



## Narratives of Environmental Harbinger in Select Manipuri Folktales

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### Abstract

Manipuri folktales also known as phungawaree or chakngai waree which literally means “stories of kitchen furnace or stove” (Oinam ix) are an archive of cultural memory and repository of knowledge, traditions and beliefs. Some of the folktales reflect ample elements of ecological consciousness that mould our perspective, mental outlook and cultural attitude towards environment. They are the reflections of cultural experience that we encounter from birth to death. They depict the interconnectedness and co-existence between man and other abiotic components. This paper attempts to investigate Manipuri folktales from an ecocritical approach. It studies “the relationship between literature and physical environment taking an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty xviii). This paper also highlights environmental degradation rendered by human activities because of their limited humanistic view of anthropocentrism resulting human actions to disturb environment and natural functioning of ecosystem. The study inspects the consequences of disturbing the ecosystems which later affect human existence. The study furthers that folktales act as a mediator to give ecological awareness. It is a content analysis of select Manipuri folktales.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Folktales, Manipur, Nature, Anthropocentrism, Sustainability.

The word ‘folklore’ was coined by William John Thoms in 1846 in a letter published in a scholarly journal called *Athenaeum*. He replaced the olden word ‘Popular Antiquities’ or ‘Popular Literature’ to ‘Folklore’. It is “the body of expressive culture” (Chaturvedi and

Ranjan 58) including “music, dance, legends, oral history proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, customs” (Chakraborty 2), oral narratives like myths, legends, folktales, ballads folk crafts, folk arts and so forth within a particular population. Folklore encompasses all the traditions,

customs, superstitious beliefs, songs and ritualistic performances that are transmitted from generations to generations through oral traditions. "Folklore is the earliest manifestation of human civilization in verbal and expressive form of art" (Mani 7). Folklore gives us the wisdom to understand the moments from different point of views. "Folklore includes myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, the texts of ballads, songs and other forms of lesser importance, but not folk art, folk dance, folk music, folk costume, folk medicine, folk custom, or folk belief" (Bascom 375).

Folktales are one of the important genres of folklore which relate human civilisation, indigenous knowledge system and interconnection of nature and man. "Folktales are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction" (Bascom 4). Folktales narrate how man has been evolved and emerged as a civilised being. "Folklore gives an impression of collectiveness of the shared culture" (Singh 112). It also stresses the indispensable relationship between man and nature, forest and other physical components in their theoretical analyses. They emphasize on men's adherence to nature for their survival. Nature or the environment enormously shapes or reshapes human life. Human and nature have a causal relationship. Human activities affect natural phenomena and *vice versa*. In short, they are both dependent on one another. Folktales can be seen as a text addressing this complex tapestry of man and nature. They are instrumental in inculcating ecological values, knowledge, and ethics among members of the community. "Folktales are also rich in depiction of life skill knowledge, farming methods, livelihoods and cultural values that are useful for fostering public awareness in conserving nature as a resource for cultural maintenance" (Sari and Putra 59).

The paper is an analysis of Manipuri folktales from ecocritical lenses which will deepen the underlying knot between nature and man. "Folktales have played a key role in each

and every Manipuri's cultural life because storytelling has been a living tradition in Manipuri tradition and culture" (Sanatombi 502). Manipur, a North Eastern state of India, is endowed with rich folklores and cultures. Having been settled by different indigenous communities makes the state abundance in cultural and literary domain. The state is enriched with varied folktales of different communities. These folktales also enlighten the significance of accounting for the social dimension and community participation in ecological management. They also highlight the value of understanding and enhancing various ecological restoration and ecosystem governance. The present paper studies three Manipuri folktales namely "The Old Couple and the Taro Plants" and "Taibang Meena Lairen Onba" from Meitei community, a major community of Manipur and "Lukhrabee Yumpham" from Purum Tribe pertaining ecocritical approach which studies "the relationship between literature and physical environment" (Glotfelty XVIII). These select oral narratives enumerate deep ecological understandings and cultural attitudes towards nature. These can be analysed as an ecocritical text highlighting the invaluable nexus of nature and man. 'Ecocriticism', a term coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" is the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. It studies "the relationship between literature and physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii) from interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to find solution for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation. "Ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty xviii). Assessing the above mentioned folktales from ecocritical perspectives will enhance the understanding of the undeniable tie between man and nature.

The story "The Old Couple and the Taro Plants" addresses the theme of co-existence

between nature and human and their indifferences vividly. It is about an old couple living near a forest. In that forest, there are many monkeys who reside and stay close with the couple. One day while the couple are planting the taro plants, the monkeys trick the couple by showing deceptive method of planting taros. The couple falls under the monkeys' trick. Apprehending this entire trick, they take revenge by beating them up and driving away. The monkeys because of anger take revenge against the old couple. But at the end the old couple gets hold of them and succeeds in driving them all those tricky monkeys. The story can be analysed under the Doctrine of Association. It shows the close interrelationship between human and animals. The following lines address the hopes and aspiration projected by nature towards man:

"O my old man,  
You died eating taro,  
Come back eating pumpkin" (Sharma and Rajketan 40).

This oral story reflects the Hopes and Aspirations of the couple driven from nature. Taro plants and pumpkin are all the products of nature. The old man fakes his death by eating taro plants and he is mourned by his wife to revive by eating pumpkin. Even at the brink of death, they still hope of getting their life back with the support of nature and they will be rescued by nature. A Naga folktale namely, "How Man and Animals Lived Together and Spoke Each Other's Language" is equivalent to this tale highlighting the theme that man has the capability to communicate with animals and also exhibiting the idea that man and animals inhabit together in an understanding and peaceful co-existing environment. It reflects what Mircea Eliade writes: "All over the world learning the language of animals, specially of birds, is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature...." (qtd.in Glotfelty 17).

Apart from close interrelation, monkeys' trick can be seen as capricious and unrestrained viewpoint of nature. Their trick can also be considered as a warning against encroachment of human to their natural habitat. This causes a havoc resulting to dismantling of their relationship thereby affecting in their co-existence.

Ecocriticism aims to underscore the interconnectedness between man and environment and its impact on human. "Taibang Meena Lairen Onba" revolves around a father and a son proceeding to the forest to gather firewood. After arriving to the forest, his son walks into the forest to collect the chopped woods while his father starts preparing Indian sareng (Indian boat) for the meal nearby a lake. The father picks up a wood lying near him and cutting the sareng into many pieces on it. Every time he cuts it, his body has been transformed into a python bit by bit gradually. Suddenly, the son hears his father screaming in a loud voice. When he reaches the place, he sees his father transforming into half man-half python. The son pleads his father to stay in that form. Being unable to linger himself in that form, father contemplates to transform in full python form and begins to chop down the remaining parts of the fish. Later, he is fully transformed into a python and bids goodbye to his son.

Here in this story, his son wrapping a cloth around his neck and praying to the python which is the transformed contour of his father signifies the attitude of man worshipping nature as God. Before bidding farewell to his son, the father promises him that even if he becomes a python, he will safeguard his home and its surrounding like before and asks the son to offer something every year as a tribute to his father. Here, it can be conceptualised that even after leaving the human realm and being transmigrated into the elements of nature, the love of his father towards his son remains unchanged. The chopping down of the fish also suggests the idea of disrespecting nature and cogitate that wood and fish are all mere objects

which truly reflect the anthropocentric mindset. The transformation of python which makes the father losing his identity can also be regarded as retribution of human egotism and negligence. This strongly holds the notion of deciphering Anthropocentrism where this allegory challenges the perception of human superiority above all beings. Glen A. Love in his essay "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism" speculates that literary studies remain indifferent to the environmental crisis in part because our discipline's limited humanistic vision has led to a narrowly anthropocentric view of what is consequential in life (Glottfelty xxx). Additionally, it also reverses the idea of power dynamics showcasing nature's superiority and gives the concept of ecological imbalance generated to maintain consonance and unison. Glen A. Love then recommends that revaluing nature-oriented literature which can help redirect us from "ego- consciousness to eco- consciousness" (Glottfelty xxx). Above all, this narrative dissipates the strict purlieus between human and abiotic community. The transmutation also prompts the reader the indispensable reciprocal with other life forms.

The goal of ecocriticism is to study how individuals behave in society and react to nature and ecological paradigms, studying every perspective which is examined based on its effectiveness in relation to the environmental sustainability. The tale "Lukhrabee Yumpham" talks about a story of the Purum tribe where a king rules his kingdom with pomp and prosperity. Its prosperous state is because of a specific sacred wood, which is the incarnation of God Pakhangba, that he uses in building his palace. This makes the kingdom blessed and powerful and no other neighbouring kingdom can attack it. Everyone wants to possess that wood. Even one of his daughters demands to give the wood as her dowry. Unable to reject his daughter's proposal, he accepts her demand. He orders his men to pull down the wood from the palace but it cannot be easily pulled out. At last, they can pull it out but the rope used in pulling

out breaks and the wood falls down the hill slope. The wood can never be found again. From then on, his kingdom is invaded with miseries and cries mar the once prosperous kingdom. The destruction of the wood brings calamities to the kingdom resulting its people to leave the place and settle somewhere else. It suggests the concept of destruction caused by human creed to the ecosystem of nature and its effect on human world. The pulling down of the wood from the palace is like destroying the natural habitat of living souls. It can be considered that the natural habitat of that wood is in the palace itself. When there is a change in natural habitat, it breaks all the chains and thereby affects all the surrounding components thus resulting to the disturbance and repercussion in the ecological balance. Therefore, there is a hue and cry and deaths befall in the kingdom. This is the retaliation of nature when human beings go against the will and doctrine of natural ecosystem.

Another incident that marks the wrath of nature towards man for their follies and misdeed can be seen in the village of the king's youngest daughter. The village is filled with happiness, glory and celebrations. Celebrations become more frequent and the young boys and girls work together to brew wine from rice to organise the celebrations. In the process of brewing wine, they leave the crushed rice overnight. The crushed rice is found eaten by some unknown animals for some consecutive days. Later, it is found that a big snake eats up all the rice. The villagers set a trap and prepare to kill it. They try to pull the snake from the hole. Surprisingly, the more they pull it, the body of the snake keeps keeping out. Unable to pull out whole of the snake body, they stop pulling and start cutting the snake into many pieces and pile it up. The young men and women dance around the huge pile of snake. In the following day, the meat is cooked and distributed to each and every family. Everyone in the village enjoys the meal except an old woman who lives alone in a far end of the village. At that very night of

celebration, she hears the violent cries of an animal. It echoes in all the directions signifying the pangs and anguish of nature. She hears the earth crumbling and she goes out to check it out. But none responds to her and she also enters her room and sleeps. In the next morning, she saw the villagers are buried and the village is sunk to the ground. The effacement of the entire village highlights the supreme authority of nature. The punishment is given to the villagers who encroach beyond the limitations. It gives a message that if humans try to destroy nature, it is self-destruction and they will be paid back with their coins. The woman's survival denotes that if men harmoniously co-exist with nature, they will be unharmed. This folktale explains natural phenomenon, justifying customs, and spreading message to foster humanitarian values.

Thus, these folktales highlight a shared activity and reflect coexistence of human with nature. The stories propagate the idea of deciphering Anthropocentrism which centres on the idea that man is superior above all beings. There is a great need of understanding the importance of nature in human world. It reminds mankind that "If we are not a part of solution, we are the part of the problem" (Glotfelty xxi). In return it creates a threat to our existence. So, folktales need to be revisited to acknowledge the indispensable relationship of man and nature. They transmit ecological awareness and the necessity of conserving environment for our future sustainability. The concept of preserving nature is directly linked with the conservation of our traditions and culture. Our identity and culture are deeply rooted in and inclined to the nature.

Manipuri folktales reflect the significant natural phenomena and the individual and community's relationship with nature. As a creative activity, folktales often take their sources from the lived experiences of the people and therefore, they impact on society emotionally and psychologically. "If we make an attempt to uncover the symbolic meaning

behind any folktale then we can find the solution to the problem...we should search an answer for the society from folklores" (Singh 112). Tracing the elements of folktales will help in revival of our cultural ecology making the world a better place for all living beings. Thus, studying Manipuri folktales expand human knowledge and ecological balance. It highlights inseparable relationship between man and nature. It deepens our ecological knowledge manifesting its invaluable role in human existence. These folktales echo what Glotfelty observes that valuable lessons in environmental preservation can be gathered from the cognitive and experiential dimensions of folkloric traditions and culture.

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