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Ecofeminist Consciousness in Select Folktales from Northeast India

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Abstract

Radical green theory proclaims that the origins of environmental catastrophe lie in the anthropocentrism of modern capitalism. This necessitates the formation of healthier societies wherein humans perceive their selves 'in relation' to nature. The theory of deep ecology (Naess, 1972) calls for reinforcing our sense of empathy with all life forms and brings about the philosophy of "Gaia" (James Lovelock, 1979). This idea of Earth as a living entity can also be found in *The Atharva Veda*, ancient Indian Vedic text (10th c. BCE) that perceives nature as 'earth-spirit' or a living organism. The theory of ecofeminism advocates the cessation of all kinds of coercion. In this Karen Warren (*Ecofeminist Philosophy* 2000), Mary Vidya Porselvi (*Nature, Culture and Gender*, 2016) are among the key figures to have given a new direction to the tenets of ecofeminism. Notably, folk ontology provides templates for living well based on reverence, reciprocity and responsibility which are close to ecofeminist ideologies. Through select folktales from Chandrica Barua's *Stories by the Fire on a Winter Evening* (2020), Pallabi Barua's *Grandma's Tales*. (in translation (2011), *Fresh Fictions: Folk Tales, Plays, Novellas From the Northeast* by Katha(2005) and *Fungari Singbul* (in translation) (2012), and *Funga Wari*, Vol. 3 (in translation) (1999), K.U. Rafy's *Folk-Tales of the Khasis* (2011), and D.K. Tyagi's *Tribal Folktales of Tripura* (2020) this paper attempts to examine the legends of the (silenced) women and their relationship with nature that might offer possible solutions to a sustainable and peaceful life while propagating ecological spiritualism.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Gaia, Folktales, Northeast Literature

Introduction

...the type of interspecies and ecological awareness that is evident within traditional and indigenous life-ways was normal before the rise of the west, and a functional and reverent way of living respectfully in place. (Sepie, 2017, p. 12)

In 2000, Paul Crutzen affirmed that currently, we are in the age of the 'Anthropocene', an age of unprecedented human impact on earth's ecosystem. In the race to 'progress', humans have almost obliterated the connection and semblance with the non-human world. This paper attempts to trace the roots of ecofeminism in the folk ontology of select folktales from Northeast India that could pose a viable solution to the current quandary that *markind* is in. To this end, the chapter analyzes the folktales from the lens of ecofeminist theory/ideas as postulated by Goethe (1797), Paulo Freire's (1972), Lovelock, James. (1979), Greta Garrd (1993), M. Mellor (1996), A.K. Ramanujan (1997), Karren J Warren (2000), Arnaes Ness (2005) and Mary Vidya Porselvi (2011).

In *Facing Gaia* (2013) Bruno Latour contends that cognizance of the Anthropocene writes off the modern theory of the infinite universe, pulling us back to the idea of a provincial, restricted, and

fatigued earth. Around 10,000 years ago humans began tilling the land and set on the journey of 'civilization and progress'. Post Industrial Revolution (the 1800s) there has been a manifold intensification of the negative human imprint on the earth. Hence, 'mankind' with its power-based association with the pastoral landscape, identifies the latter as 'out there, to be used/exploited to satiate its own inexhaustible capitalist agenda.

This threat of the swelling 'ecological imperialism' was addressed by Goethe (1797) way back in the 18th century, where he deliberated on how the plenteous materiality of the ideal pastoral hid the threat of the imminent modernity of capitalism. The existing global crisis is not resultant of the ways in which ecosystems function, but because of the ways of conduct of our ethical systems. As C. Tan (2020) opines:

Salvation from this order of oppression will and must come through the resistance of women. Women are the ones who must organize and engage in action so as to make a difference and gradually alter the system which has been imposed on people and often claimed to be pertaining to the natural order. (p. 633)

The assertion of the Green theorists that anthropocentrism is the crux of the degradation of environment and human-nature cohesiveness, compels us to look for prototypes of healthier societies that existed prior to the commencement of humankind's "progress". In the Indian context, the idea of the earth as a single-organic-living-spirit can be traced back to *The Atharva Veda* (10th c. BCE). It promotes the sense of human identification with all life forms, thereby almost bringing about the philosophy of "Gaia" (Lovelock, 1979). Drawing on indigenous sources of knowledge, and valuing people, women and the non-human world alike, it is what ecofeminist Karren J. Warren (2000) claims—*all connected*. Hence, exploitation of any component of the structure renders the entire system ruptured. Greta Gaard (1993) rightly opines that "ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (p. 1). Resonating the philosophy of deep ecology, ecofeminism accentuates "principles of diversity and of symbiosis" which is vital as "diversity enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms" (Naess, 2005, p. 2).

.As early as 1854, Henry David Thoreau illustrates an ideal living condition by renouncing modern life and renewing the self by retreating into nature. Suresh Frederick (2012) calls this an exemplification of an unadulterated ecology "in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other" (p. 147). Broadening on this framework, Daniel Christian Wahl (2016) writes:

What we are actually trying to sustain is the underlying pattern of health, resilience and adaptability that maintain the planet in a condition where life as a whole can flourish. Design for sustainability is, ultimately, design for human and planetary health. (p. 43)

This serves as a worthy utilitarian reason for looking into how traditional communities have lived while propagating eco-spiritual contemplation on nature, and utilitarian principles that are reciprocal. Thus, ecofeminism is instrumental in synthesizing the human with the non-human world while contending that environmental issues are intimately connected with women's

experience/s. It argues that “the battle for ecological survival is intrinsically intertwined with the struggles for women’s liberation and other forms of social justice” (Buell, 2011, p.424). Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (1998) further illustrates the interweaving of these factors as an intersection of class “exploitation, racism, colonialism, and neocolonialism” (p.3). In matters of ecofeminism in ‘Third world’ countries, Warren (2000) specifically argues that “women are more dependent than men on tree and forest products” (p.5). She alludes to the archetypal case of ‘Chipko Movement’ from India, and says that it is:

...ostensibly about saving trees, especially indigenous forests. But it is also about important women-nature connections: trees and forests are inextricably connected to rural and household economies governed by women, especially in Third World countries, so tree shortages are about women, too. (p.5)

The act of “hugging the trees” mirrors a deep association and interdependence of the human and non-human world. She also cites the case of Sierra Leone: “Women in a Sierra Leone village were able to identify thirty one products from nearby bushes and trees, whereas men could identify only eight” (p.6).

This shows not just a reciprocation of benefits, but almost akin to Paulo Freire’s (1972) idea of ‘conscientizacao’— harmonized consciousness, sense, knowledge, and feeling. Ecofeminism encompasses this standpoint as “an interconnected sense of self is more common in women” (Gaard, 1993, p.2). It is worth discerning that “before patriarchal domination of human societies, woman-centred societies existed that were more egalitarian and ecologically benign” (Mellor, 1996, p.151). Hence, the common possibilities and motifs shared by women and nature cannot remain unheeded.

Right from the days of the *Vedas*, Indian philosophical thought has been rich in the sense of eco-consciousness. As a land of rich biodiversity, India has looked at Ecofeminism as the philosophy of ‘Mother Earth’ (similar to Greek ‘Gaia’). Vandana Shiva (2010), elucidates, “Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakthi, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakriti creates the world” (*Staying Alive*, p.38). *Prakriti* is the omnipresent, all-inclusive, and spiritually elevating natural code that binds together all living forms.

The non-human natural world— “singing pines. Undulating lands. Mighty Rivers” (Preface, *Fresh Fictions*, 2005) — finds an animate and equal space in folktales across cultures. Acting as windows to one’s heritage and other cultures, folktales are carriers of values and traditions while preserving and propagating the awareness of ecological spiritualism. They carry fundamental messages and morals for the primal cognizance of humankind. In an era of ecological and commercial changes, folktales disseminate legends of women and their liaison with nature and have solutions to a sustainable and peaceful life. Folktales disseminate the perspective of the womenfolk who have stories to tell of care, abundance, and concern for human and non-human world alike.

Since ancient times, nature and women have been revered as mothers, however, this idea became degenerative and exploitative with time. This ecofeminist study aims at identifying and locating patterns of amalgamation of the human with the non-human world and nature as the ever-present life-affirming and a sustaining source to turn to at moments when the anthropocentric

world fails. The select folktales can be categorised into the themes of Creation, *Isis Panthea* (creation motif), *woody Women* (women and trees) and women and animals.

Northeast India and Indigenous Epistemologies

Their stories, said the Imperial Gazette in 1908, are “superstition.” Today, the world calls this “ecological wisdom.” (Preface, *Fresh Fictions*— on Northeast Folktales). Folktales of Northeast India, like most folktales, “move with grace and felicity from concerns that are larger than life, encompassing the nuanced relationships between stars and fishes, humans and land spaces, to those between parents and siblings, families and strangers” (Preface, *Fresh Fictions*). Indigenous ways of storytelling “enables us to make meaning out of a chaotic world” (Bal, 2002, p.10). The eight states of Northeast India embody an important fragment of the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity hotspot, one of the twenty-five global biodiversity hotspots acknowledged presently (Baruah and Dey, 2005). Hence, “owing to its nearness to nature, the folk tales are entwined with nature” (Dey, 2015, p.15). Such ‘folk ontologies’ inspire our moral commitment, or lack of it, towards the non-human world, one that tends to relate “the pre-scientific” ideas (see Sepie, 2017).

The indigenous narratives from different states Northeast India showcase an intrinsic association that involves a kaleidoscope of shifting impressions of personhood as well as identity as appropriate to the ‘characters’, mostly non-human. This comprehensive sensibility of the folk ontologies runs parallel to feminist concerns and is tied to a concern for a natural world that has been imperiled by similar exploitation and ambivalent conduct as have the womenfolk.

Creation

Folktales across cultures seem to have analogous plotlines when it comes to the motif of creation. Four main motifs seem to recur in these tales: *one creator*, the fact that humans are made from organic elements, that human beings have appeared on earth for a purpose, and that it is a prerequisite for humans to respect the laws of nature. From this outlook, such tales of creation tend to have more secular implications in modern cultures. G.N. Devy (2002) says:

The tribal imagination...is still to a large extent dreamlike and hallucinatory. It admits fusion between various planes of existence and levels of time...oceans fly in the sky as birds, mountains swim in water as fish, animals speak as humans and stars grow like plants...they admit the principle of association between emotion and the narrative motif. (pp. x-xi)

In “The Seven Clan” (*Fresh Fiction*, 2005), a folktale from Meghalaya, the Khasi God U-blei (master lord) first created “Ramew, the mother earth” (p.15) and her husband, “the patron god of villages” (p.15). They begot five children—eldest was a daughter, sun; the other three daughters being water, wind and fire. Moon, their son, was the youngest of the five. Sun, being the eldest (female) child, is replete with maternal disposition and takes care of the family as against the wilful brother, the moon:

The sun, their first born, began to flood earth with light and warmth. She would rise early every morning, go out to work without fail, and come back only after accomplishing her day’s work...the moon would go out to replace her. He was a little naughty and at time would sleep in... (pp. 15-16)

The rest of the three daughters, water, wind and fire, did their duties diligently, and kept “reshaping the world into a pleasant land, giving life to tall trees and beautiful flowers everywhere” (p.16). Ramew then called seven clans from heaven to “descend to till the earth, to populate the wilderness, to rule and govern and be the crown of all creation” (p.16). However, nature had to be respected; hence, U-Blei makes a covenant of the seven clans and instructs:

So long as man led a virtuous life, so long as he lived righteously on earth to earn merit...he would never be abandoned.... His life on earth was one long tale of happiness. (pp. 16-17)

But it is “not in man to be content with happiness alone” and hence soon he went out of the “god’s dictates” (p.17). God, vexed with man’s ways, made the tree Diengiei grow to block the sun which resulted in a “perpetual darkness” (p.17) on earth. All forms of life were threatened. But man decided to cut down the tree, and did so with the help of a little wren called Phreit. Grieved by man’s wilful ways God closed the golden gate to heaven and tore all ties with mankind. This led to a new kind of darkness to descend on earth “that bred all kinds of evil in the minds of men” (p.20). This folkloric message stands tall in today’s times when paying heed to divinity in nature is the least of human’s concerns.

An Apatani (Arunachal Pradesh) folktale “Reru Subansiri” (*pasighat.wordpress*, 2011) imagines earth as a woman, Kujum-Chant. The tribe believes that the first humans to walk the earth lived on the “surface of her belly”. One day, Kujum-Chantu thought that if she gets up and walks, humans would fall off, hence,

she herself died of her own accord. Her head became the snow-covered mountains; the bones of her back turned into smaller hills. Her chest was the valley where the Apa-Tanis live. From her neck came the north country of the Tagins. Her buttocks turned into the Assam plain. For just as the buttocks are full of fat, Assam has fat rich soil. Kujum-Chantu’s eyes became the Sun and Moon. From her mouth was born Kujum-Popi, who sent the Sun and Moon to shine in the sky... (para.1)

Evoking nature as a woman, this folktale, like others, enables humans to empathize with the non-human world. As Warren and Jim Cheney opine, “As a methodological and epistemological stance, all ecofeminists centralize, in one way or another, the ‘voices’ and experiences of women (and others) with regard to an understanding of the nonhuman world” (Gaard, 1993, p.53).

In a Hrusso or Aka (Arunachal Pradesh) folktale, “Buragaon, Kameng” (*pasighat.wordpress*, 2011), the Earth (wife) and Sky (husband) were formed out of two great eggs. However, the husband was smaller than the wife (earth/nature) and the latter readily adapts to his request and made herself “pliable and the mountains and valleys were formed, and she became small” (para.3). Presenting an alternative way of looking at the world, here nature, like the womenfolk, exemplifies the characteristics of adaptation and inclusion.

“The Formation of the Earth” (Rafy, 2011), a Khasi (Meghalaya) folktale, also shows the first entities as women/feminine. Ka Ding, Ka Um, and Ka Sngi were three Goddesses, and when their mother died, three elder sisters, Ka Ding undertook the responsibility:

She spread forth great flames which swept over the forests and caused the earth to burn and to crumble...Ever since then the earth has remained as the fire left it, full of mountains

and valleys and gorges. It became a much more beautiful place, and in time mankind came here from heaven to dwell. (pp. 25-27)

In a Lupho (tribe of Manipur) folktale, "The Daughter of Lupho" (e-pao.net, 2011), talks about the Great Flood, and a daughter from a leading family had to be sacrificed as tradition. Lhangeineng, the daughter of Lupho, was chosen. And "Lhangeineng gave herself up to the god's of the sea" (para.4) and saved humanity.

Folktales centering on the feminine principle have a different perception of the environment than a man's perception. Mary Vidya Porselvi (2011) observes that women's compassion towards environment and every being in it finds genuine representations in Indian folktales. In such tales, the non-human do not exist simply to satiate human needs; it is a world where the human and non-human entities stand as transcendent comrades. It is a horizontal society where the human and non-human are on equal grounds, rather than a vertical arrangement of mere exploitation.

Trees

Trees hold a spiritual significance in Indian history, mythology and folklife. They came to be associated with knowledge, wisdom, or even hidden secrets. In *Rigveda* there is a prayer for the growth of Trees:

Vanaspati mount up with a hundred branches that
 We may mount with a thousand, thou whom the
 Sharpened hatchet has brought for great auspiciousness.

[Lal, Singh & Mishra, (2014), *Rig-Veda* 3.8.11]

In ancient India, the concept of the tree as a living universe was projected unto *Asvattha*, an upside-down tree with its roots in heaven and branches enveloping the earth. It is seen as an actual living universe, part of *Brahmand*, the world spirit. In folktales, the flora is ideally perceived in two forms: physical and metaphysical. In physical form, the plants or trees are seen as a providing means for humans in day-to-day use, while in the metaphysical form they are respected and even prayed to. A protagonist (mostly a female) is either aided by or benefitted from trees in some way from the persecutions of the human world. Such tales validate the folk belief that death is simply a metamorphosis into an afterlife. Thus, human beings (mostly females), in their afterlives, get mutated into fruits, flowers, and trees. In most folktales across cultures, the motif of "girl becomes tree becomes girl" reflects the synchronized consciousness of *conscientizacao*. 'Oikos'[1] (home), for women, is presented in two forms— anarchic or integrative. The non-human world in the form of trees allows the victimized womenfolk to travel from *anarchic oikos* (chaotic) to *integrative oikos* (peaceful).

"Sandrembi and Chairsa" (e-pao.net, 2009) is a Manipuri folktale of two stepsisters brought up by their mothers alone. Chairsa was a single child while Sandrembi had a brother. Chairsa's mother always carried evil intentions to harm the other two children. Chairsa's mother finally hatched her plan when she killed the mother of Sandrembi one day when both of them were fishing and Chairsa's mother throws the body into the water. The victim turns into turtle, eventually into a sparrow and flies away.

After some time, the desolate Sandrembi captures the heart of a King and is married to him. The jealous stepmother is perturbed by Sandrembi's sudden *integrative oikos* and decides to rob her of it. One day Sandrembi is invited home for lunch and is killed by the stepmother and Chairsa is sent back as the Queen instead. Sandrembi, on her part, turns into a dove and lives with the King until Chairsa kills her. The metamorphosis continues and she turns into a mango. The gardener discovers Sandrembi in her human form and takes her to the King. Angered and pained, he organizes a duel between the two sisters. Chairsa is slayed and Sandrembi regains her *integrative oikos*.

Endorsing an anti-class template, the folktales with this motif show a fluid mobility of a female human- self turning to various kinds of flora or even fauna. This also reflects the chronotope of harmonized consciousness in narrative time-space of folktales. Such dimensions in women-centered stories are marked by interchanges of interior (domestic) and exterior (public) planes of existence.

"Tejeemola" (Bezbaroa 1911/2020) (Assam), is a parallel to the story of "Cinderella" and also to various other folktales from India. In one of the long absences of the sailor father, Tejeemola is tormented and finally killed by her stepmother. Tejeemola then transforms herself into myriad forms— gourd, plum, lotus, dove. Each time somebody wants to pluck or catch hold her mutated forms, she exclaims the story of her murder. Finally, she is brought back into her *integrative oikos* by her father. As he tries to pluck a lotus, he is startled by a voice coming out of it:

Don't extend your hand, don't pluck a flower.

Where from have you come boat-man?

Along with silk-clothes, my step-mother pounded me,

I am only Tejeemola. (Barua, 2020, p.40)

Shocked, the father entreats her to turn into a dove and accompany him home. The evil stepmother was thrown out of the house, and Tejeemola turns back to her human form. It is noteworthy that Tejeemola never articulates her state of existence or speaks back until she is dead and transmutes into numerous plant forms. The world of flora may not have a code of language like the human world, but ironically, Tejeemola, speaks out as one. This is indicative of the fact that trees or plants may have much more agency than a (human) woman.

In a Manipuri variation of the Tejeemola story, "Mama Potkabi" (Oinam, 2018) the protagonist is killed by her stepmother, who, then takes the form of a pepper plant, a bottle gourd, and a lotus. She speaks to her father when he finds her in the lotus form: "Please do not hurt me. I have not done anything wrong" (para. 26). She comes back into her human form and together they drive the evil stepmother (wife) away. A.K. Ramanujan, in the folktale "A Flowering Tree" (1997) puts forth three distinct phases in women's life categorized by integrated, hierarchic and anarchic *oikos*. The protagonists in both the Assamese and Manipuri versions go through the phases taking a full circle.

In a folktale from Tripura, "Chethuang" (Tyagi, 2020), the brother falls in love with his sister and the family finally decides to hold the marriage. Helpless, the sister has a visitation by an old man in her dream: "You poor girl, find out the seedling of Chethuang tree and plant it. Workshop it

and you will be free from all the agonies" (p. 4). Sometimes the tree grew and she sat on it and started singing a song: "O Chethuang tree, they want to get me married to my brother. You grow more and more" (p. 4). There were several attempts to bring her down by cutting the tree and its root off. When everything else failed, the father tried to trick the daughter by professing that the son has been killed. However, she saw through the fabrication and prayed to the South wind to take her away forever. She disappeared into the clouds; her *oikos* integrated.

This motif recurs in "Kelchawgni" (*Fresh Fictions*, 2005), a Mizo folktale. Kelchawgni, the obedient daughter, misinterpreting her parent's instructions, cooks her younger sister for dinner. To punish her, the parents leave her on the rooftop and refuse to bring her down. Finally, she "looked up to the sky and Pleaded with Pu Vana, the god of the heavens" (p.34). She went away to the heavens and lived happily forever.

Indian philosophy claims that *Prakriti* is the power of creation as well as destruction and that all originates from her, and melts into her. The select folktales reveal the silent yet definitive power of nature, trees in this case, to give the final refuge to all persecuted.

Animals

An Assamese folktale "The Kite's Daughter" (Bezbaroah 1911/2020) states the abandonment of a daughter for the desire of a son. A rich potter had several daughters, so warns his wife against begetting any more daughters. As fate would have it, she begot another daughter and before the husband could find out, she covered the child in rags, put in a tumbler, and set her adrift on the river. Left to her fate, the child was found by a kite who adopted her. She grew up on the branches of a tree; the kite mother would steal from humans and provided her with all the essentials to her human daughter. She grew up into a beautiful young woman and captured the heart of a merchant. The kite mother, considering the human-daughter's safe future, married her off to the merchant.

The merchant had seven other wives who created an *anarchic oikos* for her. However, the kite mother continues helping the daughter in times of need. The evil wives discover this and kill the Kite by treachery. Finally, one day, in the absence of the husband, they sold her off to a peddler who came to vend stationery items. Surprisingly, the peddler treated her well, so much so that, when one day the merchant nearly finds her, she tries not to be found by him to avoid going back to the past *anarchic oikos*. Meanwhile, she learns pottery from the peddler and becomes a renowned potter herself. Thus, because of the kite she is endowed with an *integrative oikos* from which she was thrown out by her *potter* father's desire for a male child.

Such folk tales produce alternative perspectives upholding concern, abundance, and care for all living beings. Assamese folktale "Tula and Teja" (Bezbaroa 1911/2020), shows how the *elaagi*, or the alienated wife, is killed by the *laagi*, favourite wife. Elaagi turns into a turtle and feeds her children Kanai (son) and Teja (daughter). Laagi finds out from her daughter Tula about this arrangement. She gets the turtle killed and "two trees bearing fruits and flowers" (p.21) grow at her burial spot. The fruit and flower-bearing tree also stand as a symbol of the maternal instincts of nature who is 'giving' rather than 'receiving'. Attracted by fruits and flowers, one day a king comes to the place and spots the beautiful Teja. He eventually marries her, turning her into a queen, all by the blessings of the dead human mother who metamorphosed into several non-

human forms. However, the evil designs of Laagi don't end. She invites Teja home and turns her into a sparrow and sends Tula in her place as the queen. However, the truth unveils and the King orders Tula to be killed and Teja is reinstated as the Queen in her human form. Tales like this are suggestive of exploitation of nature (animals and trees) vis-a-vis women. The *oikos* keep mutating until they are *integrative* which might be suggestive of a hopeful future for the world if humans identify the concept of *conscientizacao*. The constant transmutation of forms also upholds an "anti-class posture" of deep ecology that thrives on "principles of ecological egalitarianism and of symbiosis" (Naess, 2005, p. 2).

Another recurring animal motif in folktales is that of snakes. In a typical male-centered tale, a snake is usually seen as a rival phallus and hence meant to be killed. Alternately, in women-centered tales, snakes are seen as husbands, lovers, helpers etc. (see Ramanujan, 1991). In "Champavati" (Bezbaroah 1911/2011), a python falls in love with Champavati, the daughter of the abandoned wife, Elaagi, and is married off to it. The perceived terror of the mother-daughter turns into good fortune when the snake-husband treats Champavati like a princess and clads her in riches. Seeing this Laagi, the favourite wife, forces the husband to find a python-husband for her daughter as well. Their evil plan hatched out of greed results in disaster as the python devours his wife. Such tales reflect the necessity of communion with nature while focusing on raising consciousness. If humans 'use' nature for fulfilling their material needs alone without paying heed to the reciprocity of the relation, disasters are bound to happen.

The ability to mutate into non-human a form is also seen in "Taibang Meena Harinongnang Onba" (e-pao.net, 2012), a Manipuri folktale. The father left the family and on his return several years later, he, unknowingly, gets attracted towards his own daughter, now a beautiful young woman. Ashamed and feeling defiled by the thought, the daughter first turns into a fish and eventually into a parrot and flies away to hills far away—a symbolic and literal flight away from her life of shame.

A Tripuri folktale titled "The Hornbill" (Tyagi, 2020) relates the transmutation of a woman into a Hornbill. Sampari, the wife, worked hard to make two ends meet while Kachak, the husband, wiled always his days in alcohol. One day a bear comes out of the jungle and takes the baby away as Kachak is engrossed in playing flute. Sampari returns from the field only to realize the irresponsibility of Kachak and the resultant disaster. She curses Kachak:

...in the next birth you will be a bird and your beak will be as long as your flute. Your voice will be coarse and harsh. Your wife will watch her eggs without moving till the young birds can fly. You will have to feed the mother bird all throughout the day. You alone will have to do all the work and there will be no one to help you. (p.14)

Mellor (1996) puts it, "before patriarchal domination of human societies, woman-centred societies existed that were more egalitarian and ecologically benign" (p.151). The folktale displays a non-human world in which the females would lead a life exemplifying that of the men's (human) world.

A folktale from Manipur, "Sakhi Darlong" (Tyagi, 2020), presents a classic case of exploitation of Mother Nature and the transmutation of living forms. A Jhumia named Shyamacharan hunted a deer and took it home only to find a human spirit coming out of it. They eventually get married on the agreement that he will never reveal her true (deer) self. One day, years later, the intoxicated

Shyama reveals the secret to their children and the wife turns into a deer and goes away to the forest. She continues feeding her children nonetheless. In the meantime, the new wife of Shyama entreats him to kill the deer which then takes the form of a *Simul* tree to feed her children. Shyama cuts off the tree and she finally transmutes into a fish and takes away her children in search of an *integrative oikos* in the sea. This tale replicates the philosophy of "Gaia" which postulates a sense of transcendence between all life forms. The non-human spirit goes through an extended event of persecution even as she takes care of her human children. The tale reiterates that nature is magnanimous and 'giving'.

The fish and water are in themselves connected to the idea of life and birth. The symbolic meaning of fish differs from culture to culture, but by and large, it represents good luck, and prosperity and is also connected to the idea of the sacred feminine (Clifford 2021). The medium in which it travels freely is water, which is itself considered to be a metaphor for a higher level of awareness, thought-process, intelligence and esoteric knowledge (Clifford 2021). The mother turning into a fish and taking her children along into her water kingdom is symbolic of a hopeful, happier and meaningful future.

Likewise, in "The Stork Girl" (Tyagi, 2020), a flock of Storks lends one feather each to the protagonist, Arti, to fly away to find her *integrative oikos* far from the *anarchic oikos* created by her aunt. Thus, the folk story-telling method could be the best way to address environmental ills while asserting the requisite to be an involved listener.

Conclusion

That the earth has itself intervened to revise those habits of thought that are based on the Cartesian dualism that arrogates all intelligence and agency to the human while denying them to every other kind of being? (Amitav Ghosh 2016, para. 14.8)

A woman's culturally fashioned life-forms, her perspectives, are different from a man's and hence the meanings of elements change. The reading of the select folktales from Northeast India illustrate that "genders are genres" and that "the world of women is not the world of men" (Dharwadker, 2004, p.446). Thus, the gender of the genre becomes imperative in interpretation.

Human history has frequently romanticized interpretations of Utopia, the unspoiled world, where people live in harmony and in sync with nature. With no signs of natural calamity or crisis of human desires, such Utopias solemnize happier human experiences and designs of 'orderliness' for human cultures to practice. Along with respecting nature, the select folktales foreground values like cooperation, reciprocity, and nurturing. The tales also emulate woman-nature propinquity and locate and uphold women's voices in the domain of 'nature-culture' as well as "counter and complement the attitudes of the male-centred tales" (Ramanujan, 1991, xxxi). This culminates in the Ecofeminist perception of (logically) challenging binaries like humans/animals, culture/nature, man/woman, self/other, etc., while decreeing that human identity is neither fixed nor predefined, rather it is sculpted by the seamless associations or differences of human-nature interface.

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Note

^[1] The term 'ecology' has Greek etymology and is derived from two words 'oikos', meaning 'home' or 'household' or 'habitation' or 'place to live' and 'logos' meaning 'study' or 'discourse'. (Verma, P. S. and V. K. Aganval. (1989). *Principles of Ecology*. p. 4.)

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