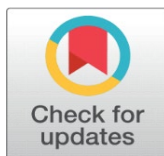
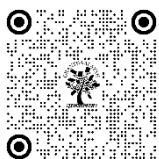


ENVIRONMENTAL DISQUIETUDE IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF ASSAMESE WRITER SAURABH KUMAR CHALIHA

Mompi Saikia  1

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English North Bank College, Ghilamara Lakhimpur-787053, Assam, India



Corresponding Author

Mompi Saikia, Mompis2020@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

With the introduction of a new theory termed ecocriticism, environmental concerns in literature are a hot topic these days. Environmental risk has become a more prominent issue in recent years in environmental literature because of its connections to climate change. This paper attempts to study the ecological concerns in the short stories of Saurabh Kumar Chaliha. This paper focuses on the environmental issues raised by Chaliha. He is known as the writer who captures the urban life with all its tall buildings, narrow lanes, filthy roads, overflowing drains, noises and pollution. But at the background of such stories there lies solicitude for the environment degradation. Noise pollution, draught, deforestation etc. are some of the environmental issues which occupy certain place in Chaliha's stories. This concern for environmental degradation is associated by the author with the materialistic concern of the Assamese middle class. In the proposed study, three short stories of Chaliha are selected-Awaj; Golam and Khorang-are selected to examine how the characters suffer at the hand of the depleted environment. Chaliha writes about the scenarios and characters facing environmental issues where their identities are threatened owing to human greed and ignorance. The study of the chosen stories will be done through close reading, textual analysis and citations. Here, information from both primary and secondary sources is incorporated. While secondary sources are obtained from journals, periodicals, and reference books, primary sources are the texts of the chosen nonfictional and fictional works as well as the author interviews.

Keywords: Environment, Destruction, Materialism, Middle Class



1. INTRODUCTION

Anthropocentrism has instilled great confidence in a man, leading him to new heights of growth and genius. Human existence, according to anthropocentrism, is the most crucial and essential component of the universe. Humans have made every attempt in recent decades to make their lives simpler, more comfortable, and more accessible. In order to meet their own needs, humans have degraded other species to little more than resources. As the threat posed by climate change develops, ecological issues are becoming increasingly prominent in human discourse. The current environmental dilemma is the product of man's relentless avarice and the frenzied rate of growth and progress across time. Following this progression, there have been countless worldwide natural disasters, including cyclones, earthquakes, floods, droughts, and wildfires. The climate crisis has become a hot topic among intellectuals, trending on social media, in public discourse, and as themes in literature.

Many critics, like Leo Marx, Raymond Williams, and others, have emphasized the environmental discussions in literature, but it wasn't until the late 1980s and early 1990s that it was recognized as a distinct subject of literary and cultural studies. This could be explained by the fact that many people did not begin to treat the environment seriously until that time. Ecocriticism is the practice of reading literature from an earthly perspective. To make the public more

conscious of the need for environmental concern and action, ecocritics frequently discuss the value of nature in literature. Ecocritics seem to gravitate towards the environmental justice movement, which addresses the uneven and generally unfair distribution of the burden of environmental degradation between rich and poor countries.

A substantial amount of writing from the Northeast is included in the canon of Indian English literature. In their creative works, contemporary writers in the region today appreciate the bounty of nature and the diverse indigenous communities that make up the region. They have begun to investigate issues other than violence, insurgency, societal instability, and political change. North East India's creative works today represent the loss of cultural traditions and environmental destruction caused by the younger generation's lack of interest. These authors believe that by establishing a literary revivalist movement, we may also restore the natural world's balance by raising public awareness of environmental challenges. This revivalist movement is primarily concerned with increasing public awareness and sensitivity to environmental concerns.

The first mention of nature in Assamese literature dates mostly from Sankardeva's writings. Even while disseminating the Vaishnavite philosophy was the primary goal of the writing, an eco-critical concern is also evident. For readers in the modern era, the incorporation of nature was particularly notable in poetry found in Assamese romantic literature from the 19th century. The poetry of Hemchandra Goswami, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Raghunath Chaudhury, Chandrakumar Agarwala, and others brought a sense of longing for the pastoral setting and a message of love for man and environment to the field of Assamese literature. While it is impossible to characterize literary depictions of the beauty of nature as ecocritical concerns, there are certain parallels that support the idea that ecocriticism is a wider interpretation of romanticism. Poets from Assam who emerged after independence, such as Harekrishna Deka, Hiren Bhattacharya, Nilim Kumar, Bijay Sankar Barman, Kamal Kumar Tanti, and others, focused on environmental issues and made pertinent observations about human nature and its effects on the environment. Examples of numerous writers in Assamese nature novels include *Xukula Hatir Khuj* (2012) by Prabhat Goswami, *Rumyang* (2016) by Gobin Kumar Khound, *Chorai Chuburi* (2016) by Pankaj Gobinda Medhi, and *Eyat Ekhan Aranya Asil* (2018) by Anuradha Sarma Pujari. Authors of short stories such as Mahim Bora, Saurabh Kumar Chaliha, Homen Borgohain, Bhabendranath Saikia, Apurba Sarma, Arupa Patangia Kalita, and others attempt to depict current environmental issues and the link between humans and nature via their works.

Saurabh Kumar Chaliha's ecological concerns are expressed in a very subtle way in his stories. Chaliha persistently depicts the changing ideals and materialistic worries of the Assamese middle class, particularly in post-independence India, in his works. This essay aims to examine the environmental issues raised by three of his stories: *Awaj*, *Golam*, and *Khorang*. These three stories demonstrate a sincere concern for the declining state of environment and how it affects people and society as a whole. In the first story, we meet a man who is trying to find a way out of the city because of the noise pollution. In the second, the main character shows an image of Guwahati City covered in a thick layer of snow, thus providing a counternarrative to the capitalist idea of industrialization leading to progress. The author tells the tale of a semi urban area that experiences a protracted drought in the third story.

2. OBJECTIVES

The following are the objectives of the research paper:

- 1) To look at how the selected stories introduce ecological issues.
- 2) To find out and assess how the middle class characters react to these environmental problems.
- 3) To ascertain how these ecological concerns affect the interpretation of the narrative

3. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY USED

In this research paper Saurabh Kumar Chaliha's stories will be analyzed with the literary theory of ecocriticism. Interpretive and analytical methods have been used to focus on the study. The study of the selected stories will be carried in the form of close reading, analysis and textual references. There are two sources of information that are used here- Primary and Secondary. Primary Sources are in the form of the texts of the selected fictional works, non fictional works as well as the interviews with the author, while the Secondary Sources are taken from journals, articles and reference books.

4. FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

The following are the paper's findings:

- 1) The middle class protagonists in Chaliha's stories are cognizant of the dangers their surroundings pose and the environmental challenges at hand.
- 2) Although they never ignore the deterioration of the environment, they show a certain callousness when it comes to implementing the necessary corrective action. In fact, in light of this, they seldom think twice about pursuing their materialistic goals.
- 3) The story raises this ecological issue in such a subtle way that it almost goes unnoticed.

5. DISCUSSION

Even though environmental laws were introduced and put into effect in India in the 1970s, the issue of environmental degradation did not become evident in literature until the 1990s, especially in Assamese literature. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a few writers—the majority of whom are also natural activists—exposed their concerns about the degraded environment through their works. These works are a form of awareness-raising literature that advocates for the preservation of nature, whether for the benefit of humans or for the sake of the planet Earth. Some notable contributions to this literature are Uroniya Hanhor Mat (1998) by Hiren Gohain, *Prakitir Anukule Pratikule* (2008) by Avani Kumar Bhagabati, *Kitap, Manuh Aru Prakitir Sangat* (2008) by Homen Borgohain, *Prakitir Sahagami Chinta Aru Chetona* (2011) by Soumyadeep Dutta, *Paribeshor Babe Samanya Kam* (2017) by Dinesh Ch. Goswami, and so on. The preservation of the environment for human existence was the central theme of these works. Other literary works demonstrate an ecological concern that contrasts with this anthropocentric concern for environmental destruction. Writers such as Soumyadeep Dutta, Mubina Akhtar, and others are nature advocates. Notable works in Assamese ecocentric literature include *Prakiti-Poribesh-Pratyahbanor Green Reporting* (2017) by Akhtar, *Asomor Seuj Songrokhon Chetona Aru Sahitya* (2017) by Naba Kumar Chamuah, *Aranyar Rod Boroshun* (2021) by Pankaj Kumar Dutta, and *Prakriti: Chinton Aru Monon* (2020) by Jyotimali Mahanta and Chitrajit Saikia.

Under ecocriticism major literary works are reread from an environmental perspective paying close attention to how the natural world is portrayed. The idea that everything is socially or linguistically created is rejected by ecocritics. They believe that nature is a genuine thing that, if mistreated, may have an impact on humans. Nature cannot be reduced to an idea that we define in the context of our cultural practices. As a matter of fact, ecocritics are likewise interested in the contradictory link between culture and nature. By emphasizing pertinent "factual" publications like essays, travelogues, memoirs, and regional literature that reflects some topographical issues, ecocriticism broadens the scope of literary criticism. Nonfictional writings of Assamese short story writer Saurabh Kumar Chaliha convey a strong sense of environmental concern. His essays, such as *Rajdhani Proxongo* (The Issue of the Capital), express his dissatisfaction with Guwahati's environmental pollution. Chaliha was opposed to Guwahati being the state capital of Assam, stating in his essay, "Guwahati is a beautiful place, one should not destroy beautiful things" (Das & Bayan, p.478). He draws attention to how environmentally conscious small cities in Europe are, and how their daily activities and jobs are a reflection of their love of the natural world. However, the author's stories also express worry about ecological destruction. *Morudyan* is one of these stories; for the purposes of this study, three of Chaliha's well-known stories—*Awaj*, *Golam*, and *Khorang*—have been chosen.

In the wake of globalization, India's economic reforms in the 1990s brought in a new consumption pattern among the middle classes. Economic liberalization policies that have been implemented since the 1990s have been supported by a wide range of illustrations and public discussions that have focused on how the middle class is changing in terms of its function, attitudes, way of life, and purchasing habits. In his book *The Great Indian Middle Class*, Pavan Verma criticises this elite for shrugging off its moral and social obligations. The overall pattern of middle class development observed in other regions of India was equally applicable to North East India, which includes Assam. This resemblance especially highlights the middle class characters of Saurabh Kumar Chaliha. In contrast to the widely held belief that members of the middle class are compassionate, understanding, and sensitive, he has shown his characters as egotistical, selfish individuals who are swept away by a culture that values only materialistic profits. Nonetheless, Chaliha expresses his concern for environmental issues in a few stories by showing the middle class characters' callousness.

Awaj (Sound) is commonly read as a science story, the result of Chaliha's fascination with the scientific imagination. The plot revolves around noise pollution, which a man must deal with on a regular basis. The story's protagonist is anonymous, implying that he is the urban Everyman compelled to live in the city and work in the midst of the hustle and bustle of a huge newspaper. The man is upset and has a headache because of the incessant, unpleasant noise of the machinery in the press. Furthermore, his desire of authoring a film script remains unfulfilled because his creative ideas fail to thrive and he loses focus. Even his wife used to perform in musical productions, but these days she works as a typewriter just to lose herself in the machine's cacophonous noises. The sounds of the saw mill, welding shop, cars, buses, transistor music, people in a parade, and their slogans permeate the entire narrative. The man is also aware of the negative effects noise pollution has on human health because he recalls reading that noise may narrow blood vessels, raise heart beats, and even increase the risk of cancer. He knows that the "Anti-Noise League" was founded in 1933 in Europe, but in Assam, the middle class considers itself modern since they play loud rock music. He believes that materialistic mindset and the expansion of capitalism are to blame for the cacophony that permeates urban areas. To hone his artistic abilities, he requires a lonely haven amidst the cacophonous urban desert. In a desperate attempt, he attempts to create a "mini-noise machine" that is meant to absorb sound, but it fails and instead absorbs his wife's beautiful voice. Rather than seeing this as science fiction, we can see that the author is concerned about the environment. We witness how nature and culture adopt their opposing stances throughout the entire narrative. The protagonist used to have access to solitude on the riverbank, but that is no longer the case. He finds no comfort in the sound of the sand mining trucks, the labourers' noises, the factories and wastes they dump into the river, or the population's constant growth. Man's creative impulse is suffering in the same manner that nature is being destroyed in the city. The man and his spouse frequently take pleasure in the quiet sounds of nature, such as leaves rustling in the wind, horse bells ringing, or simply the sound of a paper being opened in a lonely midday. However, the noises of the machinery that are a part of our middle class culture are endangering these natural sounds. The man chooses to carry on with his artistic endeavour amid the city bustle after his failed attempt to transform the cacophonous sounds of the surroundings, but not at the expense of losing their sensitivity towards the melodic sounds of nature. The story's conclusion suggests that despite the destruction, the man and his wife would still appreciate nature's beauty in the hopes that it will eventually regenerate itself.

The second story, Golam (Slave), illustrates the socio-political reality of urban life. The story starts with the description: "When snow starts falling in Guwahati in the month of November and December, the children become highly elated. The streets, roof tops, flowers and trees, carriages- everything become white with snow. The entire city seems to have a white seamless canopy" (Hiloidary, p.17). As soon as this seemingly ludicrous, dreamlike description ends, readers realize that it is actually a translation of a German essay called "Snowfall in Our City," where the narrator has simply substituted Guwahati for the German city's name in order to submit it to the German tutor. The narrator's goal is identical to that of a middle-class man hoping to advance in his career by obtaining a German language diploma. After reading the essay, the German professor quizzes the narrator on Guwahati and the locals' sensitivity of the environment. The narrator considers how unhygienic and environmentally insensitive the streets and neighbourhoods of the city are, including his own neighbourhood. The story's whole plot presents an alternative account of the industrialization-based, capitalist conception of development. The idyllic portrayal of Guwahati is a mirage; capitalism creates the myth of growth, which invariably exploits the middle class Assamese. Such myths conceal reality in the same manner that snow creates a white blanket over everything. However, an ecocritical reading of the narrative suggests that, against the backdrop of the city's degraded environment, the narrator's dream of a snowy Guwahati may come true. On a rainy day, the narrator recalls leaving for Germany. Although it was the rainy season, he was more bothered by the man-made flood that resulted from the overflowing, clogged drains than by the heavy downpour. Excreta from humans were combined with floodwater to create an influx on the road. The story also makes specific note of the dried-up lake that is just behind the narrator's home because of environmental damage. Some suspicious individuals have established their refugee camps and set up shops selling wooden furniture, sandals, and other trinkets on the bank of the dried-up lake. When the narrator's father reads from the newspaper about the news of excessive rain causing floods and damaging the farmers' rice fields, he too demonstrates his worry for the altered ecology. When the narrator discovers that Rabindranath's Sanchayita's lyrical depiction of the rainy season looks out of place in the current Guwahati city, he too voices his ecological concerns. However, this worry for the deteriorating environment is fleeting as we learn of his future intentions to renovate his home after receiving a promotion and to unclog the portion of clogged drains that are located in front of

his residence. The story's metaphorical dry lake alludes to the Assamese middle class's parched feelings of compassion. In this particular story, the narrator gives the impression of being a slave to the colonial concept that a foreign language is superior to his own mother tongue, but in reality, he is a slave to materialistic worries that drive him to treat nature with indifference.

Using the metaphor of an unexpected downpour ending the drought in the third narrative, Khorang (Drought), Chaliha illustrates the sense of possibility and hope among the younger generation. As the external examiner for the Physics practical test, the story's narrator attends an isolated higher secondary school. After the drought rendered his crop unproductive the student Bhrigu Kumar is running late for the exam because he must labour in someone else's paddy field. When the narrator visits Kumarpara out of intense curiosity, he discovers that Bhrigu Kumar lives in a small, dark shack without any basic facilities. The narrator commends Bhrigu for his attempts to further his education and believes that, despite all the odds, there are always opportunities and that, despite everything, some members of the younger generation remain hopeful and optimistic. However, a thorough reading of the narrative reveals the author's ecological concerns, which are present throughout. The story takes place against a backdrop of heat waves, droughts, and dry periods, the worst of which affect farmers the most. The scarcity of raw materials forces the potters—the Kumars of Kumarpara—to abandon their traditional line of work. It demonstrates how the land's quality has declined in that location. Students like Bhrigu Kumar have been forced to alter their career to farming due to this ecological shift, only to be met with drought. The entire story is filled with descriptions of dryness, such as the dusty road, parched trees, and withered flowers in an area devoid of any wildlife noise. It explains how Kumarpara's natural resources have been diminished. In the eyes of the narrator, Bhrigu Kumar represents hope in contrast to his fellow pupils at the same institution who are consumed with living a materialistic life made possible by modern technology. His relationship to the land and environment puts him in a contradictory position when it comes to motorbike students who act disrespectfully by blowing smoke and dust on their examiners. The narrative draws a comparison between the ecological and cultural droughts, suggesting that the former can be overcome if the next generation learns to coexist peacefully with the natural world.

6. CONCLUSION

Saurabh Kumar Chaliha addresses his environmental worries in these three stories. The Assamese middle class and its indifference to environmental concerns are portrayed in all of these stories. His characters become aware of their vulnerability to nature's fury. In *Awaj*, the protagonist is aware that people are hostile to the very nature that he enjoys, but he is powerless in the current situation and has learnt to bear with the surrounding noise pollution. At the same time, he is unafraid to face opposition on individual and social level in order to defend what is genuine and eternal, which is nature. In the second story, *Golam*, the protagonist, becomes an opponent to nature after obtaining the diploma credential. He is well aware of the harm that humans have inflicted to nature, and he himself is a victim of nature's retaliation, but his middle-class selfishness prevents him from delving deeper into the matter. The writer's ecological concerns are clear in the third story *Khorang*, when he takes us to a drought-stricken district called Kumarpara. The potters in the area have been forced to change careers, and some have even fled the area. Bhrigu Kumar is one such potter who continues to study despite working in agriculture. In the story, he represents hope and ecological restoration in contrast to the other students who are motivated by materialism and commercialization. Chaliha's ecological concern remains buried in the story since it is portrayed carefully in the narrative. His novels are primarily understood as a reflection of modern urban life with all of its existential difficulties, but environmental degradation is also a very important subject that the modern man has to deal with, and this is what Chaliha has shown in a very subtle way.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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