



**WRITING ENVIRONMENT: AN ECO CRITICAL READING OF ARUPA PATANGIA KALITA’S WITTEN IN TEARS**

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**Abstract**

It is often times observed that writers writing about the beauty of nature is operated as a mechanism of exploring the turmoil prevailing within. The writers especially in the contemporary world have been successful in driving awareness of the fact that amidst the beauty of nature lies the chaotic nature of human beings. Men with their very own actions have betrayed the ever-giving nature and landscape. Similarly, like any other writers of the mainstream, writers from Northeast India, especially Assam delves into the kind of writing that explores the relationship between man and nature about the existence of conflict in the form of a fiction. The present paper focuses on one such Assamese writer, Arupa Patangia Kalita. It subjects the collection of stories *Written in Tears* into an ecocritical analysis. It attempts to dive into the fictional narratives present in the text and the indigenous people as characters of the stories are portrayed to have a better connection with the nature. The paper further demonstrates the ongoing violence prevailed in the state and how it has polluted the nature with the spilling of innocent blood. The very nature which was once an integral part of the indigenous life has been exploited by the same people with their violent activities. The nature which once shone with glorious beauty has been turned into dark ashes as a result of the violence. And amidst all these the primitive and indigenous people are the ones who suffers the most and they long to revive the lost glory of nature and the landscape.

**Keywords:** Nature/Environment, Landscape, Ecocriticism, Indigenous, Conflicts, Northeast, Assam.

**Introduction**

Ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary approach deals with the study of relationship between the nature/environment and men. It generally explores the interconnection of literature, culture (of men) and the physical environment. Originated previously as literary ecology, the approach exposes to the type of connection that men and nature share between them as well as how nature is forced to exploitation and degradation by the acts of men in the dominated society. The social norms and various activities of the human results a discriminatory dominance over nature/environment or non-human world. This approach further, investigates the connection or relation between nature and men in the context of religion, culture, beliefs, and other social aspects as well as the traits of indigeneity. Nature since decades have been a vital part of the human life and spirit. But it is unfortunate that, the deeds of men has gradually led to the destruction of the very essential part of their lives in this modern society. Men who once worshipped the environment/nature, has emerged as an exploiter and destructor against nature both directly and indirectly. Their actions are observed to resulting into chaos not only on nature but also on its culture. It has posed humanity as a threat to nature and its culture as days approached towards modern society.

As mentioned by Anish S. Georshia in his journal “Nature in the Realm of Indigenous Writing: An Ecocritical Perspective”, the dynamic balance between nature and human beings is no longer the same as it was during the primitive era, rather it has lost its grip. It is observed that the sacredness of the indigenous people is deeply rooted with nature than anybody else. Thereby these people keep themselves strongly connected to nature and strives to move back to the times when environment where they lived in were chaos and pollution free and lived a peaceful life in the heart of nature. Therefore, it is often discerned that people tend to escape into the nature from its chaotic and mundane life resulted from their own deeds. Such scenarios frequently reflect in the literary works of many writers from Assam in the contemporary world.

The entire region of Northeast India, especially the state of Assam is largely known as a region which is prone to conflicts and disputes led by insurgency. The region has seen a number of innocent killings, extortions and many such cruel activities driven by the political, cultural or ethnic problems. The notion perceived by the indigenous people that the mainland India overlooks the issues of Northeast India and is often neglected in terms of political or economic aspects has left these people in great disillusion. The observation of the indigenous people of Assam based on the illegal influx of immigrants from Bangladesh and occupying in their homeland has triggered their question on cultural and ethnic identity. This led to the emergence of insurgent movement where a group of young rebellious indigenous people declared themselves as the army who works solely to save their land from the hands of the outsiders. But ironically these insurgent groups caused hostility among their own people. These conflicts resulted from the activities of men have not only impacted the habitats of the region of Northeast and Assam but also led to a substantial exploitation and degradation on the nature and environment itself. Such a state of Northeast India, especially in the land of Assam oft-times are represented in the literary works by the contemporary writers of Assam like MitraPhukan, Dhruva Hazarika, ArupaPatangiaKalita, Indira Goswami, AruniKashyap etc. The present paper takes into account the collection of short stories *Written in Tears* by Arupa



Patangia Kalita. It attempts to study the kind of relation indigenous people or man shares with nature as well as how the activities of these people themselves has led to the hostility of the environment at the same time.

**Men, Nature and Literature: A Textual analysis**

Like any other literary works that explores the aspect of ecocriticism, the Assamese writer Arupa Patangia Kalita also successfully illustrates in her writing, the existence of interconnection between men and nature and as to how the very existence of each of them impacts the other. Originally written in Assamese and later translated into English by Ranjita Biswas, the collection of short stories, written in Tears portray the relationship between man and nature both directly and indirectly, though Kalita’s main characters in the stories that shares a better and cordial relationship with nature are women. Besides, Kalita in the stories articulate the various events of conflict escalated as a result of illegal immigrants and insurgency in Assam and Brahmaputra valley. All the stories in this text are set at the backdrop of Assam agitation or insurgent movement of late 1970s, where the violence was at its peak. The people of Assam saw killings of the innocent people, burning down of villages and houses and extortions and these incidents largely impacted the lives of indigenous people. It explores in the form of fictional stories the human suffering as well as the tumultuous times endured by them. In the midst of all these chaos lies the beauty of Assam’s landscape or nature which was previously untouched, pure and not subjected to any exploitation. Nevertheless, with the advent of the hazardous activities of human and conflicts, the beautiful and peaceful landscape of Assam stands polluted, distorted and exploited. Kalita through this attempts to demonstrate the atrocity of dominance that men prevail on each other as well as on the landscape or nature. In all the short stories compiled in Written in Tears, Kalita incorporates the different elements of nature or environment like trees, flowers, air, paddy fields, animals, birds or insects to describe her characters as well as the events presented in the stories. She describes nature in fiction and fixes her focus on setting and characters with attention to nature and animals.

In the story ‘Arunima’s Motherland’, Kalita represents the kind of attachment the people of Assam shares with its motherland and its beautiful environment/landscape. The characters stand as a representation of the indigenous Assamese people, who is deeply rooted to its land and its environment. The story unrolls after the bride, Arunima’s farewell ceremony, where the environment of the wedding is submerged by the fragrance and beauty of nature’s own sources. The opening lines of the story states that jasmine and tuberoses flowers entwined around her hair revives as it unites with the morning breeze. This indicates towards the fact that the untouched nature of Assam is so lively and youthful that it has awoken the already dried flowers. (Kalita2015: 1). The story moves forwards in a manner to represent how Arunima’s husband’s family is extremely fond of planting. They have a large garden with beautiful flowers that illuminates their house as well as their existence. As she enters the compound of house, her eyes caught the sight of the yellow- and chocolate-coloured Marigolds, the carpet of sewali flowers flaunting in white and orange glory along with the aroma of pure white jasmine and kamini-kanchan flowers. (Kalita2015: 6)

On the other hand, Arunima’s sister-in-law, Baby is observed in the story as a girl who sets her heart towards flowers. When Arunima gifted her a book on flowers, the readers could discern the clear glimpse of fondness for them. As she was reading the book it was ambiguous if she was actually reading it. Rather she made herself a part of the garden and was making merry along with the blooming flowers. This gets expressed in the following sentence:

Was she reading the book or was she in a dream flying about like a butterfly in her garden? (Kalita2015: 16)

She was yet to come out from her dream world of the flower garden, the coloured threads and the little girl with a red bow in her hair. Her eyes smarted with the smoke and feeling of unreality. (Kalita2015: 19)

The above line implies that her face shown the dreamy side of her intimacy with the flowers. She assumed herself as a part of the garden and as a butterfly she was savoring its beauty. Further, flowers and garden as a part of nature depicts how Baby perceives that she is a part of the nature itself and her existence enhances its beauty. Besides it also denotes the indivisible relation between the two. On the other hand, in the midst of all these lies the chaos of the agitation. An unfamiliar light and sound disrupted them amongst the serene state. The agitators or the young group of insurgents set a part of the town on fire as a sign of rebellion. The smoke from the fire that went up, invaded the fresh air and left it polluted, as expressed in the following line:

... the only difference was that black particle floating in the air from burning objects covered everything. The green of the grass and leaves in the trees were lost. They all went to the bank of the pond... The pond was white with the underbellies of dead fish. (2015: 21)

These lines suggest that the serene and beautiful nature which people were savoring, is disputed in a split second. The very act of human’s rebellious acts of violence not only left the people of Assam in fear and hostility but also have exploited and harmed the innocent nature as well as its sources. Towards the end of the story, Kalita unfolds to her readers that not only a part of the nature



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(town) is submerged to disruption but the entire nature is burnt down living no hint of existence of blooming flowers or trees or animals, that were visible in the beginning of the story.

Similarly, the story ‘The Cursed Fields of Golden Rice’ also narrates about an indigenous bodo girl Mainao, who is deeply rooted to her traditions, primitive and religious beliefs, keeps nature and its beings such as trees, plants, flowers, birds and animals, closest to her heart. She is often seen to have a close connection with the primitive ideologies as well as how nature plays an important role in healing an individual from any situation. The fact that she is married to Alfred, who is more of an outgoing and modern person in terms of his lifestyle and educational qualities, portrays the exposure of an indigenous people towards modernity. Further, Alfred studying in English Medium college and majoring his higher studies on English subject, also represents the western domination, where the primitive beliefs or the ethnic traditions are commingled with western or modern ideologies. This emergence of western ideologies and people have left the state of Assam and entire Northeast region in dispute. The violence surfaced when this region became a part of India under the British rule. Eventually after its independence the Indigenous people of Northeast discerned that they are dominated and overlook by the Mainland India, resulting to the rebellion of the indigenous people of Northeast.

Set at the backdrop of insurgent movement, Mainao and indigenous girl in the story undergoes through several traumatic situations. In the beginning of the story, she was introduced to the readers as an individual who enjoys every bit of her livelihood and often lost in the beauty of nature. In fact, she was a kind of person who could connect with the nature and understand its language. She understood nature better than anyone else and knew its many songs and stories, which is portrayed in the lines below:

She knew so many songs, so many stories. If you asked her where she learnt them, she would only laugh, her body shaking with laughter like jhow grass swaying in the wind. The pani-pia bird looking for water from the sky was still calling out. If Mainao heard it, she would have told him ‘You know Alari, she is the younger wife who was killed by the elder wife. She killed her by setting a snake in the tree. The murdered wife has become this bird. She cries out looking for her children. (2015: 53)

This reflects the kind of bond that Mainao shares with the birds and the nature as a whole. She understands and knows its language. She is also oft-times found lost into the nature disregarding what is happening around her. (2015:54). Her songs as well are only about nature, its beauty and her longingness to be a part of it, escaping from the mundane world. The lyrics of her song as follows:

The dove is cooing  
O’dear, I too shall go with you  
The crow is cawing  
O’ darling,I too shall fly with you  
The horse neighs  
O handsome young man  
Untie the knot of your gamoch

The above song of Mainao is a clear indication that she longs to flee with the nature and be a part of it in eternity. She was a person who would cry when she had to kill the hen to cook with rice. (2015: 69). However, these connection between nature and Mainao is soon crumbled down, when Alfred (also called Alari) has to move to the city to save himself from the insurgents and later on move to Delhi for his higher studies as well as to earn his living. Alfred took Mainao and his son along with him to the metropolitan city from a remote village of Assam. The village or a country life portrays a better connection with nature whereas the city life with advancement of technologies and coming up of more buildings and industries, keeps the lives of people away from nature. When she moved to city from a countryside, she was turned into a totally different person. A girl who once remained lively humming to the tune of nature’s song and dreaming into the heart of the nature has turned to a stoned person who is physically alive but dead spiritually. She sat in the corner of the dark room and found herself in the middle of nowhere (2015: 100). This incident reflects how, the violence has detached people from nature and the most affected are the indigenous people who is deeply rooted to nature and the landscape.

Further towards the end of the story, we observe that the half-dead Mainao is instantly active and lively when she was taken back to village for few days. But unfortunately, when she reached her house in the village, her house was no longer beautiful and pleasant nor was the village. The houses broken and the chickens, pigs and goats that Mainao kept in their house was no more. The house was turned into an extortion centre and the once glitter village with the beauty of nature is converted into a place with gunshots, extortion, bombing and smoke of violence. (2015:113)



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In the story, 'The half-burnt Bus at Midnight' Kalita narrates about an incident where one night at 12 o' clock enters a bus into a town in Assam, leaving in havoc the beautiful environment. The bus was burnt down by a group of insurgents. They closed the windows so tight and poured the petrol inside the bus, permitting no chance for the passengers to escape. After few minutes the people inside the bus were dead and bodies only remained as clumps of flesh (2015:160). ArupaPatangiaKalita in one of her interviews mentions that the half-burnt bus is a representation of violence which destroys everything wherever it exists. She states that violence wrecks the beauty and destroys the flowers ("Jaipur Literature Festival," 33:07-33:28). This symbolic representation is reflected in the lines below:

But now the moon resting on the breast of the river suddenly disappeared.. Whenever the truck-drawn bus passed by, the water of the river turned dark; the sky above the water became dark too. There was no moon no stars; what remained was only an inky, dark, impenetrable sky. An old putrid smell came out from the river water. Like the odour of clotted day-old blood. Under the dark sky as the bus went on, the water of the river became red- the colour of the blood. (2015: 154)

Whenever the shadow of the bus fell on the river, the water became blood-red in colour and the fish died... the fireflies in flight above burnt into ashes and vanished into the jungle...the green stretch ensconced lovingly in the midst of the river lost its lush cover and took on an ugly black hue... As the half-burnt bus wound its way underneath the banyan tree, the birds fell down one by one like seeds. (2015: 154-155)

The above quotations from the story distinctly pictures that as the violence entered into the town, the beauty of the nature, its environment, the birds/animals/fishes, the glowing moon in the sky crumbled down, swapping beauty with ugliness. With the emergence of conflict and violence created by men, the habitats as well as the beautiful untouched nature has been contaminated. Consequently, this contaminated nature is no longer natural and gifted but has become artificial as if nature was reconstructed by the hands of men under violence as expressed in these lines:

Tonight, the white and red lotuses were in full glory under the silver moon. But as soon as the bus reached there, the lotuses started looking unnatural. (2015: 156)

Accordingly, the impeachable nature has been transformed into hollowness and artificiality, as men with its action has started painting their own nature/environment. And this recreated nature is controlled by mankind and its activities.

Additionally, Arupa Patangia Kalita in the other stories 'Kunu's Mother', 'The Girl with Long hair', 'SurabhiBarua and the Rhythm of Hooves' and 'Ayengla of the blue Hills' lay down the theme of violence of insurgent movement as to how these people of Assam and the entire Northeast region has undergone suffering both mentally and physically. And as Kalita suggests, amidst all the chaos, the one who suffers the most are the women ("Jaipur Literature Festival," 25:53-26:01). They are caged under various circumstances, making it difficult for them to exist as a normal individually in the society. For instance, in the story 'The Girl with Long Hair', we come across a young bodo girl who is stopped from going out with her friends to enjoy durga puja by the bodo insurgents. When she rebelled and visited the puja, she was held as a criminal who went against their ethnic ideologies. She was dragged by a stranger man to stand for a verdict to the centre of the courtyard in front of people and commanded to cut her hair as a sign of shameful. Her clothes fell down and she lies half naked as people wait for the final judgement. It can be observed that almost all the stories in Written in Tears deals with the character of women and it is discerned that woman are the ones who are afflicted the most in the course. And in order to escape from this plight caused by violence they escape into the nature to find their peace and serenity and be a part of it. This notion is reflected in almost all the stories as all the characters are fond of things found in nature.

Though all the protagonists in the stories are women, it can also be used as a generalized interpretation as when human loses its peace and grip of existence in the world, they try to escape into the nature and wilderness to find calmness and silence to the chaos resulted out of their own actions. But this very nature is no longer in its original untouched and pure state. People with their chaotic activities have killed its beauty and serenity, transforming it into artificiality and keeping a control over it.

### Conclusion

Arupa Patangia Kalita picks up her incidents or characters from reality. As she believes that insurgency is not something that can be fantasized. As a person who once lived a life of fear and trauma of the violence, she knows very well of the consequences of the actions of men. Her stories are primarily focused on the conflict surrounding the beautiful land of Assam and its neighbouring regions. Her narration of the stories portrays the fact that she admires the beautiful nature and landscape of her hometown, driving her completely back to the past in a different light. As a result, even though she describes the vigorous acts of conflict, she never fails to



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narrate about the beautiful nature and landscape of Assam. She places her characters in the center of the beautiful landscape in the form of realism. ("Jaipur Literature Festival," 16:41-17:24). Further, comparing her characters with the nature and its family, like the birds, animal, flowers, trees etc. She always related the people in her stories with nature, attempting to showcase a close connectivity between them. Kalita as a person who is deeply rooted to her traditions and a person who loves folklore stories, portrays her characters as indigenous people who are also firmly embedded with their indigeneity with primitive minds. These indigenous characters are observed in the story as someone who tried to live adjacent with the nature and its landscape but are subjected to separation with the emergence of modern ideologies and violence between people. They constantly try to regain the lost purity of the nature but collapses at its attempt. The people with their own hands have contaminated the beautiful nature and landscape with the darkness of violence, spilling the blood of innocence. Indigenous people perceive that nature and they are an extended ecological family that serve the progenitor and the origins. The life as a whole is feasible in any environment, if only men reckon the other non-human beings in his surrounding as his own kin or family.

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