region, it was realized that the soil and climate of Assam were conducive for tea plantations. Thereafter began the gradual and systematic exploitation of the region in all possible ways under the supervision of the British rulers of the colony. The people of this region lived on subsistence farming and forest produce. Furthermore, the Burmese invasions in the early part of nineteenth century left a scar on the psychological and social world of the Assamese people. Not only the population had depleted substantially because of the ruthless slaughtering of the Indigenous population by the Burmese marauders, but most of the population had also fled to neighboring territories to escape these atrocities (Barpujari). Thus, when the British arrived and annexed the region, there was very little resistance from the people (Baruah; Guha). With an eye on increasing revenue, the British adopted policy as in other colonies, to repopulate the region for agricultural and plantation purposes (Guha 2). Thus began a new chapter in the history of India's North east.

Vast tracts of forest lands were cleared, and the trees were felled to make space for agriculture and tea plantations. Initially the British tried to employ the local population in this

work; however they realized that it did not accelerate the expected growth. Hordes of indentured laborers from various parts of India were brought as tea garden laborers to work in these plantations. This created a new economic ecosystem. The lavish lifestyles of the “Sahebs” living in the bungalows of the large tea estates became a new status symbol that attracted many of the local entrepreneurs to participate in the same race. However, the terms of taxation were different for the Indigenous people from that of the British entrepreneurs. These tea estates and plantations carried within them numerous stories of ambition, hope and oppression. Abdul Majid’s film *Chameli Memsaab* and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Two Leaves and a Bud* give us two alternate perspectives on the lives of the people associated with tea plantation. Whereas the “tea owner” in the film is depicted in a romanticized version putting the lives of tea plant owners on an ivory tower, Anand presents an alternate reality that afflicts the life of the laborers. Not only do the laborers live in the most unhygienic and squalid conditions in the tea plantations, they are also exploited, raped and killed. The effects are almost Dickensian when it comes to the exploitation of the laborers of the plantation. These tea gardens have continued to thrive up to today at the expense of the laborers who could never scale the ladder of success. Behind this gruesome story there is another story that has been little explored—the effect of the plantations on the rich flora and fauna of the region. The varieties of plants and trees that are needed for pollination and cross-pollination, the varieties of bees and caterpillars that support the ecosystem, have gradually become rare, thereby affecting biodiversity, on one hand, and the livelihood of the forest-dwellers, on the other hand. Furthermore, many communities who lived in these forest lands or had community lands were uprooted forcibly by the colonizers directly or indirectly by levying heavy taxes on land holdings (Hazarika 42). These vast tracts of lands have been mentioned in official reports as barren or useless places. But these were the home to rare species of animals, including the one-horned rhino as well as very rare medicinal plants and trees. The loot has been so numerous that it not only filled the coffers of the colonizers, but it also kept attracting more investors to the region. The region became a favorite hunting spot of British officers and rulers. As early as 1904, there were only a few one-horned rhinos left in the entire region because of continuous hunting and poaching. However, with the intervention of Lord Curzon’s wife, hunting was soon banned and an effort to increase the population of the rare species was initiated by declaring the affected area as Kaziranga Reserve Forest.² Sadly enough, not much has changed in the present time as illegal poaching, hunting, mining and

logging continue unabated. Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail* gives us a brief sketch of this scenario in the form of fiction.

On one hand, while tea plantations have brought a change in the economy and ecology of Assam, there have been demographic changes owing to the immigration of people from one place to another. Coupled with this were the waves of immigration invited by the provincial governments under the tutelage of the colonial administrators. People from East Bengal arrived in the millions. These immigrations changed the social demography of the region and caused serious social conflicts between the Indigenous and immigrant communities. The then-government formed by the Assam Provincial Muslim League under the leadership of Sir Syed Muhammad Saadulla explained that peasants should immigrate to Assam so that more crops could be grown (Hazarika 73–74). Furthermore, with increasing government activities, a new social ecosystem was created comprising of Bengali clerks and teachers, Marwari businessmen and people from other communities.

The rise in the immigrant population was strongly opposed by the Indigenous people and eventually it led to the rise of the Assamese nationalist movement. Since this movement was related to the expulsion of immigrant communities and enforcement of Assamese language in schools and colleges, there were manifold challenges for every subsequent government. How these movements are related to the ecology of the place will be discussed in the next section.

Ecology and Regional Politics in North east India

As stated earlier in this article, Assam turned into a “troubled periphery” because of the challenges brought about by the immigration policy of the colonial regime. Whereas the nationalist leaders representing the ethnic communities in Assam complained of the underdevelopment of the region and objected to resource extraction by the government, the issue of language imposition boomeranged in an unexpected way (Khakha; Nongbri 60). The oils field in Assam as well as coal, lime and uranium reserves in various parts of the North east, attracted the interest of the center (Misra1357). Roads and railways were used as a means of transport to carry out these resources without giving any substantial return to the region in the form of development. Consequently, violent protests rocked the region, which was already reeling under other challenges. The language issue also led to the rise of other sub-nationalist forces who revolted against the imposition of Assamese language and, in due course, led armed struggles demanding a separate identity for themselves. Thereafter, the

region was balkanized, and the new states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya were formed by balkanizing Assam. On the other hand, the immigrant issue continued as a bone of contention between the nationalist and sub-nationalism agencies. A reading of fictional works like Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid* and *Legend of Pensam*, Aruni Kashyap's *A House With a Thousand Stories*, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, Siddharth Deb's *Point of Return* and many more such literary works give us an inkling of the issues of conflict.

In hindsight, while these fictional works narrate the issue of conflict, they do not elaborate the ecological crisis that is gradually engulfing the region. The resource-rich region is not only precious to the center but also to militants and underground forces who keep exploiting the state resources. The forests that shelter the militants fighting the state forces are also the source of their revenue to some extent. They not only sell the timber but also poach rare animals including the one-horned rhinoceros. They extract a hefty amount of money from the miners, oil companies and tea planters. As a result, the problems, which started with the colonizing enterprise, continue in new forms in independent states. Indeed, these problems are much more complicated than they appear or have been stated above. There are issues pertaining to ethnicity, religion, political interference, international politics, militancy, economy and many more that operate on multiple grids to affect the ecology of the place. Neither a non-fictional take nor a fictional narrative is enough to give a comprehensive picture of how these function. The problems and their causes are so remotely connected and branched that only the tip of the tentacles is visible to us. These complex facets are captured by North eastern storytellers in their fictional works. The next section discusses the fictional narratives, which in various ways reflect what has been discussed in the previous sections.

Literary Responses from the North east

Yash Dorjee Thongchi's short story "The Forest Guard" was originally written in Assamese. Although Thongchi hails from Arunachal Pradesh, the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), instead of writing story in his native language, he prefers writing in Assamese. Most of the septuagenarian writers from the region had their schooling mostly in Assamese or English mediums; and this is why these two languages are chosen as the preferred form of literary expression. Although the story was originally written in Assamese, the setting is that of Arunachal Pradesh. Anyone who is acquainted with the territory will at once be able to visualize the pristine beauty of the region. Phrases like "Pakhui Wildlife Park" and "Territorial Department" are also very significant in understanding the relationship between

the geopolitics and ecological scenarios of the place. As stated earlier, due to the protest by the ethno-nationalist forces in India's North east, various territorial departments and autonomous councils were made functional to empower the local people so that they can be involved in the administration of their region at a micro-level. Far from realizing the objectives of these departments, the officials are involved in the further exploitation of the region. Thongchi exposes the malfunctioning of these departments and pulls off the veil of honesty from the faces of these pretentious officers.

The story narrates the ordeal of Gomseng, a forest guard, who chooses the difficult task of protecting wildlife rather than a lucrative job with "extra money" (21) in the Territorial Department. An incident during his childhood when he accompanied his father during a hunting expedition has left him aghast, thereafter he vowed to protect innocent animals forever. With this noble objective, he joined the Department of Wildlife Protection. During the induction programme, his morale was highly boosted by a speech given by Sri Tajum Lombi, the secretary of the Wildlife Department. The secretary announced the goal of the department officials:

Our government runs on the royalty that we receive from the timber business. Your job is to ensure that this business is carried on in a legal manner and no one indulges in illegal, clandestine timber trade...Our state is the richest in India in wildlife...so it is my special request to you, please save our wildlife, which is on the verge of extinction and help to increase their numbers. (24)

These reassuring words embalmed the scar that was deeply engraved in Gomseng's memory. Hunting has been not only a favorite pastime and sport among the hill tribes, but very often such activities are carried because of the lucrative international smuggling of rare animal parts sought after for medicinal purposes in Asian nations. During his childhood, Gomseng was forced to kill a doe, which has had a tremendous psychological impact on him. He felt as if he has committed a great sin like Coleridge's Mariner. So, when he joined the forest department, his only objective was to protect wildlife. During his duty at Observatory Number 3 at Pakhui Wildlife Park, he regularly observed that a hornbill had made a nest in the hollow of a *halong* tree. He gradually became emotionally involved with the pair of birds and tried to understand how the world of nature functions. While the female bird laid eggs and incubated them, the male bird went in search of food. Gomseng brought tree branches

with fruits for the bird to help it. They gradually developed a bonding. However, one day when the secretary arrived at the national park and expressed his desire to hunt a wild animal, Gomseng was taken aback. This was the same man who lectured on protecting wildlife during the training program. Eventually the secretary orders Gomseng to wait upon him while he will spend the night at an observatory to hunt a tiger. Failing to locate a tiger, the secretary shoots the hornbill while Gomseng was asleep in the early morning. When the latter confronted the secretary for this heinous act, the secretary leaves the place with a warning that he will sack Gomseng for his audacity to confront him. Gomseng was once again swallowed by grief, not for losing his job, but for failing to protect the innocent bird.

This short story is a critique of the callousness of the government officers and politicians who not only fail to do their job honestly, but also create obstacles for the ones who do their job fairly. As a matter of fact, these officers and politicians misuse their powers and positions from time to time. Thongchi writes, “Bhalukpung was a favourite haunt of poachers, most of whom were government officers and important political leaders” (25). These leaders and officers are also involved in the illegal mining and trading of timbers. Despite of laws that prohibit illegal mining and trading, such activities continue to plague the society (See Annex). Moreover, these leaders also set bad examples through nefarious acts. They help in running syndicates that control illegal trade activities. Most often they also engage the student leaders and local youths in these activities by showing them the path of easy money. Mamang Dai’s *Legend of Pensam* gives us a glimpse that how the young generation is more attracted to easy money. They have lost their culture and tradition; and are attracted to a modern lifestyle devoid of hard work. Not only such paths will lead the youths of the nation stray, but these paths will also cause a great ecological crisis in the future. Easterine Kire explains in her *Son of the Thundercloud* that greed leads us toward evil forces and once these dark forces overpower us, we are forever doomed. Siddharth Deb’s *Point of Return* also narrates a similar situation. While the Indigenous youths are driven by false ethno-national sentiments, their leaders are involved in massive corruption and the destruction of state resources.

Arupa Patangia Kalita’s *The Conflict* deals with human-animal conflict. The story was originally written in Assamese. Like Thongchi, Kalita also highlights the illegal felling of trees. As more and more people are attracted to a city life of comfort, they are losing their connection with the world of nature and environment. On the other hand, due to the loss of forest cover, animals are also losing their habitat very fast. As a result, animals come to the

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villages during the harvest season to feast on the ripe paddy often causing damage to life and property of the villagers. Kalita narrates the story of a couple, Bani and Mineswar, to explain this crisis in proper perspective. Bani and Mineswar's newly married life is overshadowed by the sudden attacks of elephant herds that come in search of food to the villages. Although Mineswar tries his best to keep away the pachyderms by putting up an electric fence around the crops, his wife loses her sense when she sees the elephants toppling the fence and, in a fit of rage, sets everything on fire. The psychological impact that the writer tries to build up through this story familiarizes the readers with the everyday ordeals that the villagers must face. The scene where the elephant tramples a villager is not just a fictional episode for the Assamese readers. Readers are acquainted with such gruesome news telecast everyday on television channels and reported through newspapers. Elephants very often raid the forest fringe areas during the winter season. There are also collisions between trains and elephants on railway tracks leading to casualties. While the number of man-animal conflict has gone up during recent times, the civil societies are demanding for immediate government intervention.

The crucial message that the writer wants to deliver is that greedy people are responsible for such conflicts. Their greed for "extra income" (100) and a comfortable life is the root cause of all kinds of evil in society. Kalita writes:

The greedy youngsters in the village procured illegal permits to cut trees and send truckloads to Dhubri. Some boys in the village made quick money by taking just a couple of planks on their bikes to sell them to petty traders in town. The deforestation caused by such greed for monetary gains ruined the hills. The offenders decamped with the loot, the small fry remained behind to face the music. Much as the village elders abused these offenders in no uncertain terms, it made no difference. (101)

While the older generation feels wearied by the present situation, the younger generation is completely oblivious to the damages inflicted by their own acts. The writer tries to underscore the gradual transformation in culture that is gradually eroding under the garb of the modern lifestyle.

In "Innocence Wears Another Look," Vanneihluanga brings out the basic instincts of humankind. It is the story of a twelve-year-old boy Mazama who eventually gets killed. Vanneihluanga uses irony and sarcasm to deliver the message that what goes around comes

around. It is more a story of sin and the divine retribution for human acts. Like William Golding's characters in *Lord of the Flies*, one can see that Mazama is prone to violence and murderous instinct despite his tender age. Without institutional control and parental guidance, children are bound to be misdirected, leading to catastrophic ends. Whereas the story deals with the relationship between humans and nature, Vanneihluanga's focus is more on the abruptness of death, which is uncertain. Once again, we find that Vanneihluanga's story also starts with reference to the corrupt practices of the government officers. The sarcasm is visible in the following lines:

Pu Sena was an outstanding pillar of his community and enjoyed a social standing that few could match. The locals looked up to him for advice and counsel and felt reassured by his mere presence. One had only to consider his establishment and livelihood, his contribution to both society and church, and the circle of acquaintances that he cultivated, to measure the extent of his influence. Besides this, he was an accomplished sportsman who particularly enjoyed Mizo sports such as hunting and fishing. It was a matter of great pride that he could bring home a slain deer with its impressive antlers blatantly displayed from the back of government Gypsy allotted to him for official use. There did not seem anything wrong in this occasional, petty misuse of government resources in a system crammed with officials engaged routinely in corrupt practices. (214)

The church as a social and religious institution is held in high esteem. But the irony is that somebody who is involved in the wanton killing of animals for sports and misuses his official status is also given a respectable position in society. The story can be read at multiple levels. It can be seen as a critique of the Mizo society which has entirely converted to Christianity but has not discarded the primitive way of sports. This utter disregard for the life of animals once again brings back to our mind the message that Coleridge tried to convey through his "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The story also highlights the relationship between humans and animals in the tribal societies of North east India. In most of the tribal societies across the region, hunting is a favorite sport. With the growing human population and with the decrease in forest cover, such sport can bring an end to many rare species. Pu Sena's love of hunting has also influenced Mazama so much so that he wants to prove his manliness by

showing his hunting skills. On one fateful day, Mazama goes to a garden with his catapult on the invitation of his friends. He shoots a little bird and kills it mercilessly:

Mazama hurriedly went after the bird and discovered that it was still alive and had fallen down only due to dizziness. As it saw him approaching, the bird pitifully tried to take off again. As he had never taken a bird's life before, Mazama reluctantly caught hold of the bird, and feeling it struggle against him, almost let it go again.
(216)

Then he picked up the bird and gripped it by the neck and dashed it against the ground: "Thus Mazama watched 'life', certainly not the handiwork of man, leave the beautiful bird" (216).

Mazama met his match in Valtea, a truck driver. He had the instinct of running his truck over any creature that came in front of his vehicle. As fate had it, Mazama was returning home and was about to cross the road, but was run over by Valtea's truck. Valtea saw two cocks fighting on the road and instantly his instincts compelled him to run over the birds; however as he sped away, Mazama came in front of the truck and got killed: "Thus Valtea watched in great distress as 'life' certainly not the handiwork of man, left the young boy" (218). The narrator's remark makes it clear that a violent life ends violently. An utter disregard for life needs to be changed. While the writer is delivering a Christian message, the larger message is that each living creature contributes to the world in its own way. And the human, being the intelligent and rational creation of God, should be humane to those non-human beings around him/her. This story was originally written in the Mizo language and can be taken as an initiative by the author to deliver a message of love and respect for the animal world around us. Instead of the wanton killing of animals, one should respect life, lest this instinct will take control of humankind.

Monalisa Changkija's "The Hunter's Story" is a fable written in English. Changkija hails from Nagaland, a place that has witnessed violent conflict between state and militant forces since India's Independence. The Nagas were head-hunters known for their strength and valor. Like other tribal societies, hunting remains the favorite sport of the Naga tribes. Although they have discarded the primitive tradition of head-hunting after converting to Christianity, they continue with the practice of animal hunting. The Nagas also have mythological stories that relate them to nature and the animal world. Through the present story, the narrator tries to awaken an environmental conscience. Changkija narrates the story of an ace hunter, Chuba, who would never return home without a successful hunting

expedition. His hunting spree has affected the wildlife so much that the animals decided to teach him a lesson. Once when Chuba went hunting, all the animals went into hiding and Chuba, unable to find a single animal, decided to take some rest in the forest and then continue the expedition. On waking up, Chuba finds that he is surrounded by all the animals. Thus the intimidated “Chuba finally understood what it felt like to be stalked, hunted and trapped” (252). The narrator delivers the message through the Grand Lion: “We too can hurt and kill, but we know that we know that we were not created to cause pain and death. We know that we have been created to maintain balance of nature and contribute to the well being of this planet. We cause pain and kill only when we are attacked, in self-defence” (253). This lines act as a double-edged sword. While they explain the role of animals in maintaining the ecological balance in the world, on the other hand they also reveal how humankind is responsible for destroying ecological balance. What the animals do, they do it out of need, but what men do, they do out of want and greed. As the proverb goes, the world has enough for everybody’s need but not for everybody’s greed. Through this fable, Changkija reverses the myth of the human being as a kind and rational animal. However, the writer ends the fable on a positive note, and she believes that, if humankind follows this message, we will fulfil the purpose of our creation.

Conclusion

The stories discussed above have been taken from *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*. The careful selection of the stories, their translation to English and inclusion in the anthology give a purpose to which they contribute. The colophon of the anthology states that the region has been marred by decades of violence, and, as such, both volumes include stories, poetry and essays that hint at the stains left by violence in the North east. The inclusion of these four stories that deal with the ecological world is very timely. The violence affecting people also percolates into cultural consciousness so much so that human acts in everyday life affect the animal world adversely. Violence has always been a part of human life in some form or another. However, with the burgeoning human population, the effects of such violence are also spilling over to the world of nature. In a postcolonial nation like India, which has experienced years of foreign rule and domination, violence will only be detrimental to social cohesion. With the rise in ethno-national consciousness and the increased effects of globalization, it seems that modern humans have developed an ambivalent personality. In all these stories discussed above, the destruction of flora and fauna

is caused by human greed. While such acts are condemned in the public sphere, in the private sphere they are secretly endorsed. The overuse of natural resources—the creation of wealth at the expense of the natural world around *and within* us—is also limiting possibilities for an ecologically sustainable world. While cornucopians will suggest alternate remedies, the fact remains that life on the fringes and frontiers is greatly impacted by the glitter of modernity. The crisis of the emerging modern society in North east India, as depicted in fictional works, emerges from the daily encounters and experiences of the narrators. The region, which prioritizes growth and development at the expense of its flora and fauna, promotes a politics based on ethnicity by overlooking the effects of corruption. These stories remind us that leaders need to realign their political and social priorities according to the environmental crisis that the world is experiencing in the twenty-first century.

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End Notes

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²<https://www.kaziranga-national-park.com/kaziranga-history.shtml>

Annex

These photographs were taken during my tour to one of the north eastern states of India. These photographs indicate the large scale destruction carried out in this region in order to extract resources.



Rat-hole mining



Destruction of Hills



Logging