



## Eco-sensitivity in Nilim Kumar's poetry

Dr Bhubaneswar Deka

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Pandu College Guwahati, Assam  
(Affiliated to Gauhati University, India)

**ABSTRACT:** The present review aims to offer a reading of the poetry of Nilim Kumar (1961), one of the most admired contemporary poets of Assamese literature, India, selecting some poems from his last anthology Nilim Kumaror Nirbachta Kobita (Selected poems of Nilim Kumar, 2017), focusing on eco-sensitivity in his representations of birds, animals, reptiles and natural phenomena. An ecocritical reading of his poetry definitely shows various questions of ecological interconnectedness and environmentalism. This critique also provides an idea of Nilim Kumar's poetic technique as he mostly builds his nature texts with implications of metaphorical as well as magical narrative.

Widely acclaimed as poet of socio-cultural concerns, love, humanity, his poems have been translated into several languages of the world including English, German, French, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Kannad, Nepali etc. A winner of Indian awards like Uday Bharati National Award (1991), the Raza Foundation Award (2004) and the Shabda Award (2010), his anthologies of poems include Aachinaar Ashukh (Illness of Achina, 1985), Barikonwar (Gypsy boy, 1990), Panit Dhou, Dhoubor Mach (Waves in water, Waves are fish, 1990), Swapnar Relgaari (Trains of dreams, 1992), Seluoi Godhuli (Mossy evening, 1993) Topanir Bagicha (Garden of sleep, 1996), Dhunia Tirotabor Aur Anya Kabita (Beautiful women and other poems, 2000), Kailoir para Apunak Bhalpam (I would love you from tomorrow, 2001), Nilim Kumar Premar Kavita (Love poems of Nilim Kumar, 2001), Moi Tumulakar Kavi (I'm your poet, 2002), Jonak Valpoaa Tirotaajani (The woman who loves moonlight, 2002) Kabita Samagra (Poetry collection, 2003), Amar Akashat Charijoni Jon (Four Moons in our sky, 2004), Nimakh Aaru Ekoishta Kabita (Salt and twenty one poems, 2004), Narakashur (Assam King Narakasur, 2005), Atmagatha (Self-stories, 2007), Nilim Kumaror Shrestha Kobita (Great poems of Nilim Kumar, 2009), Khali Ghar (Vacant house, 2012) and Nilim Kumaror Nirbachta Kobita (Selected poems of Nilim Kumar, 2017). His poems have been published in English magazines like Indian Literature (Sahitya Academy, Delhi), Chandrabhaga (Editor, Indian poet Jayanta Mahapatra), Poetry International (Rotterdam, the Netherlands). Kumar went to France and Bangladesh for attending poets' meets.

**KEYWORDS:** Deep ecologists; ecocriticism; environmental activism; magical narrative; Nilim Kumar; Nilim Kumaror Nirbachta Kobita (Selected poems of Nilim Kumar, 2017)

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### I. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that the Indians gained knowledge of the natural bond between human beings and nature, among others, from the teachings of oldest scriptures of Hinduism like the Vedas, Puranas, Charak Samhita much earlier than spreading the canonical notion of the significant intellectual literary movement ecocriticism that emerged in the 80 in America and early 90s in the UK. But the latest disasters being persistently wreaked in ecosystems and environments by man start alarmingly shaking each and everyone; and as an upshot, an environmental consciousness grow as movement with thought lines of the Deep ecologists and ecocritics during the twentieth century. Norwegian eco-philosopher A. Naess, seeking a mass participation in the drive for human's fellow feeling towards nature, highlights this 'consciousness' so that the global people can learn how to behave towards nature and make this space of the human and the non-human a place of unremitting happiness (Naess, 2008). This very idea of nature and our accountability towards it also thuds at an early work by British critic Raymond Williams in the 70s where the author, throwing critical and conscientious luminosity on 16<sup>th</sup> century English literary perceptions, explicates the conflict between rural and urban conditions regarding nature representations (Raymond, 1973). These are not the only attempts in this field; an instance of ecological awareness in the early 70s is detected in Joseph W. Meeker, an American Professor of Comparative literature

and an ex-ranger of US National Park Service in Alaska, who blames western cultural tradition for being responsible for environmental catastrophe. His environmental morals embedded in holistic approach to nature, reflect realization of our limitations in nature; and by "comedy" he assertively indicates our liberation (Meeker, 1997). The concepts of Deep ecology and others of the type with environmental consciousness gradually find best expressions literature globally. Indian literary perception as hauler of ecological design with man-nature interface, all forms of catastrophe and its cultural as well as ethical forces, could, in fact, claim the highest scope as the country is engulfed in multiplicity of physical environment which arrays from Himalayan belt in the north to southern plateaus and from the Bay of Bengal in the East to the deserts of the western part. While tracing back to the initial trend of ecocriticism in Indian scholarship we offer credit to Dr Nirmal Selvamony (of Central University of Tamil Nadu, India) who for the first time introduces Tamil Poetics, a course to see translated Tamil texts on ecocritical perspective, in 1980 at Madras Christian College. His three serial petite publications (jointly with Nirmaldasan) namely tinai adds a scholarly shift to the conceptual sphere. Later, the Madras Christian College English Department organizes the 3rd World Conference and the 11th All India English Teachers' Annual Conference in 2004. That is considered as the first event in India addressing environmental issues in literature. Scott Slovic, editor of the journal ISLE, (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment) initiates the idea of launching an Indian ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment). Hence, the period 1980-2004 remains as dawn of Indian ecocriticism.

The ecocritical awareness or this western concept has already wobbled the North Eastern states of India in the first part of the twenty first century. Critics of the discipline look at poetical works of Mamang Dai, who mostly talk of man-nature communication and environmental catastrophe, (Arunachal Pradesh), Tamsula Ao, who is concerned about man's identity through nature (Nagaland), Kh Choaba and L Kamal Singh, who talks of identity (Manipur). Our study contends that in Assam, Nilim Kumar, Anubhav Tulashi and others belonging to the first part of the twenty first century prove their constant engagement with physical environment and its latest state of degradation.

Ecocriticism, being the study of relationship between literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, unearths environmental concerns of the authors; and various ways how the authors treat the concept of nature. This canonical approach also reviews and traces cultural history of physical environments alongside its human interaction. Cheryll Glotfelty, a professor of literature and the environment at the University of Nevada, Reno, outlines the concept in his much celebrated work *The Ecocriticism Reader* as "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996). Lawrence Buell, Professor of American Literature Emeritus at Harvard University, maintains ecocriticism as "study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell: 1995).

## **II. DEVASTATIONS TO NATURE: A QUINTESSENCE OF A SITUATION IN BHUT (THE GHOST)**

With this idea in mind, we make a probe from ecocritical point of view into the poetic world of one of the most popular poets, Nilim Kumar from India's north-east region Assam. While instituting a thorough scrutiny on the thematic and formative patterns of his poetry we discover that most of his poetic renderings truthfully expose the poet's engagement with physical environment. It is also loaded with a rhetorical question arising out of the present crisis in nature, and that is, we have been seriously unethical in our treatment towards nature.

His much-celebrated poem *Bhut (The Ghost)* included in his current anthology *Nilim Kumaror Nirbachta Kobita (Selected poems of Nilim Kumar, 2017)*, which is replete with environmental consciousness, is a quintessence of a situation that entails attempts of civilized men who seek to be happy bringing devastations to nature. It has a striking launch:

"Don't utter in fear  
If your house is trembling at night,  
Or you hear some sounds on the roof,  
If you see your house curtains waving  
Or you hear flute tunes rising up from down the floor,  
Don't utter in fear."

This quizzical indication bears a fact that the abrupt happenings, as the poet feels in a house compound, are some actions of the souls of birds and other things of eco-sphere. The poet maintains that civilized men become hosts sending the members of the bio-sphere homeless, cutting trees and destroying their habitats. But the poet reminds each and every one that these nature members never trod from their places, but remain as souls everywhere:

"But you cannot hurl them away  
They stay there instant

In their own places  
Only you stay at day time  
And they at night.”

This poetic piece makes interesting reading when the poet glorifies the objects of nature valuing them as innocent specimens of creation. Ecocritics mainly talk of a space in nature and its far-reaching ethical zone. Only it is man whose unwanted interaction with it is the most disparaging part of tragedy.

The poet, at the final part of the work, forwards a rhetorical question as “And hence, your house trembles at night/you hear sounds on the roof...”. It is nothing but a reminder to all of us-- men should think of nature as their best companion and enjoy its benevolent forces as can as possible. Men should not create an atmosphere of aesthetic and ethical dilemma and make the whole of the globe a space of tribulations and destructions.

In the very recent years, those who practice in the ecocritical discipline engage themselves paying serious heed towards writings of environmental activists. Nilim Kumar from Assam seems to sincerely espouse the ideals of environmental activism by writing such a poem on nature and men's affliction upon it. His poetic renderings are especially rich in his insight to nature and its connotations to cultural space. What and how he speaks through poetry is always startling. Arundhati rightly sums up: “Nilim Kumar's poems are oddly haunting, and far more sophisticated than their surfaces suggest. There are moments of sudden insight in throwaway lines and insights more penetrating than one might initially suppose” (A, Subramaniam: Poetry International Web, 2013).

Creation on all fronts on earth always bears a meaning ranging from the largest animal to the microscopic bacteria. Any devastation being meted out to ecosphere by humans creates havoc not only to its living organisms, but also to its overall milieu. The ecocritics institute a serious probe into reflections of such situation available in a literary text. From this point of view we observe that the poet Nilim Kumar remains apologetic toward human's redundant intervention in nature. The destruction, being done to nature, as the poet regrets, brings miseries to the non-humans sending them homeless. In the fourth part of the poem is ecocritically noteworthy as the poet writes:

“Flocks of distant birds  
Had their rest on that fig tree,  
They sang songs  
Made chirpings  
And many of them built nests.  
The sounds that you hear on the roof  
Are sounds of the souls,  
They are in search of their old homes,  
Places where they sang songs  
Nests they lost in utter despair.”

This catastrophe created unfeelingly by humans and allowed to approach is the greatest of its kind that takes place constantly in any places on earth at present day times. The poet's interpretation here reminds us of this situation and this particular stanza also emerges as a warning to those who are persistently engaged in this act of devastation. Ananya S Guha in an article entitled Poetry and the Art of Being rightly comments on Nilim Kumar's poetry as an embodiment of mourning and loss of things: “Nilim's poems ambiguous, recalcitrant and poignant drive home the artistic dilemma of poetry, poets, love and death. There is nostalgia, mourning almost for things and people gone” (Guha: 2017). And the above stanza carries the poet's mourning for the living organisms.

The present poem is lucid in its linguistic pattern, but it carries hidden meanings. His artistic intersection in the wilderness and connotation with human intervention lead him to a domain where he is capable of assuming a position to authorize his ideals of environmental ethics. Bhut identifies the poet as bearer of anthropocentric ideals since the work centrally brings forth human interface with nature. The poet never forgets to make an appeal for fellow feeling towards nature. Human interface with natural objects is a common thing on earth, but men should apply their power of rationality for the betterment of the environment.

### **III. CHILDHOOD MEMORY AND OBSESSION FOR WILDERNESS IN SHIAL (FOX)**

In another poem entitled Fox, Nilim Kumar recounts his geographical memories of his childhood days with a difference. On the one hand, it brings him back to the time when he, as a child, was less matured to make out what life means to him. On the other hand, he expresses his strong obsession towards the creatures like foxes in the jungle. In between his desire for this mysterious animal and his rage for them, the poet draws a note of

melancholy about life and its happenings. Nature, in the poem, represents a world of mystery where he submits to its core forces as a human being. He writes:

“He was the only inexplicable animal  
In the land of my life's jungle.”

Fox is ecocritically significant in the sense that it conveys the poet's wild wish changing the life of the animal to a bullock allowing it to pull a cart. Ecocritics can trace this poetic rendering as a natural representation for a situation where we observe prototypes of human beings in animals. In the final part of the poem, we again observe that the poet, as is done in Bhut, shows his serious concern about destructions in nature. He does not find trace of his childhood friend (fox); everything in nature or the wilderness is now taken up by concrete structures. The poet is seriously melancholic about the absence of such mysterious animals in his memorable jungles; and with this environmental imagination the poet seems to suggest lessons of social responsibility and ecological 'oneness'. He writes:

My dreamy land is now gone  
It's concrete everywhere,  
The plants now breathe through glasses  
Oh! Where has it gone  
My old, mysterious friend  
In the jungle of glasses?

#### **IV. STUDYING HUMAN LONELINESS IN THE VERANDA:**

Through another significant poem *The Veranda* the poet scrupulously deals with human loneliness with a symbol of trailing woody-stemmed plant:

As everybody keeps  
I too keep an earthen tub in my veranda  
From where  
A vine on my tutoring  
Embraces a concrete pillar,  
And asks me always,  
Oh! How much would I keep on doing it  
Around such a lifeless pillar?

It is true that Nilim Kumar lives in a world of solitude constantly launching a search for meaning of life. Fox is undoubtedly a reflection of such search. His acquaintances, constant concerns, involvements with memories of an animal inhibit his deep perception on the organisms of the biosphere. He himself said: “My childhood became increasingly tattered for sham human behavior and for the sheer lack of love. And then- I got the gift of an awesome power-solitude. My poems are an expression of my solitude. Amidst the unending clash with my consciousness while living a life absolutely unwished for, I think, that, to celebrate life I do not have people by my side, what I do have is immense nature beside me. I try to unveil this boundless nature with aesthetics. That is why, you find water in my poems, or moonbeam in the lips of water; and that is why water treads in and out through my house.” (NEZINE: 2016)

#### **V. ECOLOGICAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS: PROBING INTO MAGICAL AND METAPHORICAL APPLICATIONS**

Nilim Kumar's treatment of nature appears mostly through magical narratives. His much-talked-about poem *Gochor Malita* (Ballad on trees) begins as:

A tree enters angrily into the Municipality office  
And begins to burst into tears hitting its head  
On the Mayor's table.  
The Mayor's room is filled with  
Falling leaves.  
The glass-table dazzles in drops of tears of the tree.  
Then after, tree goes along the small road of the town.  
Releasing mysterious story of town.

With this magical narrative and metaphorical implications the poet conveys the woes of the plants which fall victim to human torture. This poem depicts the condition of wilderness. It ends with a more pathetic scene when the tree in front of all dies on the floor of the Municipal office. This poetic piece has been indicative of crisis in global wilderness where humans ruthlessly inflict various kinds of wreckages perennially. His poem *Rain* is one the greatest embodiments of a situation as to how nature can have impact on man's psychology. Rain, as the poet metaphorically as well as magically says, stops a running bus on the way and gets into it for a travel. Gradually it enters into the poet's heart and starts flooding his heart with incessant drops:

The Rain stops the bus  
And promptly enough  
Boards on it for a travel.

Nevertheless, Nilim Kumar seems to prove, through this poem, Greg Garrard's notion of nature as "what we call 'nature' is often a forgotten or pastoralised remnant of human culture." (Greg, 2014).

#### **VI. FOCUSING ON REPTILE WOES IN AAGAGAR (THE PYTHON):**

Aagagar (The python) appears as:  
That day heard each and everyone  
Snapping sounds of the vertebrae  
Crawling along the main road.  
The vehicle goes turned their nose up facing hardship  
In traffic jams.  
With short breath people got startled on the footpath.  
.....  
Then along the staircases of a seven-storied apartment  
It inched up to a seven-cornered chamber  
In labor pain.

Clearly the poem deals with more mechanical states of urbanization and predicament of the creatures of the bio-sphere. A python, with its circuitous progression, is believed to be passing along a road of a city for which vehicular rush creates a hardship for all roaming here and there. Actually the python shows its abnormal behavior as it is in gestation period. What is more important in the literary rendering is the poet holds this situation responsible for precipitous decline of wildlife from earth.

Kate Dunning is of the view that ecopoetry 'has consciously been influenced by sensitivity to ecological thinking, especially in the area of energy flow/retention, cyclical renewal, bioregionalism, and the interdependence of all organisms with an ecosystem (Kate, 2013). The reading of Nilim Kumar's poetry suggests us to believe that undoubtedly he belongs to the category of ecopoets whose ecological emphasis is entwined with environmental justice, restoration and conservation. Nilim Kumar's eco-sensitivity, as we observe, correlates a slogan for justice, sustainability and social responsibility. He can be assigned to the level of Temsula Ao and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (from India's north-east region) who have equally shown their environmental awareness in the treatments of their subjects.

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