

Eco-wokeism and Harekrishna Deka's “Rousseaur Saponat” (In Rousseau’s Dream)

A Critical Reading

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In social media vocabulary, “woke” is nowadays a very popular (though often misunderstood) term. Political conservatives use it disparagingly to label what they consider as progressive or liberal ideas. While its origin and core have to do with racial justice, it is now widely used to **criticize anything** that promotes tolerance, fairness, compassion and due regard for the well-being of others. Being woke means waking up our sensitivities to injustice and inequality. It means recognizing and claiming the moral values that guide us in deciding what is right from what is wrong. Understood as a moral imperative, “woke” is perhaps what is needed to address both human and non-human issues (racism, social justice, gender issues, issues of climate crisis, ecological sustainability, and climate justice). Therefore, environmental “wokeism” or what I have termed “eco-wokeism”, is perhaps the need of the hour. Eco-wokeism, in Western academic institutions, or specifically within the discipline of Humanities, does have a history and context dating back from the 1970s and getting traction from the 1990s. The efforts of certain environmentally-concerned academic solidarity groups like Association for Literature and the Environment (ASLE), Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC), and European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and the Environment (EASLCE) went a long way in raising consciousness on environmental issues. These associations through their widespread networks and affiliations, have attempted to read literary texts by adopting informed environmental perspectives. Some sub-genres of literature termed as “ecopoetry”, “ecofiction”, “climate fiction” etc, and a branch of theory termed as “ecocriticism” came into being, and all these have gone a long way in effecting an “Environmental Turn” to literary studies.

However, when it comes to literature emerging from India, there was till recently, a perceptible silence in addressing the problematic of the looming climate crises. The Indian literary tradition seemed to be ecologically “un-woke”, despite being “woke” while dealing with anthropocentric issues like identity politics, economics and sociological concerns. Renowned novelist Amitav Ghosh in his incisive non-fictional work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) raised several pertinent points on this. One of his important observations was that creative writers did not engage much with ideas of ecological crisis. He was unable to explain why issues like “global warming” and “climate change” were not “interesting” enough themes for creative writers. Despite tell-tale signs of the catastrophe confronting human civilisation due to climate change, Ghosh was surprised to note that most fictional writers seemed to have turned a blind eye upon it. Ghosh rationalised the conspicuous ‘neglect’ towards the environment to humans’ “belief in uniformitarianism” (Ghosh 2016: 34), which is a geological theory proposing that the “earth’s features are mostly accounted for by gradual, small-scale processes that occurred over long periods of time.” Therefore, catastrophic

pronouncements of scientists on global warming and climate change need to be taken with a pinch of salt.

However, people in the Northeast India are waking up to the precarity posed by global warming and climate change because the ominous signs are evident everywhere. In the context of Northeast India, climate change is an undeniable fact. None can afford to be climate-deniers or sceptics anymore. There are several tell-tale reasons. Akshit Sangomla in his article published in *Down to Earth* titled “Climate crisis in North East India: Why are rainfall patterns changing?” (Tuesday 07 September 2021) observed that the climate of Northeast India is changing: Rainfall patterns over the region in the last century have considerably changed, resulting in its overall drying up. The Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change projected that temperatures in the region will rise by 1.8-2.1 degrees Celsius by the end 2030. The Global and Planetary Change paper forecast that the annual mean surface temperature will rise by 0.64°C between 2011 and 2040 and 5.15°C by the end of the century. Rainfall may increase by 0.09 millimetres/day that amounts to an annual increase of 33 mm. In Assam, the state most vulnerable to climate change, models predict an increase in temperature of 1.7-2.0 degree Celsius between 2021-2050. As many as 200 mountain springs, direct primary sources of water for mountainous villages in Arunachal Pradesh have dried up due to a decrease in rainfall.

All these are telling signs of the precarious state of the ecology of Northeast India, and we are acutely aware of the reality of global warming as well as the problem of water scarcity, and rivers drying up at an alarming rate. In the face of such crises, efforts are being made presently to redress these environmental issues. A kind of eco-wokeism is emerging, auguring well for the future of the region. This kind of “wokeism” is increasingly accommodating discourses and conversations in which the non-human ecology was foregrounded over the human. Even though “woke” is a recent, informal terminology having its amplified deployment in social media culture, especially troll culture, it does appear to be an apt term to imply the notion of ecological consciousness, subsuming within its core the categorical imperatives of climate justice and eco-sustainability. Therefore, I would like to argue that eco-wokeism is not a new concept in Western discourse, and its increasing advocacy has fortunately generated a substantive corpus of researches that have deployed different strategies of reading practices, including interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives and methodologies. The discourse has become, in Deleuzian term, so “rhizomatic” (rather than axiomatic) that it is beginning to “deterritorialize” into unmappable terrains, which in a way, is paradoxically an epistemological inevitability/necessity.

Such a positive development is also evident in Writings from Northeast India. Creative writers are beginning to focus on ecological issues. Till the beginning of the twenty-first century, writing from the region was dealing majorly with what I have already underlined before, that is, issues like militancy or insurgency, ethnic mobilization, identity politics, ethno-nationalism, linguistic nationalism, race profiling, the centre/periphery debate, and other roiling issues. There was palpable a sentiment of distrust and discontentment against the policies adopted by the centre towards the eight states. The growing militarization led to collateral damage to both militants and security forces. The ethnic militants were as much dreaded as the security forces of the Indian state. Independence and republic days were spent indoors, as militants marked these as *bandha* (lockdown days). In such a fraught, precarious situation, writings from Northeast India could not be blinkered to deal with other issues, including environmental issues, considered as innocuous

and less relevant at that fraught historical moment. The writing from the region was characterized by depictions of extreme violence, ethnic cleansing, political purging, and “there was something rotten” in the state of the entire Northeast. Disenfranchised citizens, intelligentsia and writers from the region were so much gripped by fear as well as anomie that they could not think of anything beyond the issues underlined above. A pertinent example of an eco-wokeist poem is Harekrishna Deka’s “Rousseur Saponat” (In Rousseau’s Dream). This poem is a deeply evocative and imaginative recreation of two contrastive scenarios, referencing two art pieces exhibited at the same hall in the New York Museum of Modern Art, where the speaker evidently paid a visit. The first art piece is Henri Rousseau’s impressionistic oil-on-canvas painting titled “The Dream” completed in 1910, which depicts an idyllic, utopian sequence of pure harmony existing in an ecosystem comprising of both human and non-human ecologies.



The Dream (Source: Wikipedia)

The second image is the bronze art installation of Alberto Giacometti titled quite graphically as “Woman with Her Throat Cut”, which is a surrealistic, dystopic depiction of a woman brutally raped, dismembered, and disembowelled. The graphic details with which the woman figure is treated in this sculpture is horrifying: the body is splayed open, disembowelled, and her body parts severed. The brutality of this image is in sharp contrast with that of the first image, the oil painting of Henri Rousseau.



Woman with Her Throat Cut (Source: Internet)

Coming to the significance of these two Modernist art objects in relation to Harekrishna Deka's poem "Rousseau Saponat" ("In Rousseau's Dream"), it will be useful if we know how Henri Rousseau interpreted his painting "The Dream". He noted in a poem composed to interpret his art in this way: "The naked woman asleep on the couch is dreaming she has been transported into the forest, listening to the sounds from the instrument of the enchanter" who is a snake-charmer playing on a reed instrument." The "dark" snake-charmer could be emblematic of men and his capacity to exploit or control both nature and women. Thus, the implication in the poem could be to suggest the possibility, albeit in a dream, of the existence of an undefiled, unexploited, quintessential nature in a pre-lapsarian period, thereby implying in turn, such a possibility of bliss for women as well, since nature and women have been, across the ages, victims of patriarchy. A few lines from the Assamese poem are translated and extracted (below) to highlight the utopian, idyllic note implicit in recreating Henri Rousseau's painting:

I am a traveller in your idyllic dream!
That vernal forest seems so placid!
Nature is such a soothing presence!
The naked woman seems so safe and chaste!
The beasts look so satiated! There is not a hint of malice!
Birds, trees, and flowers look so enchanting!
A perfect harmony existing among all beings.

This scenario from Henri Rousseau's painting "The Dream" could imply the phase of human history when nature and women were not subjected to inhuman exploitation. The perfect felicity between the naked woman (here, "nakedness" perhaps implies the state of being uncontaminated by cultural trappings) and all beings that are part of an idyllic, uncorrupted interspecies relation, suggests a similar, non-hierarchical relationship between women and nature. Eco-critic Tina Amorok in her study titled "The Eco-Trauma and the Eco-Recovery of Being" considers this utopian phase as situated in "Eco-Being", which implies an existence that recognizes the interspecies interconnection of animals, humans, and the environment. According to James M. Cochran, "Eco-Being represents an eco-humanistic concept that imagines humans within a larger network with living and non-living human beings and environments" (59).

However, this utopian dream scenario of the poem, is succeeded by an imagery, which is quite horrifying. This terrifying image is a reference to the bronze sculpture of Alberto Giacometti, named "Woman with Her Throat Cut." If one contrasts or juxtaposes the first imagery with the second, what we perceive is that the utopian scenario of the first is replaced by the dystopian image of the latter. The graphic image of a brutally raped, dismembered, and disembowelled corpse of a woman perhaps, in Harekrishna Deka's poem, alludes to the way in which both women and nature have been seized, raped, exploited, cut, felled, and flagrantly violated by selfish, rapacious, exploitative humans through self-aggrandizing, unsustainable policies adopted by virtue of their valorising Enlightenment logic, human exceptionalism, colonialist practices, imperialism, capitalism and its ever-expanding meshes and matrices.

What is also remarkable while comparing the two contrastive scenes in the poem is that Henri Rousseau's impressionistic, colourful dream setting has an undefiled naked woman perfectly in sync with the idyllic surrounding, while Giacometti's monochromatic bronze sculpture is bare, without a backdrop, with perhaps the only context of being part of materialist culture. The absence of nature in the backdrop of Giacometti's bronze installation is perhaps indicative of

nature being flagrantly violated and decimated, just like the disrobed, dishonored, dismembered woman. A few lines from this section (translated by me) will highlight the graphic details of the violence unleashed:

I wake up from the reverie with a shudder
Because I can see
Lying splayed open
on the ground
with the throat cut,
A horrific sight of a disembowelled women
Who
was victim of inhuman rape
She
in Giacometti's macabre conception
Lies cold and spreadeagled
In the same hall where hangs
your enchanting painting -
Two contrasting ecological themes housed in the
same hall of the museum.
Or, does it imply the exploitation of two natures
At the hands of rapacious men?

Hence, by juxtaposing the utopian imagery of the first scene with the dystopian imagery of the second, Harekrishna Dekha's poem collapses the category of nature and women into an interconnected, assimilative category, both being victims of patriarchal exploitation. Thus, this poem provides ample scope for an eco-feminist reading as well, which is one among several approaches informing the environmental turn to literature. Therefore, Harekrishna Dekha's poem "Rousseau Saponat" (In Rousseau's Dream) is suggestive, subtle, and uses the tropes of metaphor and metonymy to encapsulate the universal environmental history, which has been exploited and devastated by human's utilitarian agenda and the culture of self-aggrandisement. It is "woke" insofar as it portrays the way in which ecology and women have been defiled, degraded, used and abused in quite brutal, visceral terms.

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