



Nature as Identity: Eco-critical Perspectives in Northeastern Indian Novels

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of eco-criticism on the relationship between nature and identity in Northeastern Indian novels. Authors like Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, and Temsula Ao integrate nature—landscapes, rivers, forests, and mountains—not simply as backdrops but as pivotal forces that shape cultural memory, collective identity, and spiritual belonging. The study focuses on Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, and Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, and seeks to demonstrate how ecological environments shape and embody ethnic traditions, resistance, and spiritual cosmologies. Employing eco-critical and postcolonial paradigms, the study contends that the nature-identity nexus in these texts is framed as an archive and as an active agent in identity formation in a region that is largely overlooked in Indian literary discussions. The study concludes that Northeastern literature defies exploitative paradigms of modernity, presenting instead a holistic ecological vision grounded in a relationship of reciprocity between the human and non-human domains.

Keywords: eco-criticism, Northeastern literature, identity, cultural memory, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, postcolonialism

Introduction:

The Northeast of India, made up of eight states and a rich tapestry of ethnic groups, stands out as a unique cultural and ecological region where the landscape and identity are intricately linked. Unlike much of mainstream Indian fiction that often treats nature as just a backdrop, literature from the Northeast places ecological elements front and center, making them vital to cultural expression, memory, and survival. The rivers, forests, and hills are not just scenery; they hold the weight of oral traditions and spiritual beliefs. This paper delves into how writers like Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, and Temsula Ao weave nature into the very fabric of identity. Their works push back against human-centered ideas of nationhood and modernity, instead presenting an eco-centric perspective that highlights the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world.

Review of literature:

Scholarship on Northeastern Indian writing shows its marginal place in Indian English literature and its close connection with ecological landscapes. Thongchi (2012) points out that environmental settings are tied to cultural identity in this area. Kohli (2015) notes that Dai uses rivers and forests as 'archives of memory,' linking history to natural features. Sen (2018) criticizes the dominance of Western eco-critical discourse, stating that Northeastern texts reflect native views where ecology is spiritual and communal. Dutta (2020) emphasizes the importance of women's voices, illustrating how nature represents both resilience and vulnerability. While these studies highlight the central role of ecology in Northeastern narratives, few provide a comparative eco-critical reading of Dai, Kire, and Ao. This study aims to fill that gap.

Theoretical framework :

This research dives into eco-criticism to explore how various texts portray ecology, balance, and responsibility. It also taps into postcolonial theory to shed light on how marginalized voices push back against dominant national narratives. Foundational eco-critical perspectives (Glotfelty 1996; Garrard 2012) lay the

groundwork for understanding the connections between humans and nature, while postcolonial approaches (Ashcroft 2001) bring to the forefront the dynamics of center versus margin, and nation versus tribe. By blending these frameworks, we can investigate how texts from the Northeast depict nature as a powerful material, cultural, and spiritual force.

Methodology:

The study takes a deep dive into qualitative textual analysis, honing in on three key novels:

1. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006)
2. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014)
3. Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006)

Through close reading, it explores themes of landscape, ecology, and identity. A comparative analysis reveals both similarities and differences in how ecology is represented, while secondary scholarship adds depth to the interpretation.

Analysis and Discussion:

1. Mamang Dai: Rivers as Archives of Memory

In Dai's novel, rivers and forests serve as vessels of shared memory. The Siang River stands out not just as a physical presence but also as a symbol of cultural continuity, representing the survival of traditions and the bonds that connect generations.

2. Easterine Kire: Spiritual Ecology and Indigenous Cosmology

In Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, we see a worldview where rivers and forests are alive. The main character's journey highlights a belief system where natural elements communicate, guide, and influence the course of human lives.

3. Temsula Ao: War, Trauma, and Ecological Witness

Ao in her work places the themes of insurgency and violence against the backdrop of Nagaland's landscape, by depicting the hills and forests as steadfast witnesses to pain. Nature acts as a refuge, a record, and a testament to the strength of resilience.

Results and Findings :

1. Nature as Identity: In Northeastern fiction, ecology and identity are deeply intertwined.
2. Resistance and Memory: The rivers, forests, and hills serve as living archives of history, standing strong against cultural erasure.
3. Spiritual Ecology: Northeastern writers move beyond the bounds of scientific eco-criticism, embracing a more relational and spiritual connection with the natural world.

Conclusion:

The comparative analysis of Dai, Kire, and Ao reveals that nature plays a crucial role in shaping identity, history, and survival in Northeastern Indian fiction. Their writings push back against anthropocentric and exploitative development models, instead offering an ecological perspective that sees humans as part of nature rather than its rulers. This eco-critical viewpoint highlights different ways of belonging, resilience, and cultural memory, providing a powerful counter-narrative in both Indian and global literature.

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