

Locating Shared Affinities and Inclusive Existence, Dismantling Oppression: An Ecofeminist Study of Select Folktales and Myths in Ao Naga Narratives

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist enquiry and activism. Ecofeminism's basic premise is that, the ideology which sanctions any form of oppression such as race, class, gender, sexuality etc also authorizes the oppression of nature. The call of ecofeminism is to put an end to any form of oppression. It argues that any attempt to end women's oppression or an oppressed group would prove futile and unsuccessful if an equal attempt to liberate nature is not made. Ecofeminism describes that the framework which authorizes this form of oppression as patriarchy. The institution of patriarchy gives birth to a sense of 'self' and causes disruption which will lead to violence. Human society which is structured within the male domain functions on a system of hierarchy. In oral and written discourses, society is constructed on the basis which legitimizes the male centric social structure and renders the women 'other.' Folktales and mythical narratives are rich repositories of knowledge, of the custom and culture of the people and they abound with stories where women are subjected to hegemonic male centric ideas. Longkongla, a mythical character projects a paradoxical picture of women-initially as a victim but finally as a victor. The women figure in *How a woman became a kaku (cuckoo) bird* is silent and subordinate initially, but later attains articulation of her 'voice'. Yajangla is a woman who survives patriarchy, retains her autonomy and individuality. But because women are closer to Nature, through her capacity to give and nurture life, she possesses an affinity to Mother Earth who also procreates and nurtures life. All the female figures in the narrative under study possess this 'affinity' to Nature which enables them to take refuge in the bosom of Nature when spurned by male oriented ideology.

Keywords: ecofeminism, folktales, myths, nature, mother earth, patriarchal hegemony

Introduction:

A study about the early life of human beings will show that dating back to around 10,000 years ago man began tilling the land and set on the journey of 'civilization and progress'. A study of post-Industrial Revolution will further reveal an unpleasant picture of the manifold intensification of the negative human imprint on the earth. Man,

the undisputed ruler of earth, with powers inherent in him, cultivates an association with the pastoral landscape, identifies the latter as 'out there, to be used or exploited' to satisfy the unquenching thirst of capitalist agenda.

As early as 1797, Goethe in his epic idyll, "Herman and Dorothea" had spoken about the swelling 'ecological imperialism', the threat and

consequences of modern capitalism. The crises faced by the world today are the result of our conduct and of our ethical system and not because of how the ecosystem functions. Man and nature are intricately dependent on each other. In the words of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in "The Ecofeminist Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" they view that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. In this modern age of scientific development and technological sophistication, we are faced with distressing ecological circumstances. Such a situation obliges us to think in a bio-centric way as Jonathan Bate maintains in "Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition" that it is profoundly unhelpful to say that there is no nature at a time when we are faced with an urgent need to address and redress the damage done to nature due to modern man's relentless exploitation of earth. Man should make ceaseless effort to maintain an ecological balance when his home is under insurmountable threat.

Ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary study of natural science and humanistic discipline is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how man's relationship with the environment is reflected in literature. As a corollary of ecocriticism, ecofeminism is a specific academic discipline, a branch of feminism which acknowledges the connection between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. Ecofeminism holds the view that patriarchy is responsible for the exploitation of women and the destruction of nature. Eco feminist, Karren J. Warren claims-"all connected"- it means exploitation of any component of the structure will make the whole system rupture. Greta Gaard too has also rightly opined 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 (Gaard 1993, 1). Ecofeminism is thus a value system, a social movement, and a practice, and it offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction. Again ecofeminism is an awareness, the beginning of a realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to men's notion of superiority, the attitude that looks at women as the 'other'. Ariel Salleh views that there is a "parallel in men's thinking between their 'right' to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other" (Salleh 1989, 27). All the above views suggest that it is pertinent to seriously study what C. Tan writes "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 ecosystem which has been imposed on people and often claimed to be pertaining to the natural order" (Tan 2020, 633).

Myths, folklores, folk belief as part of oral literature can play an important role in influencing the discerning faculty of man in the conservation of environment and a balanced ecosystem. More importantly, from an ecofeminist perspective, some female oriented folktales or mythical stories can act as agents of giving voice to the dehumanized and devalued condition of women and nature at the hands of dominant patriarchal setup. It is so because such stories show women as marginalized and discriminated. We are living in a technologically advanced world but for a tribal community like the Ao Naga people, their folklores and beliefs are still considered as storehouses of wisdom and knowledge and their folklores are always acknowledged with great reverence. This is so

because the stories mirror their cultural beliefs and how they look at life in conjunction with nature. In “The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes”, *Simon J. Bronner* remarks that Dundes does not think ‘tradition’ to be artifacts ‘of the past’, but demonstrates that folklore is a constituent of the ‘modern technological world’ and ‘something alive and dynamic’ rather than ‘dead and static’.

In accordance with the above views, it can be understood that folklore or the belief system of a community plays a significant part in the mental make-up of the people in the past and at the present too. Folklore and environment are closely related because the songs, tales, dances, legends, myths etc. of a community can significantly throw light on the relationship between man and nature. As Vellerman maintains, “A story does more than recount events; it recounts events in a way that renders them intelligible, thus conveying not just information but understanding” (Vellerman 2003, 1). The non-human world- “Singing pines. Undulating lands. Mighty Rivers” finds an animate and equal space in folktales across cultures (Fresh Fiction 2005, Preface). Acting as windows to one’s heritage and other cultures, folktales and myths are carriers of values and traditions while preserving and propagating the awareness of ecological spiritualism. In an era of ecological and commercial changes, these narratives disseminate legends of women and their liaison with nature. Throughout the ages, nature and women have been revered as mothers. But human society which is structured within the male domain functions on a system of hierarchy. In oral and written discourses, society is constructed on the basis of patriarchal norms which legitimizes the male centric social structure and renders the women ‘other’. This ecofeminist study will aim at identifying and

locating patterns of amalgamation of the human with the non-human world and nature, power-based structures and relationships, and the ever-present life-affirming and sustaining source of nature to turn to at moments when overwhelmed by subversive ideology. Ao Naga folk narratives “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” (Fresh Fiction 2005, Preface). Some selected folktales and myths are studied here according to the following themes.

Women and Nature: Shared Affinities

There are mythical narratives which show that there is a relationship between nature and women in terms of their marginalized oppressive state at the hands of dominant ‘self’- here the human beings in general and the men in particular. Ecofeminism among all ideas and principles contends that patriarchal domination of nature ensues from the belief that nature is divine and feminine. The nature-woman relationship which is the basic tenet of ecofeminism is reaffirmed through these narratives. Women have a tender care for the society at large and for her immediate family. Like nature, they sustain life; have a close proximity with the world of nature as it shares a caring attitude in them. But again, like nature, it is the women who are kept at the periphery and remain unheard by the patriarchal society.

In a society overpowered by male-centric ideas, the way women and nature have been conceptualized has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women such as emotion, nature and the body. On the otherhand, society elevates those values associated with men such as reason, humans, culture and the mind. It is very pertinent

to voice that the “one task of ecofeminists has been to expose these dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals and the earth” (Gaard 1993, 5).

This dualistic approach is not confined only to elite intellectual space, but can be seen very clearly through different folktales and mythical stories across cultures. For the Ao Naga people, the story of Longkongla recounts how her maternal joys and fulfillments were nipped off in the bud through the intervention of hegemonic male centric ideas. This malevolent concept of the ‘self’ representing patriarchy could be seen operating on the basis of an ethical right or justice. This ‘self’ crushes the dreams of the ‘interconnected self’ of women and nature. It is evident that the interconnected self would rather make moral decisions on the basis of an ethic of responsibilities or care. Patriarchal setup will show that men tend to focus on rights, whereas women tend to focus on responsibilities. When the villagers saw that Longkongla and her son prospered, owning much paddy and domestic animals, they decided to put an end to her prosperity. In the absence of a male as the head of the family, Longkongla’s rising social prominence in terms of wealth, which would also facilitate a rise in social eminence, the male folk in the village saw it as a disruptive force or an act against male dominated spheres. The villagers therefore decided to plot against the son during a fishing expedition. We can very safely conclude that it was the male ‘force’ alone that performed the heinous act “incited the whole village to plot their destruction” (Ao 2012, 91). The whole village implicitly or explicitly implies only the men folk of the village because by tradition, in an Ao village, decision making is strictly confined to the male domain and women

are always deemed as silent spectators “but their roles are strictly defined by this tradition which says that it is only men who can be decision-makers in important matters both in private and public affairs” (Ao 2014, 46). We see here how a woman’s ‘private’ or ‘domestic’ affair is forcibly intruded upon by the domineering patriarchal power. The son was drowned in the fishing expedition. In an Ao village, for community events such as fishing, women folk are never allowed any participation. Since the tragic event happened where women have no role to play, it shows how there exists a fractured relation in social order. This action of the villagers upon her son incited the elemental motherly wrath in Longkongla. She decided to gather all the young children of the village and put an end to their life by setting them on fire.

Now, what is “certain is that a failure to recognize connections can lead to violence and a disconnected sense of self is most assuredly at the root of the current ecological crises (not to mention being the root cause of all oppression) which is based on difference” (Gaard 1993, 2). The story shows that the son ‘Songmaket’ was a heavenly gift, turned into a human baby boy from the feather of a beautiful hornbill. That a feather of the bird should flutter down upon Longkongla’s lap on her request is symbolic of the interconnection between animals in nature to an earthly woman. Ecofeminism believes that Women are related in a special and superior way to the earth and to divine power through their childbearing capacity. The story testifies the interconnected sense of the self as Nancy Chodorow’s and Carol Gilligan’s studies have repeatedly shown “a sense of self is more common in men, while an interconnected sense of self is more common in women” (Gaard 1993,2). In this story Longkongla met with a tragic end but the interconnection she had with nature

even in death is seen when a particular tree called Kabusing is cut open “incidentally, till today, this particular tree, when cut, oozes a reddish sap which the AOs say is Longkongla’s blood” (Ao 2012, 92). This remnant shows how a particular tree holds a symbolic significance for the Ao people. In folktales and myths, flora is ideally perceived in two forms: physical and metaphysical. In physical form, trees provide men with their daily use, and in the metaphysical form trees attain a spiritual significance. We can perceive how the female protagonist, Longkongla, firstly, was aided by certain supernatural powers to escape from the persecution of the human world, especially the male world, secondly and most importantly, how she benefitted from being immortalized through the very tree with which she was pierced to death. Such tales validate the folk belief that death is simply a metamorphosis into an afterlife. An ecofeminist interpretation of such stories is that, persecuted women, in their afterlife, gets mutated into fruits, flowers, trees or ‘a reddish sap’ of a tree as in the case of Longkongla. This motif of metamorphosis into different elements of nature reflects a synchronized consciousness. In this story, the non-human world in the form of a tree allows the victimized woman to travel from a chaotic realm to a peaceful realm. The silent yet definitive power of nature, a tree in this case, gives the final refuge to the persecuted woman. Her predicament projects the picture of the two paradoxical sides of woman—both as a victim initially but finally as a victor. Such associations can be converted into a positive force by affirming the so-called feminine values, such as caring, openness, and nurturing. We see that attempts are always in motion to distort any form of affirmation by forces which seem to fear that women will somehow take power and do what men have done.

Dismantling Oppression:

“History has rendered women and most non-European, non-privileged people as despicable, destroying identities and cultures. Invisibility and violence are strangely and intimately related; refusing to perceive or acknowledge another person is one end of a continuum whose other is murder and genocide” (Lahar 1993, 93). There are folktales which render women as ‘despicable’ and in the process of their subjugation their identities are destroyed. Such a predicament is found in a story where a woman turns into a cuckoo bird. It is essential to accept that everything in nature has an intrinsic value—be it human, animal or other creatures from other realms too. All life should be considered as essential who contribute for a congenial co-existence in nature. The story of *How a woman became the Kaku (cuckoo) bird* tells us about the injustice suffered by a woman in the hands of her husband by the name Tsunangpong and her father-in-law. The woman was from a ‘foreign’ village. Her parents were utterly unwilling to have the daughter’s hand in marriage pointing out “that it was not advisable to enter into a lifelong relationship with such a person and hence he should forget all about her and marry someone from his own village” (Ao 2012, 111). But anyway the marriage took place; the woman gave birth to a healthy boy but gradually her beauty diminished. She became weak, pale, her beauty faded, which made her husband worried of her state. He decided to visit the girl’s mother because only the mother knew the remedy for the daughter. The story has a supernatural element; we find that the woman is unable to sustain her health and former beauty from earthly food. By consenting to visit the wife’s mother, the husband becomes a willing emissary between her and her mother. The objective was to bring her back to health and most probably her

'lost beauty'. But when reality dawned on him, he decided to forsake her, by way of giving his approval to his father. In this way, he becomes an agent of his wife's destruction; he betrays her trust in him in silent conspiracy. Herein, we see the dualistic psyche of male chauvinism, an eruption of the powerful psychological undercurrent created by thousands of years of patriarchy. The action of the husband sets himself apart from nature, his action disembodies human experience and brings about a discord from an organic whole. In male construction, the categories 'woman' and 'animals' serve the same symbolic function as subservient or submissive. Women and animals are used, an emblem to justify and preserve the superiority of men. This story evokes human empathy with the non-human world.

Again, ecofeminists believe that there are perceived similarities between woman and nature, such as passivity and life-giving nurturing qualities. It is this quality that makes women and nature equally vulnerable to male domination. This story clearly shows these qualities—the woman's life-giving nurturing qualities by giving birth to a son, nurturing and loving him, her passivity by obeying her husband and father-in-law. She followed the father-in-law obediently, climbed the tallest part of the tree and remained a mute spectator. She is the symbol of a silent sufferer. In her grief she turns into a bird giving out a plaintive cry kaku-kaku. This folktale shows the fluid mobility of the female human self turning into a bird. Such dimensions in women-centered stories are marked by interchange of interior and exterior planes of existence. It is noteworthy that the female character never articulates her state of existence or speaks out until her human form ceases to exist and she transmutes into the form of a bird. The world of fauna may not have a code of language like the human world, but

ironically once she is turned into a bird, she finds her voice, overcomes her silence, and started to chant loud "kaku, kaku". This ability to mutate into a non-human form is symbolic. Her transformation into a winged creature eventually enabled her to spread her wings and soar high into freedom from a life of confinement, and most essentially from male persecution. Such a phenomenon may seem unreal but it shows the "tangible relationship between himself of the real, natural world and the forces of the unseen supernatural world as symbolic by a member of the animal kingdom because he (the animal) at one time is believed to have belonged to man's world (Ao 2012, 78).

Devaluation of any feminist principles in a systematic manner has always been a fundamental basis of domination in patriarchy. 'Masculine' or 'masculinity' is a patriarchal cultural construct and this value has been internalized in our minds, embodied in our institutions. This overpowering effect of masculinity has taken control of every power-based social relation. The undercurrents of masculinity are a non-human centeredness which is behind numerous irrational ideas and behaviours. This story speaks of what Ynestra King says "Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected on to nature and then used to justify social domination. Therefore, ecofeminist theory seeks to show the connections between all forms of domination, including the domination of nonhuman nature, and ecofeminist practice is necessarily anti-hierarchical" (King 1989, 19).

Inclusive Existence: Surviving Patriarchy

The Ao Naga people believe that at one time in the beginning of the earth, there was no distinction between light and darkness. Men and animals co-existed in mutual harmony and

understanding. The world of folklore also speaks of a time and space where plants and trees, birds and fishes, ponds and rivers, animals and humans all live with cordial relations. We understand that Ynestra King was speaking of such a time when she says “A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including humans and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity” (King 1989, 20).

To explore this theme in the context of the Ao Naga society, the tale of Yajangla is examined. Yajangla is a woman who possessed the tiger-spirit. This belief of the tiger-spirit belong to the domain of the supernatural, but perhaps such belief are early man’s attempts at establishing a direct, tangible relationship between himself of the real, natural world as symbolized by a member of the animal kingdom. Such an existence maybe what King means by ‘diversity’. This story has a strong ecofeminist message because ecofeminism recognizes sympathy and compassion as a fundamental feature of an inclusive existence. The story narrates how by using her magical power, she conjured spirits with whose help she was able to clean all the weeds in the field in one single day. Her husband, surprised at her feat, wanted to know her power. Very reluctant initially, she consented to reveal her power due to her husband’s relentless pestering. But her consent came with a warning and some vital instructions for his safety. These initial warnings maybe regarded as something exclusive or unique because the story reveals the absence of any deliberate malevolence in the use of supernatural powers relating to such a phenomenon. If in the process of transformation to an ‘other self’ deaths would occur, it is to be understood that whatever killing is done, it “takes place due to the animal-ness of the spirit rather than any deliberate direction from the person possessing such a power” (Ao 2012, 77-78).

Yajangla pleaded her case by saying that when she assumed the form of the tigress through magic, she was no longer a human but a savage animal and behaved as one. “Oh, the baby’s father was at fault. It was he who forced me to reveal my secret magical powers in spite of my warnings. Because of my supernatural powers I became a tiger ... And I still say it was wrong of him to force me to do it” (Ao 2012, 117). Yajangla tried to dissuade her husband but he would not cooperate. This non-cooperation is a marked manifestation of the desire to dominate the ‘other’. The defining of the powerful ‘self’ led to a tragic end of the husband in the story. Here we understand that it is essential in nature to nurture an outlook of close connection with every entity in the course of experience. It is to be seen that veneration and allowing ample ‘space’ to the ‘other’ would recurrently lead to positive as well as harmonious consequences. On the contrary, fostering an attitude representing all other entities to be isolated from one another would usually result in anarchy and uncertainty or chaos. It is important to see the non human world in terms of its value or use for them. A non dominating partnership with each other, cutting across gender and other differences will surely inculcate greater harmony within human relationship and with non human entities too.

Such a tale as that of Yajangla shows that “the association of animals with human beings dates back into the hoary edges of history in Ao folklore. As a matter of fact the nature of the prevalent belief appears to have evolved out of such a past where it was believed that man could live with animals as equals so as to speak the same language, coexists in one environment and even intermarry” (Ao 2012, 77). In tandem with Ao Naga belief, Linda Vance too comments “to be an ecofeminist means to be constantly aware of relationships – between

humans, between humans and non-humans-and to be keenly attuned to the patterns of domination that maybe at play” (Vance1993, 134).

Conclusion:

Folktales and myths from indigenous communities serve the function of tale telling. It is a most fruitful means to inculcate ecological values and ethics. It also creates a sense of care and concern for the non-human world living in their surrounding environment. Folk narratives also connect the thread of people’s lives with the powerful and unchanging aspects of nature. The stories under study show woman-nature propinquity and locate and uphold women’s voices in the domain of ‘nature-culture’. The stories also culminate in the ecofeminist perception of 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 interface.

To conclude, geographical ‘borders’ and ‘boundaries’, gendered ‘borders’ and ‘boundaries’ which is a human construct, become powerless in the folklore and mythical world and fails to act as a barrier. The mythical heroine, Longkongla transmutes from her physical form into a natural element defying patriarchal barrier. Yajangla makes a conscious choice to retain her power and autonomy bestowed on her by nature. When she realized of her marginalized state, she decided to make an assertion for liberation from the shackles of bondage. As for the ‘woman’ when she is transmuted into a bird, she is liberated from her state of silent benevolent subordination into a state of ‘articulation’ and her ‘voice’ could now be heard clearly.

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