

Poetry in the Age of Climate Change: Ecological Anxiety and Human–Nature Relationships in Contemporary Indian Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is emerging as an issue of the ecological and cultural imagination that fuels fears of environmental loss, cultural loss, and the alterity of the human-nonhuman nexus. In this paper, examination of images of trees, rivers, mountains, forests, landscapes, etc., found in Indian poetry is done to demonstrate how the cited poets (a group of Indian poets) shared their representations of environmental crisis, away from questions of memory, cultural belonging, genealogies, and indigenous epistemologies. The position is a qualitative, interpretive one. Theoretically, the perspective finds support in the reality that, the interdependence of the human and other-than-human is significant for existence. While evidence shows that the cited poets' concern for ecological loss; it winds up being connected to cultural and emotional loss, This necessitates dehumanizing perspectives on the other-than-human while engendering regional, reciprocal relations between human and non-human planetary communities in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism; Climate Change; Anxiety; Environmental Poetry; Human–Nature Relationship; Indigenous Knowledge.*

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is now one of the most significant issues of the modern world, which has intensified various other vital issues such as environment and culture. Its manifestation is heard in the form of wayward rains, rising temperatures, in floods and droughts, in eroding forests and declining flora and fauna, in water shortage and changing geology and landscape. These ecological realities are intimately attached with the human realities of migration, urbanization, development, industrialization, and marginalization in India. Literature, mainly poetry, could be one of the significant representations of such ecological realities at emotional and cultural level. Present day Indian poets are probing ecological degradation not as a scientific and political issue but as a non-material reality with loss, anxiety, displacement and memory.

This article explores the ways, the selected Indian poets, respond to the rapidly changing ecological conditions and conveying the significance of human relationship with nature. It examines the poetic texts to trace how the visuals of the river, the forest, trees, animals, seasons, eco-forms, terrain, and climatic conditions are used as source of eco-critique and articulation of habitat loss. The study concentrates upon the poetic use of nature in conveying ecological insecurities and environment loss, through exploring diverse approaches to nature in the poetic texts of Gieve Patel, Mamang Dai, Tamsula Ao, to list a few. Some poems seem to seize upon nature as tradition, expression of identity and carry the experience of life-long attachment and affinity towards it; while others seem to exhibit the

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devastation, estrangement, ecological grief and intervention. Later, the paper presents the understanding of nature not simply as context but rather as the living presence that forms the sense of individual and shared identities.

One of the major themes concerned is the problem of the anthropocentric and ecological views where the anthropocentric emphasizes the idea of the domination of the human world and its interrelationship with the nature whereas the ecological emphasizes the unity of human and non-human life and the mutual dependence of the two worlds. Contemporary Indian poetry is known for the tendency of collapsing the boundary between human and natural in describing the rivers, trees and forests, animals, and the very land itself as possessing an aesthetic, cultural, and even sentimental value. When the poetic art is concerned with the deterioration of environment, the alienation from nature can be interpreted as cultural alienation and personal alienation. The purpose of the study is to find out how the ecological anxiety is revealed through poetic images and metaphors and how the poet diverges from the tradition to understand the relation between poet and nature in contemporary Indian poetry, which can contribute to ecological awareness and turn the crisis into an aesthetic, sentimental, and cultural experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study will adopt the qualitative, interpretive and text focused approaches in analyzing some select twentieth century Indian poems, through relevant samples, which represent climate change, ecological anxiety and human-environment relationships. The primary texts are Indian twentieth century poems of Indian poets, whose texts reflected preoccupation with climate change, ecological loss and landscape through ecological anxiety and the human-nature relationships either directly or indirectly. Mamang Dai, Tamsula Ao, Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitre and Arundhati Subramaniam may be the key samples, but some contemporary samples may also be used to complement a few other related poems. It will be first and foremost guided by the relevance of the texts' interaction with the ecological and cultural-semiotic references as an ongoing engagement with the images of environmental articulation in the poets' textual writings.

The research approach will chiefly involve close reading of the poetry, due emphasis being given to each poet's use of imagery, metaphors, symbolism, personification, poetic voice, landscape, and depiction of ecological change. The recurrence of images (such as rivers, trees, forests, drought, water-logged landscapes) across the poets' work will be examined to study how ecological meanings are created within them, as well as the possibility that the extent of ecological destruction will have on memory, individual, and community identity and sense of belonging, community, and cultural traditions will be explored. As well as addressing why it remains relevant, whenever appropriate, issues of differences between urban and rural environs, as well as indigenous or local-knowledge conceptions of natural and cultural events and modernization will be considered. Poetry is not 'provided' as the scientific registration of climate change but this is a 'relating' of it in the terms of its formation in affect, culture, and imagination of ecological emergency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of Ecocriticism, a branch of literary studies has provided interpretative tools to analyze the connection between literature and the physical environment. Early ecocritical studies, for example, with respect of Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, have denounced the anthropocentric perspective that has historically characterized the study of literature and overlooked the study of the non-human world. Comparing nature through an interdisciplinary approach on one side and the reflection on the environmental imagination on the other, ecocritical theory formulated a definition of Ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, paving the way to eclectic ecological literary criticism. The latter took poets, who use language to break the boundaries between the human realm and the rest of the physical universe, into consideration. Ecocriticism's recent development is to address issues such as climate change, environmental justice, multispecies, greening issues, and environmental trauma.

In the Indian context, there has been greater focus on how nature and ecology are represented in Indian writing in English; Indian ecocritical writing is also different from simply ecocentric scholarship because questions

of environment are often linked to colonialism, development, displacement, indigenous cultures, poverty, gender and cultural identity. For writers from India's Northeast, for example, Indian ecocritical writing often links landscape with memory, community, lineage and indigenous identity. Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao's poetry has received focused attention as their representations of land, river, forests, community, and memory have been found to illustrate how ecologic and cultural identity can be closely linked. Their work also suggests that nature should not be seen only as an external object but also as an essential part of cultural life. This kind of scholarship is useful for this research because it suggests that the destruction of environment can also symbolize the shattering of cultural memory and traditional lifestyles.

This study also examines the ecology of poets like Gieve Patel and Dilip Chitre. While Gieve Patal's 'On Killing a Tree' has been studied for the cruelty that humans wreak on nature; 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree' by Dilip Chitre can be read as a metaphor of the tropes of flight, deforestation, development, memory, and the loss of a familiar ecocultural environment. As these two works illustrate, standard anti-pollution and anti-carbon tropes are not the only ways in which Indian poets have contributed to eco-politics. The death of a tree itself, of a specific landscape, or in fact of a characteristic ecocultural system may be a metaphor for (post)colonial discontent and displacement, per se. In late 20th century Indian English poetry, attention has been paid to the implications of ecological melancholy, climate, fear, flora, agency, and the event of the time scape of human-nature relations. Even so, the critical conversations between less and more recent Indian poets on these issues deserves a cross-temporal comparison that addresses simultaneously the implications of eco-anxiety and the ongoing process of contesting Indian identity, memory, culture, and human-nature dualism.

This is an oversubscription, yet it would prove to be crucial to take forth from this existing scholarship by orienting around climate change and ecological anxiety as both experienced and imagined the nature of the ecocritical existing body of scholarship. Rather than, merely compiling, the use of nature as a poetic device, also identifies the central questions of how the ecological crisis reconfigures the emotional and cultural intimacy of human and non-human lives with each other, and extends the thinking to poets from various geographies to spell out how environmental change is visually imagined in recent Indian poetry. In this way, this project would sit at the confluence of ecocriticism, climate humanities, cultural criticism and contemporary Indian poetry with a strong emphasis on how poetry imagery outlines the emotional and cultural losses of ecological crisis.

DISCUSSION

One of the most powerful images of the violence of killing nature is to be found in Gieve Patal's 'On Killing a Tree'. The poem contradicts the presumption that a tree can be wishfully killed: It takes much time to kill a tree is a statement that bestows upon the tree the qualities of resilience and agency that may be lacking in tender plant or even other beings. Patel reminds us that the tree has: 'It has grown / Slowly consuming the earth' (1-2). The entity of the tree is so far from being static; it is an organic thing carrying a 'history' of growth and perseverance. Nevertheless, because it is such a thing, the responsible human observer must do enormous violence to it, to destroy what nature has kept alive. The last phase of destruction is the root 'the most sensitive, hidden,' (28) which has a power similar to that of the mythical Athena. Patel carries the metaphor further by maintaining that the tree is a 'tough living thing' when he notes that 'It takes much time to kill a tree' (1). The relationship between the tree and its surroundings is heighten when it is seen as involving, 'absorbing / Years of sunlight air water' (7-8). The descriptive clause 'The bleeding bark will heal' (12) reveals the regenerative qualities of the non-human environment. The focus on the uprooting in the poem may be read eco-critically as condemning a form of violence carried out by all humans, not only the imperialist: it demonstrates to the reader the intense complexity of life.

The felling of the banyan tree is developed along similar lines in Dilip Chitre's 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree', but he explicitly links ecological destruction with many cultural factors, including memory and displacement. The banyan is iconic of the speaker's childhood and his childhood memories of the place, as well as of tradition, which views trees as sacred. The narrator says 'Trees are sacred' (5), which draws a cultural relationship between man and nature. The action of chopping down the banyan, can be read as a struggle between traditional values and modern

concepts of space and progress. The tree is cut down, and in its absence, numerous birds and insects are also eliminated. Dilip Chitre links ecological destruction directly to cultural memory, displacement, and modernity in his poem. The poem begins with cultivating a sense of traditional cultural reverence for nature through the grandmother's statement that 'Trees are sacred' immediately followed by the counterpoint that 'Felling them is a crime but he massacred them all' (5-6). The contrast between these two statements articulates the tension that exists between the ecological consciousness prefigured in the grandmother's speech and the modern attitude of human dominance over nature. The banyan is constructed as an ancient and vital presence through the reference to its 'roots [which] lay deeper than all our lives' (9); the tree, thus, symbolizes a traditional, cultural and temporal significance that surpasses individual human lives.

Also, a set of ecological consequences resulting from this measure is subtly implied in the narration; by writing 'Insects and birds began to leave the tree' (15), Jackson subtly suggests the shattering of the lone banyan at the level of non-human existence. The description of the felling as 'this slaughter' also foregrounds the act of destruction as a violent act. Finally, the move from Baroda to Bombay (where there is 'no tree / Which grows and seethes in one's dreams' (24) can be read as turning the banyan into an image of ecological memory and loss. Chitre here presents environmental destruction not only as the loss of one tree, but as the loss of a landscape and an entire web of human-non-human relations. The ecological is studied by the emotional and the cultural or personal reducing which point to an ecological devastation. It serves as a contextual reminder of personal, cultural grief. Chitre's poem presents ecological degradation as a loss of the web of relationships that exist between tree and bird, between landscape and memory, between local, individual and cultural traditions. The poem can in this way be read as a poetic instantiation of ecological anxiety, where environmental destruction is equated with a loss of coherent personal and cultural life.

The environmental and specific cultural associations become even more prominent in the poetry of Mamang Dai and Tamsula Ao. In Mamang Dai's poetry, the landscape takes on associations with history and community, chronicling mother earth, beloved soil, image of home and place of origin and take on connections to memory, community, ancestors, and identity. A prime example of the mountain's association with identity is his poem 'The voice of the Mountain.' Instead of the mountain, being a geographically perceived object, is used as passive scenery, Ranjan notes that 'Dai manages to turn this commonplace anthropocentric scene into an object of narration looking at it from the mountain itself' (304). Dai proceeds to make the mountain narrator and observer, which critics argue grants nature a voice through her and elevates the land above the day-to-day world. 'From where I sit on the high platform' (1), the mountain announces, 'I can see the ferry lights crossing / criss-crossing the big river' (Dai 1-3). The mountain's elevated position puts it 'on a historical and ecological vantage point broader than those of individual human experience' (Ranjan 304). The mountain 'familiar with 'the lights / that run a reflection on nature' (Dai 4-5), 'knows not just the 'towns that stretch' but 'the estuary mouth' (Dai 4-5), providing the natural landscape with memory and knowledge. This subversion of the natural world's passive relationship to humans subverts human exceptionalism, for it makes the world of humans simply one element of a larger ecology.

Dai further links nature to cultural preservation while the poem notes, 'we live in territories forever ancient and new' (12). The 'territories' are mapping both space and society and imply that cultural identity and stability are rooted in a connection with the land. It is further understood in the line, 'I also leave my spear leaning by the tree' (14). The tree comes to be a part of a landscape of culture where humans and natural resources exist side by side. The mountain presents itself as, 'an old man sipping the breeze/that is forever young' (16-17), a metaphor that opposes the mountain with other 'Hapaxanthic' and 'Hap synthesis' of human existence versus the ongoing inertia of natural entities. The metaphor places ecology and existence into opposition with human familiarity and development. Dai converges nature as an area in which people test and redefine relationships with it as much as the land itself.

The most significant form that the poem's opposition to anthropocentrism takes is in its presentation of the mountain that echoes, 'My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks' (19), and, which later describes itself as, 'I am the desert and the rain. / The wild bird that sits in the west' (23-24). The speaker then puts forward the idea of breaking down the barrier between things (things, in the words of the poem) to reveal their interconnected unity, since it ascribes

of even rocks that, 'as rocks know, burning in the sun's embrace' (29). This personification definitely functions for ecocriticism as a kind of way of imagining the earth from outside itself. One should do away with the idea of nature as something for human use or observation, as the poem enters into a tradition that (through its re-imagining of natural things) instigates us to think of and talk to the earth from an alter-human perspective.

Finally, Dai ties the ecological space back to memory and to cultural identity, further emphasizing the significance of the poem to the argument surrounding ecological anxiety and cultural loss. Toward the end of the poem, the mountain refers to itself as 'the place where memory escapes / the myth of time' (43-44) before concluding with the word 'I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain' (45). As a result, the mountain becomes the repository of histories, outside the span of individual human lives. This intimate relationship between history and landscape is in particular, crucial in regard to the indigenous experience of 'place': that land may have also served as a repository and source of history, identity, resources, and shared memory. Dai's work so broaden the conception of environmental consciousness to include the preservation of the memories and histories bound up in the earth, not merely its natural resources.

On top of that, in Dai's 'The River', the river is related to the notions of permanence and motion while the natural world becomes a storehouse for a shared archive of memories. Dai's poetic treatment of the landscape is so well suited to an ecocritical interpretation because human identity is closely enmeshed with the natural environment within which it is situated. Mamang Dai's 'Small Towns and the River' makes a valuable contribution to an ecocritical viewpoint because it portrays the river as a living being within the social and ecological fabric of its surroundings. Her repeated assertion that 'The river has a soul' (12-18) immediately breathes life into a merely natural geographical feature. Dai writes that the river 'removes land / like a torrent of grief' (13-14), turning a natural event into an ecological and emotional tableau. The river seems to take on a conscious agency in the line 'The river held the breath of its seeking / towards a land of fish and stars' (15-17, p. 29). These types of imagery ascribe agency to a living entity as well as forge a closer bond between the individual, the human and the natural landscape.

Dai's river becomes a living force, an eternal being in Dai's poetry, not merely a feature of the landscape. A third way in which the poem makes a distinction between the individual life span and eternal continuity of nature is through emphasizing the difference between the fleeting life of humans and the enduring spirit of nature. The river 'know(s), stretching past the town' (19) and 'running from the first drop of rain to dry earth / and mist on the mountaintops' (20-21). Its intelligence encompasses the entire water cycle of its environment. The statement that 'the river knows / the immortality of water' (22-23) accentuates the emphasis on ecological continuity; humans are repeatedly made aware of their mortality in the poem, whereas the river remains a symbol for vitality and fertility. The environment because of this offers a timeline so much larger than that of one human life that it becomes philosophically significant eco-critically as it brings the cyclical processes of nature back into focus.

In this same time frame, Dai relates the ecological consciousness to his own concern with culture and psychological anxiety. The interlocutor notes, 'small towns grow with anxiety /for the future' (26-27). These anxious cultures are not only aware of human mortality but are also uncertain about the continued existence of life. The landscape of the river, trees, mountains among others may be intrinsically part of the community's cultural environment. So, Dai's oscillation between images of death and childhood memories, natural recirculation and ritual implies it is actually hard to distinguish ecological experience from that of culture. The lines 'In the cool bamboo, / restored in sunlight, / life matters, like this (30-32) introduces an ecological minute of restoration following Dai's images of death and anxiety. The bamboo's restoration in direct sunlight is an affirmation of life. It merely implies the natural world's cyclical nature.

In this way, "Small Towns and the River" expands on the environmental anxiety of Patel's 'On Killing a Tree' and Chitre's 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree.' While the poet Patel emphasizes the violence of cutting a tree and in the poem by Chitre, the felling of the banyan tree both embodied the cultural and historical loss that accompanies the cutting, Dai imagines a living, knowing, and culturally significant form of the river. The repetition of the statement that 'The river has a soul' (12-18) in particular has great significance because the poet Dai embodies

a worldview in which nature is not seen outside of human activity. The poem so gives strong support for the larger argument that the contemporary Indian poem mediates ecological crisis not only through depicting environmental destruction but also through asking questions of cultural memory, mortality, and death, indigenous knowledge, and human/nature interconnection. For this reason, Dai's poem is highly relevant in reference to ecological anxiety in the climate change epoch.

Dai's conceptualization of nature offers a stark contrast with the Western notion of nature as 'other' to culture. Dai conceptualizes the landscape as embedded in the life of the indigenous people. This has special relevance in case of tribes, since the loss of land might mean the loss of aspects of their culture, such as cultural memory. Temsula Ao's poetry examines the relationship between environmental and cultural loss. Her poetry is largely rooted in the ecology and cultural practices of Nagaland, in which nature becomes an intrinsic aspect of community, collective memories and cultural identities. In her poem, "My Hills", Ao emphasizes ecology as a dimension of human experiences as much as it is a natural entity. Ao's "My Hills" explains that change in ecology initiates the evolution of a new 'imagination' rooted in new entities of human culture.

The sense of place as provided by the poem first sets the scene of natural surroundings up with seasonally, with the poet recounting how "the hills echoed / With the wistful whispers / Of autumnal leaves / Fluttering to their fall" (13-18). As such, the hills are not only standing as a physical space but also animate space suffused with feeling, seasons, and recalling of displaced memories. Still, this idyllic knit between mankind and nature is briefly broken when the poet admits that, "But today / I no longer know my hills, / The birdsong is gone" (22-23). The disappearance of the birdsong itself indicates the ecological imbalance and precarious cultural identity. The poet's ignorance of her hills reflects how far the environment has been changed and how its modification affects her sense of self-identity. Placing the environmental degradation within her immediate psychological disposition, Ao in the ecocritical context equates the destruction of the natural environment with dread of otherworldliness and cultural dislocation.

Ao's poetry illustrates that when landscapes change and disappear, the histories, practices, and identities that are linked to the land may also be at risk. This is why Ao's poetry becomes so pertinent to the current study of ecological anxiety and human nature connections in modern-day Indian poetry. Read together with Patel, Chitre, and Dai, Ao's poetry also suggests the ecological crisis cannot be entirely reduced to measurements of environmental damage, but must also take account of the eroding histories, memories, and cultural forms that are intertwined with nature. In this way, these poets formulate a conception of environmental literature where the destruction of nature is also a crisis of human consciousness. Their poetry helps us question the dividing line between human and non-human life and to acknowledge that protecting ecological systems also involves, reclaiming the emptiness of human existence.

OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY

This work has generated three significant insights. First, it maintains how contemporary Indian poets have located the destruction of nature not merely as an ecological or physical crisis but also as a crisis of memory, feeling, and culture. The metaphor of the destruction of the tree in Gieve Patel's "On Killing A Tree" or through the destructive felling of the banyan tree in Dilip Chitre's "The Felling of the Banyan Tree" shows the becoming loss of nature as the destruction of the equal dissonant withering away of relationship between man and nature. Second, the relationship between man and nature in these poems is constructed as a critique of an anthropocentric way of thinking. Whether it is the poetic and visual representation of trees in Patel's imagination, or Mamang Dai's embodiment of mountain and river, or Temsula Ao's consideration of land and indigenous culture, the natural/ nonhuman continues to be active, agentic, and central. It also reveals that ecological anxiety is inextricably linked with social and cultural transformation. Contra to the purely ecological implications in Patel's poems, Dai's and Ao's poetry transposes ecological alteration into ideas of indigeneity, cultural memory, indigenous traditional knowledge and shifting land relations. This work thereby contextualizes contemporary Indian ecological poetry as a significant kind of literary response to climate and ecological crisis under a network of ecological, historical, cultural and human trajectories in the modern-day life and living of all human beings.

CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that the contemporary Indian poetic engagement with trees, rivers, mountains, forests, animals, and landscapes in transition is a significant literary site upon which we may contend the anxieties of our climate enforced dissolution. By speaking to the trees, rivers, mountains, forests, animals, and landscapes of transition poets represent variations of our ecological anxiety and pain and challenge the idea that humankind is in constant contradistinction from the natural environment. An ecocritical approach reveals how the climate crisis is always tied to the crisis of culture damages to the environment impact on the cultural archive, reverence for tradition, and preferred subjective identities; in this way Indian contemporary poetry, pushes the importance of a reconsideration of the human and the more-than-human in the present tense for exploitable raw material. Thus, this poetry speaks to the necessity of a life of nature as an animate, culturally-inflected object.

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