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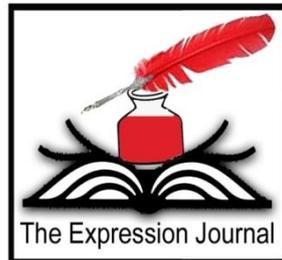
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**THE RISING ECO-CONSCIOUS VOICE FROM THE NORTHEAST:  
KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH**

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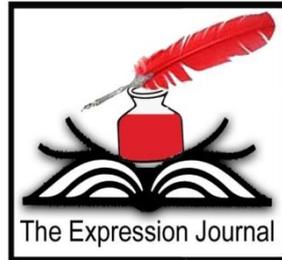
**Abstract**

The term 'Northeast' can be defined as a paragliding term that is used for the eight states of India – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. This Indian region has a rich nature centric cultural heritage. Nature has always been an important place in their life and literature. Though in the arena of world literature the concept of eco-consciousness is a modern phenomenon, deep feeling for nature and a harmonious relationship between man and nature can be seen in the Indian classical literature and particularly in the oral and written literature of the Northeast. Natural elements like river, mountain, forest, wildlife etc. always have significant impact on the literary persons of this region. This paper seeks to reveal the presence of eco-consciousness in the poetry of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih who is one among the strong rising eco-conscious voices from the Northeast, through an ecocritical analysis of his few selected poems. In those poems the poet celebrates the ecological glory of their region and at the same time criticizes irresponsible and anthropogenic human activities that are continually ravaging not only the biodiversity and ecosystem of their hill world but also the global biosphere in general. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih raises his voice against the obliteration of nature on one hand and on the other, emphasizes on its preservation with care by creating eco-consciousness through his poetry.

**Keywords**

North-East, Eco-consciousness, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih.

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## **THE RISING ECO-CONSCIOUS VOICE FROM THE NORTHEAST: KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH**

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### **Introduction:**

The term 'Northeast' can be defined as a paragliding term that is used for the eight states of India – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. This Indian region has a rich nature centric cultural heritage. Nature has always been an important place in their life and literature. Though in the arena of world literature the concept of eco-consciousness is a modern phenomenon, deep feeling for nature and a harmonious relationship between man and nature can be seen in the Indian classical literature and particularly in the oral and written literature of the Northeast. Natural elements like river, mountain, forest, wildlife etc. always have significant impact on the literary persons of this region. In this regard it is relevant to mention N.D. Chandra and Nigamananda Das. They have expressed their view in *“Myth and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from Northeast India”* that Indian English poetry from the North Eastern part of India “is rich in enshrining various aspects of the ecology, of the region,” and it is quite normal “with the poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness.” They have also sharply reacted to “the ruthless act of deforestation and oppression upon the Mother Nature in various ways by destroying the serenity of the nature, obliterating the natural environment, killing rare birds and animals and distorting the landscape and biodiversity.” (Chandra and Das 2007, pp. 35). This paper seeks to reveal the presence of eco-consciousness in the poetry of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih who is one among the strong rising eco-conscious voices from the Northeast, through an ecocritical analysis of his few selected poems. In those poems the poet celebrates the ecological glory of their region and at the same time criticizes irresponsible and anthropogenic human activities that are continually

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ravaging not only the biodiversity and ecosystem of their hill world but also the global biosphere in general. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih strongly raises his voice against the obliteration of nature on one hand and on the other, emphasizes on its preservation with care by creating eco-consciousness through his poetry.

Ecocriticism has emerged in the mid-1990s. The term derived from Greek words “*Oikos*” which means “household” and “*Kritis*” which means “judge”. So literally the term “ecocriticism” means “the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order” (Howarth, 1988, pp. 163). Gradually it focuses on the relationship between man and nature. William Rueckert coined the term ecocriticism in 1978 in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. Here he considers ecocriticism as the “...application of ecology and ecological concepts to the Study of literature,” (The Eco-criticism Reader, 1996, pp. 107). Later the term was used in two seminal works in 1990s, *The Eco-criticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. Glotfelty and Fromm state that “Nature is an interacting process, a seamless web and that nature is responsive to laws that it constitutes a value system with intrinsic opportunities and constraints upon human issues” (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, pp. 118), According to Buell ecocriticism is the “study of the relationship between literature and the environment...” (Buell, 1995, pp. 430).

The bilingual poet, fiction writer and playwright, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is from Shillong, the capital city of the state of Meghalaya. He belongs to a group widely known as the “Shillong poets.” On the one hand, eco-sensibility and eco-consciousness have gained important place in his work and, on the other hand, his deep emotion and sentiment for his own Khasi culture and tradition are expressed. The traditional Khasi culture which has always been eco-conscious is under the threat of modernity itself and this very issue finds expression through the poetry of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih who writes in both Khasi and in English. In this article, I examine six of his poems—“The Parking Lot”, “An Evening by the Source of the Umkrah River”, “Hiraeth”, “Rain Song 2000”, “Kynshi” and “Killer Instincts” taken from his poetic collection, *The Yearning of Seeds*, first published by Harper Collins, India in 2011.

Today ecological crisis becomes one of the major global threatenings. Now the world is suffering from several environmental issues like global warming, ozone layer depletion, different kinds of pollution, deforestation, eroding rain forests and many more. Considering the importance of the present situation, nations are taking various measures to protect our Mother Nature. Several environmental seminars, webinars, summits are organized today to rise eco-consciousness throughout the world. But nothing can be achieved until proper eco-sensibility is developed among the people. In his poem, “The Parking Lot” (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, pp.4-5), Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih criticizes the lack of sense of planning and lack of eco-consciousness among the administration of Shillong. Here he talks about The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or the Rio Summit which was held from 3 to 14 June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. In this summit several environmental issues had discussed:

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In Rio  
the world talked  
of global warming  
the ozone layer  
pollution  
and eroding rain forests. (Lines, 4-9)

But the actual utilization of these summits is possible only when proper eco-consciousness and eco-sensibility will be grown among the people. Later in the poem Nongkynrih proves this by describing how at Nan Polok, which is a lake and beautiful spot in Shillong, hundreds of pine trees have been cut down only for making a parking lot:

At Nan Polok  
the parking lot  
humbled down  
hundreds of our proudest  
pines. (Lines, 10-14)

This is obviously a great problem and here literature has a vital role to play.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih highlights the ecological degeneration of the Umiam Lake, locally known as *Dam sait*, in "An Evening by the Source of the Umkhrah River". (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, pp.17) Wah Umkhrah and Wah Umshyrpi are two important Meghalayan rivers. They flow through Shillong bringing their waters into the Umiam Lake which was the first hydel project in Northeast India. It had a great ecological importance as well. However, urbanization, industrialization and growing population make the rivers dirty and at the same time they bring a great challenge to the Umiam Lake ecosystem. Nongkynrih, as a responsible eco-conscious voice, does not ignore this destruction and here he deals with this environmental issue. Nongkynrih describes the pollution free and pure form of the river Umkhrah at the beginning of the poem as it flows through the hills:

By a lane winding through the hills  
'I stroll at leisure' along the Umkhrah River.  
Incredibly clear is the water up here,  
the blue sky snoozes on its bed of white sand. (Lines 1-4)

The fluvial lifestyle is emphasised by the poet here. He describes how the locals of the Umkhrah river valley are socio-economically dependent on this river:

Patrolling its banks are occasional fishermen;  
washing the clean earth from their sturdy feet,  
are country maidens, blushing and giggling  
on smooth, swarthy water-worn stones. (Lines 5-8)

But Nongkynrih brings the ending quite differently. Here he reveals the river's filthy state as it passes through urban areas:

Nobody cares that this limpid water,  
the bashful maidens, the tuneful pines  
are rolling down to the city

where life itself wallows in the filth. (Lines 13-16)

The Loktak project is one of the key ecological problems in Manipur, like the Umiam Lake hydro-electric project in Meghalaya. Loktak is Northeast India's largest freshwater lake. It is fed by the fresh water of two rivers – Khuga and Imphal. It has also considerable socio-economic significance to the locals. But the hydro-electric project causes major ecological degeneration to the area. The famous Manipuri poet Rajkumar Bhubonsana has raised his voice against the ecological issues due to this project in his poem "Should Light be put out or Mind Kept in Dark" (Bhubonsana and Singh, 2013, pp. 101-105). Here he laments thus:

Before Loktak Project came into existence  
it's said there was no light in Manipur  
Even after the commissioning of Loktak Project  
there is still no light  
on the other hand  
Loktak Project wastes paddy fields and fishes  
causes submergence under water  
spoils men  
takes away homesteads  
makes unavailable  
space for working  
causes resentment. (Lines 104-115)

Nongkynrih's another poem is "Hiraeth" (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, pp.29-30), which is a "Welsh word, loosely translated as various forms of longing" (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, footnote, pp.29). Here the poet reveals the eco-centric lifestyle of his community and expresses his nostalgia for the childhood days when life was simple, quiet, peaceful and close to nature. People lived harmoniously with nature, and the small moments of joy like waking up in the morning to a rooster's call and sounds of different birds, used to make them happy. The poet's longings get expression through recalling the past that is deeply rooted in his heart:

Out of that restlessness the past rises from dimly  
remembered songs and I watch my ghostly ancestors  
hasten from their dark pallets at the rooster's  
first reveille; warming up for their fields,  
boiling rice, packing their midday meal in leaves.  
I saw them arm themselves with hook-like whetted  
knives at the second. And slinging bamboo cones  
on bamboo straps. I watch them emerge from their  
huts at the third; bamboo torches twinkling in their  
hands, ancient songs and playful limericks flowing  
from their lips. (Lines 12-22)

The eco-centric lifestyle of the poet's ancestors is revealed here. They used to wake up at the "rooster's first reveille". They had several preparations before going to the field, which was their only source of livelihood, like boiling rice, packing midday meal in leaves etc. They used to sling bamboo cones on bamboo

straps, used to keep twinkling bamboo torches in their hands and used to sing ancient songs and playful limericks while going to their fields.

The poet earlier shows the consequences of globalization, urbanization and industrialization that are gradually destroying the relationship between man and nature. Modernization kills the melody of nature and it is reflected through the poet's lament:

No more do I hear the morning sounds of home:  
birds warbling, cicadas whining, crows cawing,  
chickens yapping about the yard and my uncle  
readying for the cement factory (Lines 4-7)

The natural sounds like warbling of the birds, whining of the cicadas, cawing of the crows and yapping of the chickens are no more heard now. Here Nongkynrih hints at the advent of industrialization in the Northeast through using the phrase "cement factory". These natural sounds are replaced by the strange chaos and cacophony:

Now, in the cycle of a year my sleep is often startled  
by raucous *azaans*, jangling bells,  
wild ululations, weird conch-shells,  
midnight carousals, spirituous carols,  
clamorous crackers, nocturnal heavy metals.

Strange sounds are crowding this town.  
Like the rooster, I too, seem  
to have become obsolete. (Lines 23-30)

So, nature is endangered before the relentless force of modernity and at the same time nature has reached on the verge of becoming "obsolete".

In "Rain Song 2000," (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, pp.38-40) Nongkynrih widens his focus to global climate change resulting from severe ecological imbalance. Here the poet emphasizes on the human-created ecological crisis through personification and by imposing corrosive individual agency on natural forces. Here he raises few questions that really make us pensive today:

So why is the sky weeping  
a river of unseasonable tears?  
Why is the wind shrieking night and day  
and pines beating their chests in pain? (Lines 21-24)

In this poem Nongkynrih creates a sense of urgency about the ecological crisis that threatens our whole existence through mingling folk symbolism with ugly modernity. He cautions us about global warming, the enormous amount of charcoal burning, ozone layer depletion, excessive use of polythene bags, the timber trade that encourages deforestation, *jhum* cultivation which is a "traditional slash and burn technique of cultivation" (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, footnote, pp. 39)), the Jaiñtia coal mine project, and the West Khasi uranium project:

Global warming, charcoal burning  
the ozone layer, polythene bags  
ecological imbalances, Jaiñtia coal mines

timber trade, *jhum* cultivation

West Khasi uranium and on and on. (Lines 28-32)

We are bound to answer those questions, but the resolution to this crisis obviously lies in our future eco-sensibility and eco-consciousness.

Here it is noteworthy that *jhum* cultivation has become one of the major environmental issues in the Northeast. It causes soil erosion, deforestation, flood etc. But this cultivation process is widely spreading now. It is frequently mentioned in the poetry of this region. Yumlam Tana, one of the famous poets from Arunachal Pradesh, often mentions *jhum* cultivation in his poetry while portraying his land. In his poetry "Will I Hear the Jew's Harp Again?" (Tana, 2015), Tana says:

Will I hear the Jew's harp again

Amidst the green *jhum* fields

Up in the mountains,

Under the canopy

Of the open blue sky? (Lines 1-5)

In the poem "I Knew of a Place in the Mountains" (Tana, 2015), Tana recalls the golden memories of the past and says, "About the locusts that ravaged the *jhum*" (line 45). Again, in the poem "Yai" (Tana, 2015) Tana mentions *jhum* while describing her dead mother's past activities:

When she rose at the sound of the rooster

Every day in the morning

To leave for her *jhum* fields

Seven kilometres down the slope of the rugged mountains. (Lines 36-40)

Though, the good news is that *jhum* cultivation is gradually declining its popularity with the increasing eco-consciousness among the people.

Nongkynrih's poem, "Kynshi" (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, pp, 43-45), is named after the River Kynshi which is "the largest river in the Khasi Hills, Meghalaya." (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, footnote, pp. 43). Here the poet reveals his anxiety about the miserable condition of this river and its environs, appealing earnestly to save the river and its ecosystem before it is too late:

Need to be preserved

in more than memories,

or the words of a backwater poet

ploughing clumsily through a foreign tongue. (Lines 14-17)

He says earlier the "sovereign river" (line 5) that has nourished "the truest Khasi braves" (line 4), is gradually decaying due to excessive greed of mankind "who cannot think beyond possessions" (line 45) and considers the value of life as "less than a pipe of tobacco" (line 30) in its quest to acquire natural resources. Deforestation is a burning issue here and as a true eco-conscious person, the poet expresses his inner pain and laments at the loss of greenery:

Inevitably, however, here too,

time has left its ugly wounds.

Pines like filth are lifted

from woodlands in truckloads.

Hills lose their summer green,  
Blasted into rocks,  
into pebble and sand  
and the sand is not spared. (Lines 36-43)

But here Nongkynrih also sings the song of nature's victory over time. Nature has the power to survive itself. Ignoring all the damage and ravages of time on itself, nature flows at its own whim:

But Kynshi goes on,  
however fickle the people,  
however treacherous their customs,  
Kynshi goes on  
with its flat sweeping flow  
to the valleys of Bangla. (Lines 49-54)

In "Killer Instincts" (*The Yearning of Seeds*, 2011, pp. 96) Nongkynrih deals with an ancient eco-friendly Khasi tradition. According to this tradition during pregnancy a woman and the members of her family do not kill any insect or animal as they believe that such an act may hurt the baby in the womb and therefore during that time:

Geckos scoured the walls,  
rats the kitchen.  
Spiders pestered our sleep,  
mosquitoes our limbs. (Lines 5-8)

In the final stanza the poet expresses his wonder about this custom. But in his exploration of this apparent wonder the poet actually criticizes the killer instinct of mankind:

I do not know  
how believers do it.  
For nine long months  
it was maddening  
not to be a killer. (Lines 9-13)

The poet here does advocacy for the ancestral customs and beliefs, hinting that in spite of considering them irrational, they must be seen through an eco-conscious point of view.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion it can be said that in the present scenario of environmental degeneration poets like Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is very relevant whose eco-centric poetry celebrates the ecological glory, warns about ecological degeneration and at the same time inspires us to be eco-conscious and eco-sensible thereby transmitting hope for a better ecologically sustainable future.

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