

Imaging Assamese Poetry through Ecofeminism

By Dr Gitali Saikia

Exploitation of natural resources by money mongers, destruction of nature by modern men due to changing life style lead to environmental degradation. Besides these, hyper-capitalist strives are the major causes that negatively affected the health of the earth destroying the relationship between men and Nature.

Ecocriticism furnishes a critique of human civilization that creates ecological devastation and crisis. It is a post-industrial, post-capitalist phenomenon that leads to ecological deprivation and catastrophe. To ensure 'development', modern people trespass the natural habitations of other living being, inviting catastrophic end of several species of animals, and flora and fauna. Such human activities are profit oriented and related to consumption. Though "ecology is an inseparable aspect of human being" (Sargar and Thombare 29), "man has always thought himself to be more powerful to nature. It is his innate tendency to dominate and oppress the other living being according to his own will" (Sargar and Thombare 29). Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive* (1988) criticizes civilizing process as patriarchal (19). Patriarchal hegemony has oppressed, exploited, devalued, and marginalized women; so also civilization process exploits and dominates nature. The capitalists loot Nature to aggrandize themselves throughout the world by cajoling people to involve in unhealthy practices. Since the development of 'ecofeminism' in 1970s, a major paradigm shift has come to the field of ecological study and gender studies. The debates and discussion incorporated with feminism has been applied to the study of ecology. Shiva criticizes the "masculine mode of aggression against nature and domination over women" (14-15). The relation between man and nature and man and woman frames the trajectory of ecofeminist's perspectives. Ecofeminists critique the question of profit and consumption that brings a reductionist (Shiva 20) attitude towards nature. Shiva puts forth an important observation: "I characterize modern western patriarchy's special epistemological tradition of the 'scientific revolution' as 'reductionist' because it reduced the capacity of humans to know nature both by excluding other knowers and other ways of knowing, and it reduced the capacity of nature to creatively regenerate and renew itself by manipulating it as inert and fragmented matter" (20).

It is said that women and nature living in the precinct of modernism and globalization are the silent sufferers. Science, technology and economy as Carolyn Merchant observes, "We must reexamine the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualising reality as a machine, rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both women and nature" (qtd in Shiva 20). These critics again bring out some arguments against the violation inflicted upon both nature and women through 'reductionist science', because it subjugates and dispossesses them of their full productivity, power and potential" (Shiva 20). Such arguments establish link between ecological predicament and the predicament of women. Feminist perspectives have clearly analyses the ecological catastrophe which has attempted to put forth a critique of sustainability and world order. "The link between women and the environment was consolidated, internationally, at the 1995 4th UN Conference on Women in Beijing. The resulting Platform for Action identified 'women and

environment’ as one of the critical areas of concern” (Buckingham 147).

Assamese modern poets consciously or unconsciously present some burning issues directly related to ecological points. Eminent poet Nabakanta Barua’s ‘Iyat Nadi Asil’ (There was a River Here), though a metaphorical critique on human society points out the heinous human activities which have adverse impact on the health of the earth. Jnanpith award winner poet Nilamoni Phukan refers to such human activities that cause pollution to air, water, soil:

1. *Eta xabda*
Bixakta panit jopiwai utha
Eta ujjal mash. ('Aru Ki Naixabda')

A word
Jumping in the poisonous water
A bright fish.

2. *Kinkin henguliyar majot*
Hothat udhao
Mor tai xoru charai. ('Kaint Aru Golap Aru Kaint')

Amidst the drizzle of vermilion
Suddenly vanished
You are my little bird

The colour vermilion is metaphoric, so also the disappearance of the little bird. It can be interpreted from the perspectives of ecocriticism. Poet Hirendra Nath Dutta in a poem says that Bihu (national festival of Assam) of other days is different from that of today. But what is the use of bothering about such things. As we have destroyed the trees around the fields where Bihu dances are performed our culture itself faces a threat:

Bihutalir ashe pashe thaka habi
Amiyei khastang kora nai jano?
Kapou phul bor lomalome olomi thoka birikbhor takala kori amiyei khori
khalo

(‘*Etia Bihu*’)

The wood beside the Bihutali
Has not been destroyed by us?
The trees where the Kapou flower blooms in abundance
We have not we cut to use as fuel?

Bhupen Hazarika, a legendary artist, poet from Assam, in his lyrics and poems, exquisitely comes out his critical views regarding human intervention and ecological deprivation as well as ‘reductionist’ activities and processes. Songs like ‘Andharar Bheta Bhangi Pragjyotishat Bai Jeuti Nijarare Dhar’ (*Stream of Light Flows Pragjyotispur Smashing the Dome of Darkness*), “Bistirno Parare Asankhya Janare” (*On the Wide Expanse*), ‘Luitate Mor Ghar, Luitei Mor Par’ (*Luit is My Home/ Luit is my distant kin/ Luit breaks and renews my cherished dream*), ‘Bohag Matho Eti Ritu Nahai’ (*Bohag is Not Just a Season*), ‘Aji Brhmaputra Hal Bahniman’ (*Brahmaputra Ablazes Today*) etc. re-evaluate nature. Though all these lyrics manifest nature with all its elements, Luit, Brahmaputra, Bohag — all are masculine figures. Generally in Assamese poems/songs formerly written by poets like Raghunath Choudhury the term ‘Bohagi’ is used to denote the month of Bohag

and ‘Bohagi’ is feminine. Hence, ‘Bohag’, ‘Brahmaputra’ in Bhupen Hazarika’s consciousness epitomizes the protest and strength of defiance against human exploitation and oppression. Moreover, nature’s benign self is further epitomized by both ‘Brahmaputra’ and ‘Bohag’ by being the ramifications of the process of forming a pluralist and multi-cultural society “constructed by quilters in particular social, historical, materialist contexts (Warren 66), and also the life-line of a multicultural (Assamese) nation. River, season, and land— play the symbolic roles by signifying some quilts of ecofeminism by “opposing social and ecological domination, encouraging justice in all spheres” (Cuomo 2).

The rivers in Bhupen Hazarika’s songs signify a flow and a connection linked to the cycle of life and civilization from time immemorial. Water is essential for every living being. It is crucial in sustaining physical life. Water purifies body and sanctifies the soul. Water has also some archetypes as “the mystery of creation, birth-death resurrection, purification and redemption, fertility and growth” (Guerin et. al 185). Bhupen Hazarika in a song ‘Mitha Mitha Bohagar’ (*Of Cheerful and Pleasant Bohag*) suggests the sanctity of the water – ‘Luitat tiuwa tomar deha’, your body is dipped in Luit; you look rejuvenated. In India, river is honoured as a god/goddess with multitude of divine power. Water not only purifies, but also brings mental peace and prepares one for prayer. Bhupen Hazarika’s popular song, ‘Luitate Mor Ghar Luitei Mor Par’ (My home is on the bank of Luit/ Luit is my distant kin/ Luit breaks and renews my cherished dream) is suggestive of this conflict. Patriarchal domination here resembles the pain exerted by the river separating a pair of lovers. The lover inflicted suffering to the beloved by abandoning her.

Bhupen Hazarika’s ‘Mitha Mitha Bohagar’ (While I ruminate on composing a Song about Soulful Bohag), the masculine figure creates a female figure, and that female figure sprouts his creativity:

*Mitha mitha Bohagar geet eti rosu buli bhabotei
Tenete susuk samak koi
Kash sapila moi jen bhasha palo*

As I ruminate on composing a song
On sweet and cheerful *Bohag*
You come hesitantly
I have found sound
Of sweet and cheerful *Bohag*.
You drenched your body in the Brahmaputra
.....
I meet you closely
As if I find an expression. (*Geetawali* 394)

The figure which is designated as ‘you’ signifies fertility, a mother figure, benign and blissful that inspires life sustaining spirit and creativity (*bhasha*/‘expression’, *sur*/ ‘tune’). It enjoins the natural preparation of Mother Earth in Spring to make the land fertile through rain and weather. But this female figure can inspire the poet to become a storm (*dhumuha*) to destroy the evils prevalent in human society. In Hindu mythology Durga, Kali are such female figures who signify power to kill demons. In this song, she is none other than Prakriti.

In another lyric ‘Asom Amar Rupohi’, the mother land resembles his motherland with a beautiful woman, benevolent enough this mother figure epitomizes beauty and bounty. Words used for eulogizing this mother figure are quite different: beauty and bounty described in relation to some natural phenomena which suggests the resourcefulness of this land both from the point of material as

well as spiritual aspects. Here again Hazarika's diction is suggestive of fertility, e.g., *rasal mati*, which literally means fertile land, refers to productivity.

For poet Hiren Bhattacharyya, motherland is a bounteous place for living. The land as mother fills his life with bliss. He too comments on the evil impact of industries and ashes emitted from the factories, yet he gives equal emphasis on the blissful properties of nature:

*Kalgharar kola dhowai
Edin akashat bijuli jwalabo,
.....
Byadhigrasta ei nagare edin
Akashaloi mur tuli sabo: akash eman bishal!
Da-koi ushah loi kabo: batah iman komal. ('Nagarik')*

Someday the black fume from the factory
Will blaze the sky
.....
Someday the sick city will
Stare at the sky: the sky is so wide!
With a deep breath will say: wind is so soft!

In Hiren Bhattacharyya's poems Nature as a benign figure appears with all her beauty and bounty. The relation between nature and human being is central to these poems.

The corollary of a number of poems penned by Manoj Barpujari is defined by environmental degradation and eco-alienation, i.e. the growing distance between man and Nature. The sensitive poet's worried questions focus on the seriousness of such issues. He deploys poetry as a weapon against the domination and oppression on woman and nature, against social and environmental injustice:

Mor dusakut kaila kola andhar, jui hai khandila mor buku. ('Surjyar Adalatat')
Upon my eyes coal-black darkness, being fire you dig my heart

In 'Saradi' Barpujari cites a verse line from Jennifer Rahim, a poet from Trinidad: "Walk like trees with a woman's feet". In this poem the figure of woman is merged with the figure of the tree:

*Enekoi tai amon-jimonkoi bahi thakile
Nadiro karibalaloi eko nathake. Keval sai thokar bahire.
Gas bororu ekei kotha: sihoteo nachon nadhare. ('Saradi')*

While she sits sorrowfully
The rivers have nothing to do. But to look at her.
The trees too: they too do not dance.

In a number of poems penned by poet Barpujari intersects with the problems caused by ecological imperialism. Along with some other North Eastern poets like Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom, Manoj Barpujari also uses poetry as the medium for environmentalist discussion. He is equally conscious about the plights of women as well as of Nature/environment. In his poems, the issues of capitalist exploitation on nature are pinpointed by the reference to Baghajan, destruction of trees, Jaya Dehing rain forest, open coal mining etc. Throughout his poetry the poet is conscious of the "aesthetics of the earth" (Glissant 149), and his constant endeavour is corroborated with a call to pay

attention to it and be conscious:

*Manuhar tej gham asthi ami danavar dore
Suhi pelaisu.
Ei nadir pani, parar gash-gashani, paharar mati,
Ami grash kora nai ki. ('Dinlipi')*

Like demons we suck the blood,
Sweat and bone of man.
The water of this river, trees on the banks,
The soil of the mountain
What are not devoured by us.

Exploitation of natural resources by money mongers, destruction of nature by modern men due to changing life style lead to environmental degradation. Besides these, hyper-capitalist strives are the major causes that negatively affected the health of the earth destroying the relationship between men and Nature. Poet Nilim Kumar also seriously thinks over the way of human abuse on Nature:

*Gagansumbi attalikaborar oparere jupuriborar
Chatfatanir oparere, grihadah aru chair pahar bhagnastup
.....
Sagunar pakhir dhapdhapani nasta nagarar upadongsa*

Above the skyscrapers over the suffocation
Of the huts, burnt houses and the ruins of the mountain of ashes
.....
Flapping of the wings of a vulture, the debris of a spoiled city...

A number of Assamese poets sing of the objects and elements, colours and places of Nature. In these poems Nature is personified, i.e., a living entity. Eco-poetry all over the world seeks to sensitize people about the harm done towards Nature and to establish a genuine relationship between man and nature. Their sensitivity encounters reality. But it is a matter of much regret that though *Prakriti* (Nature) encounters devastating deforestation, destruction of rivers, digging of hills, annihilation of animal habitation, swamps due to hyper-capitalist strives, most of the poets remain cool with utmost indifference to such burning issues ignoring the harsh reality. Eco-poets fervently voice the truth. Such voices must be louder and louder.

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