

Bleeding Green: War, Poetry and Ecology in Select Poems from Northeast India

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Abstract

Peter Nicholls's essay 'Wars I have Seen' explores the mediation of war through the medium of poetry, visuals and technology, comments on its ramification and the alteration in the perception of war in the popular imagination. By extrapolating salient themes from the essay, specifically, the interrelation of visuality and violence and the adoption of poetry as the mode of creative expression and representation in a conflict-ridden landscape, this paper will re-read poetry from the Northeast of India. Studies have undertaken an eco-critical reading of the poetry from the Northeast of India given the immersiveness of the poets in the ecosphere, while others have critiqued the representation of armed conflict in the region. Keeping this in mind, the current study would extend the ecocritical approach to include the effects, if any, of the militant clashes in the region on the biosphere and investigate its presence and representation in the poetry from the Northast.

Keywords: *Northeast India, War poetry, Ecology, Environment, Representation, Conflict*

It appears to be standard practice to begin literary research in the corpus of Northeast poetry with a caveat. The inadequacy of the term Northeast to encapsulate the varied differentiations within the eight Indian states, and how it precludes the foregrounding of the differentiations that abound in those states like linguistic, ethnic, literary and cultural differences (Chandra & Das, 2007, p. 1). The choice of poets to write about war using the medium of poesy does not seem odd when seen with the backdrop of literary history of war beginning with Iliad in the West and Mahabharata in the East. Yet the suitability of the usage of the poetic form for the representation of warfare seems strange when seen in the light of the purported marginalization of the form (Nicholls, 2005). In the Indian subcontinent especially, with its contemporaneous utilitarian Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) leanings (Pant & Das, 2018), the “academic irrelevance” of poetry is thrown into relief. Thus, before delving into further intricacies of the current study, we must interrogate the usage of the medium in question for the purpose of expression during military combat when the brutal, absolutist annihilating logic of war overpowers if not completely dominates the life affirming aestheticism of poetry, when “gunfire reverberates in the hills, and when bullets sprout from windows, instead of geraniums” (Ngangom, “When You Do Not Return”, *Dancing Earth*, 2009, p. 199). Nicholls addresses this incongruous coupling by referring to the therapeutic quality of poetry (p. 12), making the channeling of simmering angst against prolonged warfare possible. Similarly, Easterine Iralu posits the palliative capability of poetic speech as it is “an integral part of the healing of a people’s psychological wounds” in “Should Writers Stay in Prison?” (2011, p. 273). James W. Tupper in 1918, corroborates the emotional import of poetry because of its resonance with rhythmic emotional excitement and its emotional expressive ability (p. 445). Yet, the expressiveness of poetry suggests absorption and close involvement with war rather than a belated composed reflection on the conflict. The temporal coordinate of the poetic speech is another parameter that is worth contemplating. While Manipuri poet Robin S. Ngangom admits to the self-reflexiveness of his earlier poetic output in “Poetry in the Time of Terror” (2005), he discusses at length how the violence draws the poet out from within himself and aids him in engaging with the violence in the region head-on. The writer from Northeast, he says “living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics but must perforce

master ‘the art of witness’” (p. 171). Thus, the seemingly vast divide between violence and aestheticism is traversed in the poetry from Northeast India by writing poetry that is “raw”, earthy and engages with the violence in the region instead of resorting to mystical escapism. Mona Zote says in her poem, “What poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril”, “Poetry must... drip blood, remind you of sweat/ and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch/ and the sudden bullet to the head” (2005, pp. 318-9). However, Ngangom warns against the tendency to confine poetry from the Northeast to “extreme realism” and notes a move towards surrealism in the contemporary Northeastern poetry in India (“Poetry in the Time of Terror” 2005, p. 172). A case in point is R.K. Bhuhonsana’s poem “Jatinga” which illustrates the mysterious phenomenon of mass suicide by birds by “hurling themselves/ against the walls” (p. 56) which is then compared to human deaths listed in the newspapers. This poem highlights the absurdity of death in the valley by placing it alongside the inexplicable phenomenon of bird suicide.

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How can a study of Northeast Indian poetry be read through the lens of warfare when as part of the Indian subcontinent the region has not experienced a war for decades? Would it be amiss to refer to the military occupation of the eight states under the acronym of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act or AFSPA as a war, with the state and insurgents as the primary combatants? However, Pradip Phanjouman says that, “Curiously, nobody, especially the state, wants to describe it as a war situation either—largely—because war implies conflict between two states” (2013, p. 32) yet Nicholls’s words about war mirror that of Gautam Navlakha who refers to the AFSPA as “war against our own people.” (2011, p. 24). Regardless of the nomenclature, there is no doubt that the citizens from the Northeast are caught between the crossfire of the militants and the armed forces and to them, this armed conflict disrupts the monotony of everyday

life. Yet military combat encompasses a monotony of its own with periods of peace interspersed with intermittent eruptions of violence. This is evident in the poetry from the Northeast where the armed conflict penetrates the home and becomes part of the everyday. The domestication of war so to speak is seen in “I Want to Be Killed By an Indian Bullet,” by Thangjam Ibopishak where the five undisclosed armed men enter the poet’s drawing room (p. 133) which can be read as a metaphor for the nation at large or as a cartography of war. War is not taking place in a remote location here but has entered the private space and rudely imposed itself. Yet there is a paradoxical civility in the intrusion of the armed men who choose to have an encounter in the semi-private semi-public space and not the more intimate and relatively private room like the bedroom. This is one of the many antinomies of the conflict. There is a parallel defamiliarization of the humdrum everyday existence to the familiarization or normalization of armed conflict here. “Exposure to death exists as an everyday reality” (Baishya, 2018, pp. 39-40).

Before proceeding to the clash of war activities and biosphere, a brief outline of eco critical theory and practice must be laid out. The etymology of the taxonomy (‘eco’ derives from the Greek word *oikos* which means house and ‘critical’ means judgement) provides an entry point into the discourse. Ecocriticism can be understood as the appraisal of the house or ambient biosphere. The term “Ecocriticism” was first used by Rueckert in his essay ‘Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism’ where he defined ecocriticism as “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (qtd. Glotfelty & Fromm, p. xviii) Cheryl Glotfelty later redefined it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” in the introduction to the seminal collection of essays dealing with the same topic, also discussing the reason behind the choice of the term “ecocriticism” instead of “environment studies” since using the term environment places human in the center. An “earth centric” approach de-centers humans from the study of biospheres and does away with anthropocentrism (Glotfelty & Fromm, p. xx).

The interrelationship of Northeast offers fertile ground for eco-critical analysis owing to their intimate association of the inhabitants with their environment and is reflected in various poems and myths including the mythical provenance of the Ao ethnic group of Nagaland from the earth or six stones at Lungterok. In the poem “Stone People from Lungterok” by Temsula Ao, the earth is

feminized and gives birth to the ancestors of the Aos, the Stone people (pp. 1-3). The landscape here does not serve as a mere backdrop for the enactment of human activities but provides a sense of identity to the community (Chandra & Das, 2007, p. v) and anchors them firmly in the terrain. Their bond with the biosphere thus runs as deep as blood, as the community forges ties of kinship with their non-human counterparts in the biosphere.

The Aos, traditionally, have held animistic belief and worshipped “spirits of trees and forests, of stones and rivers...” (Ao, p. 3) showing a reverence for the ecosystem that is now under threat of modernization and urbanization. Besides these two inimical forces, the armed conflict wreaked havoc on the sensitive ecological system, yet the damaging effects of the conflict on the flora and fauna have been sidelined. Easterine Iralu mythicizes the war ecology in the poem “Genesis” tracing the mythic-historical life cycle of the North-Eastern ecosystem constituting of the seven daughters from the times when the “hills were untamed/ her soil young and virgin...The earth had felt good” (p. 139). This was a time of plenty as the earth was “full and rich” and “every evening they (the seven daughters) would return with their baskets overflowing with the yield of the land” (“Genesis”, p. 87). The ecological contamination and damage that this pristine and wild ecosystem experienced because of the insurgency is symbolized as the “plague” (Biswas & Thomas, 2012, p. 54) in the poem that “reaped premature harvests of field and men” using her scythe (“Genesis”, p. 87). The seven sister’s “summer night locks/ grew lank and were shorn” and the rich soil turned into “the dead earth” (“Genesis”, p. 88). Here, the forest cover of the states has been personified as a young maiden whose locks are cut. The dense forest cover of the state is usually cleared for the mobility of the state forces and to defoliate the hiding grounds of the insurgents. The “dead earth” could be a result of the usage of landmines in the region which results in the scorched earth, removal of topsoil (Berhe, p. 4), loss of fertility which subsequently impacts the production of forest resources. Studies have also shown the effect of landmines on land degradation and vegetation and discussed how it poses a grave threat to fragile ecosystem and its inhabitants, many of whom are endangered species. The “dead earth” can also be understood as the unresponsiveness or lifelessness of the bio-forms from their earlier mythical animation and sentience. It could also be indicative of the death of endangered animal life inhabiting the biodiversity parks or conservation grounds (which also provide refuge to

insurgents) that get caught in these areas of military skirmishes (Mandal & Sarkar, n.d.). The intensity and magnitude of such detrimental effects of armed conflicts on Northeastern ecology is beyond the scope of this paper, nor can the reversibility of the damage be ascertained. Iralu however, ends the poem on a sanguine note, hinting at the regenerative potential in the biosphere which is depicted as Kelhoukevira or “where life is good” (Biswas & Thomas, pp. 53-54). In “Slumber” roadside shrubs are trampled by both soldiers and “extremists” (2009, p. 181).

The poem “Dawn” by Nirmalprabha Bordoloi suggests the disturbance to the non-human life form especially winged creatures by the sound of gun fire and places this momentary disruption caused by war in the antediluvian history of biosphere, highlighting its incongruence in the temporal framework of life-forms. “Does the day break/ with the sound of guns? / No, / it breaks with the cry/ of that bird...” (p. 73). Gunshots can never signal day breaks like birds have done traditionally, affirms Bordoloi and thus violence can never assimilate ecologically in the region. Although humans seem to have become habituated to the ongoing armed conflict in the states, which can be seen in the matter-of-fact description of life in insurgent states in poems like Thangjam Ibopishak’s “I want to be killed by an Indian Bullet” and “Between Bomb Blasts” by Shimanta Bhattacharya. The intermittent silence between the blasts presented in the latter is unnatural for another reason. One expects the alarmed cacophony of birds and animals after the blasts but perhaps the poet or persona’s hearing is affected from the proximity to the blasts. Or is it possible, that the birds from the region have migrated to safer grounds away from the din of the battle? The same eerie unearthly silence reappears in “The Right Hour” by Niranjan Chakma: “The hills and valleys are steeped in an infinite silence/ there are interminable tremors now” (p. 77). The tremors, possibly caused by explosions by either the insurgents or army in “the deep forest of Kachalong/ in the deep forest of gunpowder” (p. 77) affirm the earlier hypothesis of the migration of fauna to relatively undisturbed regions.

In “An Obscure Place” Mamang Dai begins by elucidating the “history of our race” voicing the collective anguish of the various ethnic groups of the Northeastern states who “gave shelter to men/ who climbed over our hills/for glory of a homeland” (p. 88). While the identity of these men may be safely established as members of the Indian army, the identity of those who are merely referred to as

“they” who slay the “wild cat” cannot be established. “They” could be poachers or rebels who are hiding under the forest cover and are quite clearly sabotaging the precarious balance of the bioecological system by killing wild animals for profit or because they feel threatened by their proximity. The destruction of forests, for instance, results in the loss of habitat for wildlife, leading to their subsequent extinction. Insurgents often sell animal body parts to fund military operations. While the widespread loss of human life is symbolically depicted through the imagery of blood, the effect on wildlife and vegetation is alluded to indirectly in the poems. Various poems employ objective correlative to mirror the feelings of pain and anguish through cataracts, rain and water bodies.

The poem titled “Dust” by Nini Lungalang captures the same insouciance to violence in the poet as seen in “I Want to Be Killed by an Indian Bullet” and “Between the Bomb Blasts”:

I saw a young man gunned down
As I shopped in the market place.
Two thick thuds, and then he fell,
And thrashed a bit, on his face.

That’s all. He sprawled in the staring sun. (p. 166)

It also serves as a testament to the theorization of Northeastern poetry as “poetry of witness” (Ngangom, p. 172) realistically recording events from the life of the region. This documentation comes with a sense of immediacy and intimacy, yet paradoxical stoic distancing as seen in the verses above. The gaze of the poet in these poems is direct and focused on the material reality observed through the visual senses. A different kind of “seeing” occurs in the poem “Genesis” discussed above, where the poet “sees” the contemporaneous violence and conflict through a mythic-historic lens. Once again, there is a distance between the poet and the armed conflict. When this distance is psychological, there is a sense of passivity in the role of the poet as witness who becomes a chronicler of distressing events. In the second case, a three-layered buffering takes place: temporality, myth and poetry. The act of writing poetry too provides a sense of distance from the events and provides time for reflection on the violence. Like Gertrude Stein, these witness poets “see” war through poetry (Nicholls, p. 20)

where it is re-enacted. Certain poems also present a different kind of mediation of armed conflict. News reports like the one in “Jatinga” by Bhubonsana show “men wearing different masks of birds/lay dead on newspaper pages” (p. 55). The different masks here could represent different ethnicity or factions. In “An Obscure Place” Mamang Dai observes, “If there is no death the news is silence” (p. 88). Like the techno mediated wars, wars mediated through newspaper too produce alienation in the readers who feel estranged from the violence. For them death tolls are mere statistics as recorded in the poem “Native Land” by Ngangom as human beings are reduced to numbers:

First came the screams of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church.... (The Poetry in the Time of Terror, p. 54).
Inundated by the incessant death tolls, the people lose their “tenuous humanity”
and are rendered insensitive to sympathy.

This paper does not wish to delimit the literary criticism pertaining to the Northeast India to notions of armed conflict or ecology but wishes to present a nuanced understanding of the interrelationship between people, their environment and armed conflict. It was observed that poetry is used as a therapeutic, palliative, documentative and emotive medium in literature from regions of heavy militarization and used to represent the adverse effects of both the insurgency and armed states, as Murasingh remarks in “Slumber” roadside shrubs are trampled by both soldiers and “extremists” (p. 181).

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- i. When discussing the necessity of war for the constitution of the state, Nicholls briefly mentions 20th century fiction's paranoia of the conspiracy that "the state is actually at war with its own citizens." "Wars I Have Seen", p. 13.
- ii. Naorem Bidyasagar "Blood -smeared Dawn" Dancing Earth "Each of us ordinary citizens/ is a target / of blind bullets / bursting like flame from two directions" (p. 63)
- iii. Mandal and Sarkar: "Attempts by the forces of the State to flush the militants out of these parks result in armed conflict, which consequently destroys the environment. For example, trees often have to be felled over the course of the advance of the State forces into these parks."
- iv. For instance in "The Right Hour", "bloodstains fresh and dried lie scattered on the ground"(p. 177).
- Robin S. Ngangom observes in "Poetry in the Time of Terror", "In contemporary Manipuri poetry, there is a predominance of images of 'bullets', 'blood', 'mother', 'the colour red' and, paradoxically, 'flowers' too." (p. 227)

Ethical Considerations

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