

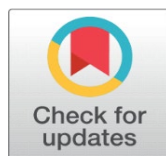
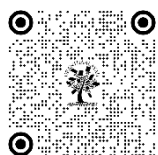
AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF SELECTED RONGMEI NAGA FOLKTALES

Pousaikingliu Rikhi Panmei ¹, Dr. Dhanamanjuri Lourembam ²✉, Ngoruh Engnithar Aquiline Moyon ³

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal Manipur

² Associate Professor, Department of English, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur

³ Research Scholar, Department of English, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur



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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism as a literary theory examines the relationship between literature and environment. Though it is a fairly recent theory, ecocriticism deviates from this anthropocentric approach to reading literature in favor of a more eco-centric perspective, in contrast to its predecessors, which typically concentrate on men and things relating to men. Ecocriticism can be applied to any work of literature since there is no set or definitive way to apply it. And as such the paper titled *An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Rongmei Naga Folktales* will focus on the environmental aspects of Rongmei folktales and its relevance to the contemporary environmental crisis. The importance of folktale is multitudinous, to name a few it enlighten the people of their culture, their roots, identity as well as beliefs and customs that is distinct to each tribe or community. Our forefathers used folktale as a means of passing on their knowledge to subsequent generations, so in addition to being entertaining, they are also replete with ancient wisdom. Environmental consciousness is one of them. There is a wealth of ecological wisdom to be gleaned from the tales of our forefathers when examined from an ecocritical standpoint.

Keywords: Folktale, Culture, Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Nature



1. INTRODUCTION

As environmental crises intensify, it becomes crucial for all individuals, irrespective of their background or profession, to develop a deeper understanding of their relationship with the natural world. This is where literary theories, such as ecocriticism, play a significant role in shaping perspectives and promoting positive change. Ecocriticism is a literary theory that explores the intricate connection between literature and nature. This theory provides a framework for understanding how literature reflects, represents, and interacts with the natural world. It allows readers to explore how various texts, from poetry and novels to folktales and contemporary works, address environmental themes and human interactions with nature.

One of the key aspects of ecocriticism is its departure from the traditional, anthropocentric (human-centered) perspective that has long dominated much of Western thought. While many literary theories, such as formalism, post-structuralism, or even Marxism, focus on human-centric concerns (such as social structures, power, or language), ecocriticism shifts the focus to nature itself. It challenges the notion that humans are separate from or superior to nature,

instead emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living things and the environment. This shift allows for a more holistic understanding of the world and the human role within it.

By rejecting anthropocentrism, ecocriticism encourages readers to reconsider their perceptions of nature. It asks us to move beyond viewing nature merely as a resource for human consumption or as a backdrop for human activities, and instead, it promotes an awareness of nature's intrinsic value and its complex systems. For instance, ecocritical readings of literature might examine how characters interact with their environments, how the natural world is portrayed, and how these interactions reflect or challenge societal attitudes toward nature.

Through ecocriticism, literary scholars and students can influence broader social change by helping individuals of all ages and backgrounds see the environmental issues in new ways. It provides a bridge between the humanities and the natural sciences, offering a platform for discussions that could help revitalize a sense of responsibility toward the environment. In sum, ecocriticism is not just a literary theory; it is a call to action. It urges readers to examine the role of literature in shaping our understanding of nature and to embrace a worldview that recognizes the significance of ecological balance. By challenging the human-centered mindset and encouraging a more interconnected approach to the world, ecocriticism has the potential to play a pivotal role in cultivating a more eco-conscious society.

Using ecocriticism to analyze folktales reveals how nature is more than just a backdrop—it shapes characters' identities, decisions, and even the moral fabric of the narrative. In many folktales, the natural world is imbued with symbolic meanings, often reflecting the values and worldview of the culture from which the story originates. Similarly, specific animals and plants often carry particular connotations in folktales. A wolf might represent danger, cunning, or even wisdom, while a tree could signify life, growth, or protection. In some stories, nature is personified, acting as a guide or a trickster, with its behavior influencing the course of events. These elements are never arbitrary; they are deeply connected to the local landscape, culture, and belief systems.

Through ecocriticism, we gain insights into how stories not only reflect but also engage with the environment. By recognizing the significance of nature in these stories, we can also see how human relationships with the environment are embedded in folklore. These stories can be seen as a way of teaching respect for nature, highlighting the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. In this sense, folklore and storytelling don't just preserve the culture—they also communicate a deeper ecological wisdom that might guide future generations in how they interact with the land, animals, and resources. Ecocriticism applied to folktales shows that the natural environment is not a passive setting but an active, integral force shaping the narrative. This lens invites readers to understand how these stories convey the ecological values of the past and offer lessons for the present and future.

Using local knowledge and cultural stories, such as folktales, is an effective way to rekindle public concern for the environment. These stories, passed down through generations, often contain wisdom and lessons that emphasize the importance of living in harmony with nature. They highlight sustainable practices, respect for the land, and the interconnectedness of all living things. By engaging with these traditional narratives, we can learn from the experiences of our ancestors, who understood the delicate balance between humans and the natural world. Revisiting and respecting these cultural teachings can guide modern efforts to prevent environmental destruction and foster a deeper connection to the environment, encouraging more mindful conservation practices today. Our forefathers had a deeper connection to nature, shaped by their reliance on it for survival and daily life. Unlike today, where technology often separates us from the natural world, their lives were intertwined with the rhythms of the earth, the seasons, and the cycles of plants and animals. This intimate relationship fostered a profound respect for nature's resources and beauty. In contrast, our increasing dependence on technology has distanced us from nature, leading to a disconnectedness where we sometimes overlook its significance and fragility. Reconnecting with the natural world can help us rediscover the balance and respect our ancestors once had, encouraging environmental preservation and sustainable living.

Before the British colonization, many Naga tribes practiced animism, which deeply connected them to the natural world. Their belief system was rooted in reverence for animal deities, forest spirits, and river gods, all of which were often depicted as taking human forms to interact with humanity. This sacred bond with nature made the environment feel like a living, breathing entity—one to be respected and cherished. The natural world, in turn, was seen as a provider, offering everything necessary for survival. In contrast to modern times, where technology and industrialization have led to overexploitation, these ancestral practices prioritized balance, taking only what was necessary and maintaining harmony with nature. The folktales of that time rarely depicted nature being harmed or exploited, as the people understood that their survival depended on its well-being. Today, however, humankind has shifted from living in harmony with nature to altering it to suit our own desires, often at great cost to the environment. The once vibrant and

pristine surroundings have given way to pollution and degradation, as modern society's disregard for nature's delicate balance continues to cause lasting harm.

The Indian Constitution recognizes the Rongmeis, also known as the Kabuis, as a Scheduled Tribe. This group is primarily found in the northeastern states of Manipur, Assam, Nagaland, and Tripura, with a significant presence in the Tamenglong district of Manipur. The Rongmeis are one of the most prominent Naga tribes, known for their rich cultural heritage, which includes vibrant traditional dances, music, and rituals. Their cultural history is deeply intertwined with folktales, which reflect their close relationship with nature, spiritual beliefs, and ancestral wisdom. These stories, passed down through generations, not only preserve the tribe's identity but also emphasize values like respect for nature, community, and the interconnectedness of all life.

The story "Chungailiu" from the Rongmei folktale anthology "Dawn" by Dr Achingliu Kamei recounts the story of the aforementioned girl. Nothing unusual occurs in the narrative, but the vividly described setting is not the same as the one we are used to. "At this time of the month the forest comes alive with a brilliant burst of colors from the blooming flower trees. The path leading down to the river below was strewn with fallen blossoms and petals" (Kamei 10). This short excerpt alone conjures up an aesthetic almost fantasy like images of the landscape in our mind. The entire story is focused on the daily activities of the youths residing together in the youth dormitories also called "morung". The story is told from the girl's perspective. The main activity of the day—foraging in the forest for food and other necessities—occurs later in the story.

Our ancestors led lives centered around meaningful, physical activities that connected them to their environment and culture. Unlike today, where much of our time is consumed by phone use and digital distractions, their daily routines were shaped by necessity and survival. The majority of tribal people, including the Rongmeis, were agriculturists, with men responsible for hunting, foraging, and other labor-intensive tasks, while women typically handled domestic chores like cooking, cleaning, weaving, and fetching water. Sometimes, women also joined the men in the forests to gather essential resources. These activities are often featured in folktales, highlighting their cultural significance. Despite the physical demands of their work, the constant movement and engagement with nature kept them healthy, providing natural exercise. Based on these stories, it's clear that our ancestors were likely in better physical health compared to us today, with fewer widespread ailments and diseases. In contrast, modern society, with its technological advancements, has brought about new challenges, such as psychological disorders like anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, which were largely absent in earlier times.

The story, "The Boy Who Turned Into a Hornbill," is a powerful example of how the Naga people use folklore to communicate values like freedom, transformation, and the consequences of cruelty. The hornbill, as a symbolic motif in many Naga cultures, represents more than just a bird—it is a manifestation of beauty, freedom, and even vengeance, as seen in the story. The boy's transformation into the hornbill after enduring abuse from his stepmother symbolizes his yearning for liberation. Birds, particularly those as majestic as the hornbill, are often associated with qualities like freedom, elevation, and transcendence. In this case, the boy's metamorphosis into a hornbill not only offers him the escape he craved but also marks his evolution into a more powerful, assertive being who takes control of his destiny.

The boy's return years later to seek revenge against his stepmother highlights a more complex facet of human emotion—how suffering can breed a desire for justice or vengeance. His revenge is not just about retribution; it also serves to underline the injustice he suffered and the power dynamics in play. The act of gifting his feather to his former sweetheart's son brings the story full circle, implying that beauty and strength can be passed down and appreciated by future generations, tying back to the symbolism of the hornbill as a symbol of beauty, strength, and freedom.

The significance of the feather as a gift and its admiring reception by the village is crucial. The feather, often woven into garments or used as adornment in Naga culture, is not merely a physical object but a potent cultural and spiritual symbol. It signifies a bond of shared experiences, suffering, and triumphs, and its placement on the head of the boy suggests a transfer of wisdom or power. Overall, this folklore encapsulates the Naga people's deep reverence for nature and its creatures, especially the hornbill, which serves as a potent symbol of personal transformation, freedom, and the cyclical nature of life, where suffering and loss can be redeemed and transformed into something enduring and meaningful.

The story of Amang is a rich narrative that blends human ambition, resourcefulness, and the interplay between humans and animals, especially in relation to cultural practices and beliefs. The key elements of the tale—the magical rope, the mithuns, and the feast of merit—carry deep cultural significance for the Rongmei people, reflecting the intertwined relationship between humans, animals, and nature in their worldview. The narrative of "Amang" and the

subsequent stories depict various interactions between humans and animals, as well as between animals themselves. Since many customs and proverbs have their roots in this tale, the majority of Rongmeis are familiar with it. The plot centers on a young orphan named Amang and his sister, who had to fend for themselves at a tender age. He eventually struck a fortune when he gets his hands on the magical rope which belonged to his uncle. When this rope which is typically used to tie mithuns(a type of ox) is chopped up into pieces and dropped into a salt lake where the mithuns frequent, each piece will transform into a mithun. And during those days owning huge herd of mithun is a symbol of wealth. The feast of merit honoring Amang's accomplishments features many fascinating animal interactions between men and animals themselves.

The Feast of Merit held in Amang's honor is an important cultural event where his achievements and new wealth are celebrated by the community. The feast not only honors Amang but also brings to light the significance of animals—specifically mithuns—in Rongmei society. Feasts such as these often include sacrifices, rituals, and symbolic acts that reflect the deep reverence for the animals that sustain the community.

"It is said that all the animals of the forest were invited to Amang's Feast of the Merit. These were the times when animals and mankind lived together harmoniously" (Kamei 60).

Folktales offer a unique and engaging way to teach children moral values, serving as an alternative to direct reprimands. One such story is the tale of how the mouse got its tail. Through this story, children not only enjoy the narrative but also learn about the consequences of right and wrong actions. In the story of Amang, the mouse and the bird are best friends who help each other prepare for a feast. The mouse lovingly decorates the bird's tail, but when it's the mouse's turn, the bird carelessly shapes the mouse's tail out of mud and rushes off to the feast. The mouse, angered by this betrayal, is left with a poor, muddy tail and is powerless to change the situation. This act of selfishness by the bird creates a lasting enmity between the two, a rivalry that endures to this day. In this tale, the bird is depicted as a selfish friend, a bad example for children, while the mouse represents the loyal and caring friend, teaching the importance of kindness and reciprocity in friendships. Such stories instill important lessons about empathy, fairness, and the impact of selfishness, offering children valuable guidance through storytelling.

People have attempted to alter the natural environment to suit the needs of contemporary society, which has resulted in disastrous occurrences like mass extinction, global warming, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss. These events have also caused an ecological crisis and ecological collapse. The ecosystem and biodiversity have been impacted and altered by humans in many ways. Despite living in harmony with the natural world, men eventually succumb to their encroaching nature. Men have always been invasive by nature owing to their anthropocentric bearing, since the time of our ancestors albeit on a more controlled level. Some folktales could be considered an early form of environmental criticism because they criticize excessive human ambition, greed, or the destruction of the natural world. Traditional tales can thus teach us important lessons about today's environmental issues. The application of ecocriticism encourages readers to consider sustainable practices and the moral treatment of nature by highlighting the connections between the wisdom of these folktales and the current environmental tragedies.

In many folktales, animals are given anthropomorphic traits, often depicted as coexisting with humans in a way that blurs the lines between species. These stories, though sometimes exaggerated, hold valuable lessons, whether they are rooted in myth or actual events. The coexistence portrayed in these tales doesn't necessarily mean living side by side as human communities do, but rather interacting with animals in a more genuine and respectful manner. Historically, humans and animals shared a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding, with animals playing essential roles in the survival and culture of the community. However, today, this bond has been largely lost. As human activity encroaches upon natural habitats, animals now perceive us as a threat rather than as companions. This shift has led to their increasing aversion and fear of humans, which starkly contrasts with the harmonious coexistence depicted in our ancestors' stories. And it is unquestionably true that humans have continuously exploited nature for their own greed, oblivious to the dire consequences that will ultimately come back to haunt them. This brief passage from the story "The Three Friends: Pangolin, Porcupine, and Tortoise" highlights the disruptive and intrusive behavior of humans.

"On the other side of the world, the humans have begun to explore every part of the land including the kingdom in which the three friends were living. Humans hunt the pangolin for their scales and meat and porcupine for quills and bitter excreta which has a curative power. The enormous size and taste of tortoise's liver is a great delicacy" (Gonmei, 65).

The three friends, along with the other animals, once lived contentedly in their natural habitat, free from the worries of food and survival. Their lives were in harmony with nature, where the balance between predators and prey maintained peace. However, this tranquility was shattered when humans began to encroach upon their territory, threatening their safety and way of life. Despite the common portrayal of tigers and other predators as terrifying and dangerous in folktales, the true danger to the animals was not from these natural threats, but from humans. As men invaded the animals' land and colonized their environment, they became the real enemy, disrupting the delicate balance of nature and forcing the animals into a fight for survival. This shift reflects a timeless theme in many folktales, where human actions—often driven by greed and expansion—pose a far greater threat to the natural world than any wild predator.

Folktales often serve as a form of wisdom, offering a way for communities to understand the surroundings, the balance of nature, and the ethical responsibilities of individuals in relation to the environment. In many cultures, these stories conveyed lessons about respecting nature, the consequences of exploiting natural resources, and the need for harmony between humans and the natural world.

In the past, humans interacted with nature on a smaller scale, and the environmental impact of their actions was often limited. This is in contrast to modern times, where industrialization and population growth have led to large-scale environmental degradation. Stories from ancient times often included themes of respect for the land, reverence for animals, and the cyclical nature of life and death within ecosystems. These values were meant to encourage sustainable practices, ensuring that people lived in balance with the environment and did not overexploit it. By revisiting these traditional folktales today, we can find important lessons that may help inspire current generations to reconsider their relationship with the planet. Folktales can serve as a reminder of the deeper connections between people and the natural world, encouraging a renewed respect for the environment and urging individuals and communities to take actions to protect the earth from further harm.

For example, some folktales feature characters who embody the wisdom of nature, teaching that nature's resources must be used carefully and sparingly. Other stories might depict the consequences of greed or disrespect toward the land, such as stories where over-hunting or deforestation leads to misfortune. In this way, these stories not only convey cultural values but also offer modern-day wisdom that can inform efforts to combat the ecological crises we face today. Thus, folktales can indeed be powerful tools in restoring ecological balance. They offer a way to reconnect with traditional knowledge and values while providing guidance for a more sustainable future. As global environmental challenges like climate change, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity become ever more pressing, these stories can remind us of the delicate and vital relationships we must nurture to ensure a healthier world for future generations.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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