

# Depiction of the Connection between Nature and Culture and the Quest for Spiritual Ecology in Ratan Thiyam's *Manipur Trilogy*

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**Abstract:** Eco-criticism or Green Studies, acknowledged to be a relatively nascent body of critical thought, has gained greater momentum in the recent years due to its increasing relevance in a crisis-ridden global scenario. Exploitation of nature and its aftermaths being all pervasive in our present days, critics are forced to recognize the manifold metaphors of nature embedded in literature. Eco-critics tend to analyse the impact of the so called anthropocentric culture on the web of life and try to deconstruct the whole notion of culture by providing an eco-centric counter ethics. It was only much later that man began to realize the interconnectedness of living beings. In a country like India, where the elements of nature are widely idolized and worshipped, and where the concept of mother earth is deeply rooted in the collective psyche, the ominous plight of nature and a deep ecological consciousness finds expression in a multitude of literary works. Ratan Thiyam, one of the contemporary figures in Indian English Drama, explores through his dramas the Manipuri tradition and culture and his concern for the environment of his native land. His plays represent a remarkable juxtaposition of tradition and the demands of the remorseless technological world of today. In his *Manipur Trilogy*, Thiyam emphasizes the need to develop the traditional attitude of reverence towards nature. Here Thiyam has propagated the idea of spiritual ecology in order to maintain the ecological equilibrium, the utmost need of the hour around the globe. The present paper is an endeavour to bring into focus this very idea of building ecological consciousness and how culture and tradition could be instrumental in resolving environmental crisis, through a study of Thiyam's *Manipur Trilogy*.

**Key words:** Eco-criticism, Green Studies, anthropocentrism, eco-centricism, environmental crisis, tradition, spiritual ecology

Eco-criticism or Green Studies, acknowledged to be a relatively nascent body of critical thought, has gained great impetus in recent years owing to its increasing relevance in a crisis-ridden global scenario. Exploitation of nature and its aftermaths being ubiquitous in our present days, critics are forced to recognize the manifold metaphors of nature embedded in literature. Eco-critics tend to analyse the impact of the so called anthropocentric culture on the web of life and try to deconstruct the whole notion of culture by providing an eco-centric counter ethics. William Reuckerts' in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco Criticism" has defined ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts for the study of literature...." (Glotfelty 107) The major breakthrough in the field of ecocriticism came with the publication of an edited volume of brilliant essays by Cherryl Glotfelty and Harold Formm

titled *The Eco-Criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. In its introductory segment Cherryl Goltfelty said:

Eco-criticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human.... Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, “everything is connected to everything else”, we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but rather, plays a part in immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter and ideas interact. (Goltfelty xix)

A literary work can be brought under a green rubric when it has the elements that exhibit an explicit kinship with the natural environment and it voices concern over the degenerative effect that the progress in human civilization brings. In a country like India, where the elements of nature are widely idolized and venerated, and where the concept of mother earth is deeply rooted in the collective psyche, the ominous plight of nature and a deep ecological consciousness finds expression in a multitude of literary works.

Manipur has a rich theatre tradition. After its interaction with the British Indian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people were exposed to Western drama. The introduction of Western education in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century influenced the advent of a new group of playwrights into the scenario. Among these playwrights it is undoubtedly in Ratan Thiyam’s<sup>1</sup> hand that Manipuri theatre has achieved a new dimension. Thiyam explores through his dramas the vibrant world of Manipuri tradition and culture. Being a cult figure in the ‘Roots Movement’<sup>2</sup> he rediscovers the folklores, myths and legends of Manipur and bestows on them a contemporary meaning. Ecological concerns are strongly voiced in his plays. His plays present a remarkable juxtaposition of tradition and the demands of the remorseless technological world of today. Through presentation of opposites and conflicts, he puts across the clear message that unless mankind resist war halts the rat race of a frenetic existence and reverses the destruction of the only planet that we have, there is only doom in store for us. His lament of the diverse ways in which we have destroyed or prevented the world of today is heard against the backdrop of angst presences in the mythical world of Manipuri deities and damsel, of mothers and wise men. In the ultimate analysis, his plays represent the victory of the gradually fading traditional values over the present world of warfare, conflicts, violence, greed and inequality. Thiyam’s *Manipur Trilogy*<sup>3</sup> is one such collection in which he has expressed his deep concern over the ecological crisis of his native land. The plays in Thiyam’s *Manipur Trilogy* are *Wahoudok* (Prologue), *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* (My Earth, My Love) and *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills, One Valley).

*Wahoudok* (Prologue) is a play in four scenes that tells the Meitei<sup>4</sup> traditional myths regarding the creation of the universe and how modernization and the progress in civilization posed a potential threat to the traditional values as well as the environmental equilibrium of Manipur. The Drama shows in the beginning there was a vacuum full of darkness. Then the Almighty cried 'Hoong'<sup>5</sup> and suddenly there appeared a halo of seven colours and there was light everywhere like it happened also in the *Book of Genesis*, Chapter I. He went on creating celestial beings, animals and plants. Then following the advice of Mother Goddess, the sons of God created human beings in the image of their father, the Almighty God. Thus, human civilization was flourished on earth and they went on enjoying the bounty of nature and the earth was perfect paradise for human beings. In due course of time population increased significantly and subsequently it put pressure on food and natural resources. Human beings started fighting each other for a share of the ever diminishing resources in order to survive. This war for survival eventually brought political and economic crisis that led to a crisis in tradition and culture. The earth no longer remains a paradise; rather, it becomes an entity under constant threat of extinction. In order to solve this, people went back to the history of human civilization and took recourse in their age old tradition.

The ecology of our planet has been talked about in *Wahoudok* (Prologue) time and again. People have been reminded of the beauty and bounty of nature for quite a number of times. The narrator in the play says:

See, how beautiful is the earth

Green, black, saffron and white coloured

Ranges of hills. (Thiyam 41)

He speaks about the entire ecology of the earth. He speaks about the oceans, the green forests, the varied flora and fauna of the earth. But this earth is now under threat. Human exploitation of nature has brought on ecological imbalance. But this should be stopped in order to create a peaceful planet in which all creatures can live peacefully and in perfect harmony. This is what spiritual ecology is all about. Spiritual ecology teaches us to respect all form of creation, and to identify the divine in all these manifestations. Only then we can hope to redeem what we have desecrated and destroyed through our greed and arrogance. It means to gain the wisdom of our ancestors who respected the sacred interconnections of life and the divine forces within it. We have to relearn to bring an awareness of the many facets of divine oneness into our life. In *Wahoudok* (Prologue), Thiyam emphasizes this very need to develop the traditional attitude of reverence towards nature.

The second play in Thiyam's trilogy *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* (My Earth, My Love), also powerfully voices ecological concerns. The play addresses a very important global issue like terrorism and shows how it can lead to environmental degradation. The play introduces the characters of seven celestial nymphs taken from Manipuri myths and legends, representing the peace-loving citizens of the world in general. They pray to the almighty to restore harmony and peace in the world. Ecomystical ideas have been well explained by Thiyam in this play. Wars, battles and armed exercises of nations for attaining superiority have polluted the

planet apart from doing manifold harms to human civilization. They have been posing a threat to the very existence of the earth. The devastation created by human beings has destroyed nature and the ecological balance:

One Earth devoid of morning and day, with the sky covered by the vultures, turned by human beings, is created. In the garden of heaps of dead bodies, one is searching for varieties of flower.... (Thiyam 69)

In order to live in a perfectly ecological way, a new eco-ethic is to be developed, in which anthropocentrism should give way to ecocentrism. This is the primary concept of ecomysticism and this is what Thiyam tries to express in this play.

The last play in Thiyam's trilogy entitled *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills, One Valley) has a powerful dramatic voice that also strongly expresses ecological concerns. Here, in this play the dramatist has depicted the mystical valley that is now on the verge of losing its glory and tradition due to unfortunate turn of events. The seven Wise Men, who have been lost in oblivion so far and who are supposed to save the people and the land from this present crisis, call upon the celestial nymphs, the mothers, to help them to write a new book of wisdom that may help the people to go back to their roots in order to sustain and restore human civilization and man's relationship with nature. The book, representing traditional culture and values, is given to the younger generation to be passed from generation to generation to make people aware about the relationship between culture and nature and the need to preserve them to preserve our own selves. The play ends with lamps lighted on the hill tops and in the valley to enlighten the people, reminding them of their glorious past and, new hope for future. Thus, the play advocates a revival of traditional values, cultural heritage and ancient wisdom in order to resist the evil forces.

From the above discussion, it appears that the dramatist is greatly perturbed by the gradual cultural and ecological degradation of his native land. In his dramatic world, he is in constant quest for a world where human beings must develop an ethic of living together with each and every object of nature with complete harmony. In this connection the words of Lynn White seems much relevant and prophetic as well:

In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men.... Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. (White 1207)

When such exotic essence of paganism was ruthlessly driven out of our cultural realms, world began to stoop into environmental crisis. It was only much later that man began to realize the interconnectedness of living beings, that—

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things both great and small

For the dear God who loveth us,

He made and loveth all. (Coleridge 119)

Thus, in his *Manipur Trilogy*, Thiyam has presented the non-human environment not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. Thiyam has shown that the existence of human civilization cannot be imagined in isolation, without having a healthy correlation with nature. This essence of interconnectedness, of oneness had been there in our culture and traditional beliefs which has now become a fast fading phenomenon

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