

# Re-reading Select Nature Poems of Nirmalprabha Bardoloi and Emily Dickinson from Eco-critical Perspective



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## Abstract

Eco-criticism or 'green studies,' as a critical approach evolved during eighties in USA and nineties in UK with the prima facie to instill eco-critical literacy awareness to the public by re-reading canonical cultural texts. This new critical mode indeed deals with the representation of nature and topography in cultural texts putting emphasis on common consent towards nature and the rhetoric used when stating about it. Adding the surge of eco-critical praxis the writers on nature discovered that the poets of nineteenth and early twentieth century are endowed with to transmit their values with profound ecological inferences. In this context their poetry has become rightfully, the fountainhead of eco-criticism. This paper humbly attempts to explore the ecological consciousness concealed in the nature poetry of Nirmalprabha Bardoloi of Assam in India and Emily Dickinson of America- two poets from diverse cultural matrices and epochs- which embodies in two aspects, and one is the harmony between nature and man, and the other is their criticism of human being's exploitation of nature.

**Keywords:** Eco-Poetry, Environmental Degradation, Eco-Criticism, Materialistic Demand, Ecological Awareness, Ethics Etc.

## Introduction

Eco-criticism or 'green-studies' both terms are used to denote a critical approach which began in USA during 1980's and in the UK during 1990's. The term "eco-criticism" was first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism." In Cheryll Glotfelty's words, "Eco-criticism is the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment...eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach" (Glotfelty & Fromm:1998). Furthermore, Glotfelty avows that, "the subject of eco-criticism is the relationship between nature and culture, in particular with the cultural artifact of language and literature. It has one foot in literature and the other, on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and non-human."(Glotfelty & Fromm:1998). In the context of ecological deterioration today, it is great significance pragmatically to reread nature poetry of Nirmalprabha Bardoloi and Emily Dickinson from a new angle, the perspective of eco-criticism, which takes the interest of whole eco-system as its value and whose aim is to explore the relationship between the nature and human being.

## Aim of the study

Eco-criticism seeks to show how the literary texts, dealt with the environmental issues, play some part in making people conscious about the importance of nature in a time of eco-crisis. Under such conviction, the present paper is designed to make an eco-critical reading of the nature poetry of Nirmalprabha Bardoloi and Emily Dickinson. This pursuit would also sincerely take notes on the divergent and convergent viewpoints of these poets reflected in their poems following their experiences in different environment and topography that they belong to. Further as per the range of works, Nirmalprabha Bardoloi, the best modern woman poet of Assam so far is yet to receive a kind of respect she actually deserves. This pursuit would help explore and exploit her talents and underscore her poetic quest and contour with that of her American counterpart Emily Dickinson.

## Review of Literature

Nature, for Nirmalprabha Bardoloi and Emily Dickinson, is a great source of 'motherly love' and this idea can be evaluated from eco-critical perspective. Here they call the nature 'a gentlest mother' whose existence

should not be endangered at any cost. Both the poets succeed to instill a philosophy on moral and ethical pitch to grab the balance between progress and preservation. In this direction, therefore, this paper underlines their poetic hunt with prima-facie focus on eco-critical imperatives as reflected through their nature poetry. This is, in fact, a novel approach of its kind which can indeed contribute to the emerging trend of literature.

Although research pursuits in the sphere of literature have made encouraging headway in India, the same cannot always be said to be true of Assamese literature, particularly poetry. In fact, there are diverse sources and aspects of the genre of Assamese literature that demand a comprehensive study. The present endeavor, therefore, springs from the belief that there is ample room for a work to unveil the latent treasure of Nirmalprabha Bardoloi, a leading figure of modern Assamese poetry. This will, of course, attract new thoughts for further studies on the regional poet's deep attachment and commitment to her culture and topography.

Nature runs as a consistent motif in whole of Nirmalprabha's oeuvre. She sought a harmony between the progress and preservation. Deeply wary of the blinding bait of technology, Nirmalprabha in her poems and papers repeatedly warns of the mindless proliferation of machines and the machinations of Man that it inevitably entails. The awareness for conservation of nature indeed took its course in the works of poets of an unindustrialized nation; Nirmalprabha proved prominence on it from her province. In one of her poems, "Heartrending," she bewails having experienced to a loss of the way of life interwoven with culture and natural world:

I, saw him going/ away at the time  
when the sun was/ declining....  
Following him/ went away the  
golden sunshine /of the monthof  
"Aghon"(Nov-Dec) (Barua, 53)

"The doctrine of nature," referring to J R Watson's comment on Wordsworth's poetry we may avidly state that similar note in terms of Nirmalprabha as her "poetry is an unremitting campaign against the destruction of the individual by material and social pressures." (Watson: 1985). The poet manifests the necessity of love, humanity and mutuality which sustain the evolving and growing of being bound by the law of nature. The poet expresses humanity's need for the natural world and argues for being tolerant enough towards nature and its process to attain something in life. In "The Promise of Give and Take," she realizes:

How shall I take / The sickle in  
hand/ Unless in the summer/ The  
sweat of my brow/ Does not make  
the fields soft. (Barua, 39)

For the ecological perspective, with reference to ecological ethics, some of Emily Dickinson's representative nature poems relevant to the subject can be analyzed considering three general categories of attitude. Firstly, approaching and loving nature with romance and transcendental philosophy that avows a mystical bond between man and nature,

and nature reveals to man things about mankind and the universe. The second category is overtly anti-transcendentalist that confirms a separation between man and nature. And the third, contrary to the first and second categories asserts the utter joy and appreciation that the poet undergoes in the diversity and display of nature. Then the rich ideas of ecological ethics that humans should respect and live harmoniously with nature are disclosed, so that people's ecological awareness of protecting nature can be aroused.

For her, the world of nature is a dwelling place, hauntingly mysterious, peopled with God's creatures that live amid the phenomena God commands and controls. Dickinson's best poem in transcendental ideology is perhaps "Nature is what we see" where she explicitly defines nature in terms of sensation:

"Nature" is, what we see-  
The Hill-the afternoon-  
Squirrel-Eclipse-the Bumble bee-  
Nay -Nature is Heaven-  
Nature is what we hear-  
The Bobolink-the sea -  
Thunder -the Cricket-  
Nay -Nature is Harmony- (p 668)

Nirmalprabha Bardoloi, like Wordsworth and many eco-feminists, rejects the assumption that humans should dominate everyone as subalterns and exploit the natural world for personal profit. The consumerist and industrial culture have created the false illusion that humans would be able to control nature, but they forget that human's unconquerable minds are vitally dependent upon natural systems. Like a stern environmentalist Nirmalprabha Bardoloi has voiced against industrializations that accelerate destruction of the natural universe. In "On the Death of the Golden River," she laments of intoxicating "the golden river":

On all sides  
The oppression  
Of endless hunger and thirst  
Intoxication  
Is slowly swallowing  
The Golden River. (Barua, 42)

Down the history, the earth has been defined as "Mother Earth" an entity which nurtures and sustains us. All creature even plants, mountains, sky evolved from or single source. Human life was not separated from other forms; everything was related and kin. As Wordsworth, interconnects his "proto-ecological" message with his interest in the dynamic wisdom of the natural world, there has been an obvious ecological point proven through following Dickinsonian lines:

Nature- the Gentlest mother is,  
Impatient of no child-  
The feeblest- or the way wardest-  
Her Admonition mild. (P 790)

Nature is personified as a gentle mother- there is no image in the world more benevolent as a gentle mother. Nature as God's deputy escorts her creations, personified as children. Humans represent the

interloper, an unwanted guest that frightens nature's children:

In Forest- and Hill-  
By Traveler- be heard-  
Restraining Rampant Squirrel-  
Or too impetuous Bird- (P 790)

Like Emily Dickinson, Nirmalprabha seems to suggest that the natural world and the human community exist in a state of mutual alienation. As a modern poet she must explode the illusion that culture can possess nature; we may invade it and occupy it but this does not mean that we know it on its own terms. On the level of the nature-culture relationship in "In Words" Nirmalprabha's identification with nature allows her to have more knowledge of nature than the culture as a whole. Having anticipated evils in culture the poet assures that the eradicating power against those lies in nature only: while she puts a question, "Does the sound of the gun/ Make it morning?," she, while answering, evinces an ecological note overshadowing culture by nature's customary gesture:

It becomes morning  
At that bird's call  
Which nibbles at  
eats up slowly  
The darkness  
of the night. (Barua, 52)

The nature images Nirmalprabha most frequently uses in the maintenance of her poetic mask are tree and stone. She uses the tree as a personal and specifically female symbol in many of her poems. But to interpret the tree narrowly as female is to miss the wider meaning she sometimes attaches to this symbol. "Era after Era," in surface level, shows her exquisite skill in depicting purpose of life. Since the image of "dead tree" implies emptiness or meaninglessness of life, it is also evocative of an anticipated condition of barrenness now nature is facing through detrimental acts of men on it. The poem thus becomes a wakeup call for those who are "blind" with craziness of material gain:

"A dead tree does  
Not give shade"  
Alas you are blind  
Looking only at the faces of dead trees  
Era after era. (Barua, 36)

In "Word and Words", the poet uses the tree as a symbol to indicating keenness between nature and poetic personae evoking a sense of responsibility of man to shield nature:

I enter  
Into the depth of the  
Perfume of the soil  
I become tree with trees  
River with rivers. (Barua, 3)

Rabindranath Tagore who took up the agenda of growing gardens as emissary of love and peace designates a tree as a valiant son of soils who immensely takes part a role in beautifying this earth and sustaining life there on and constantly helping mankind with their varied gifts of peace and prosperity. He writes:

From the realm of man, I come to you, o  
tree as a messenger I speak, for him-for

man who is animated by your breath who  
rests in your cool loving shade, who  
wears your flowery garland (Ghose: 1961  
p 947).

Nirmalprabha Bardoloi uses stone image to express her cultural consciousness and existence. Man as a cultural entity lives in mutual association with nature:

My dream is in the smell  
of the ripe fruit  
That, falling on the stone,  
Had burst. (Barua, 62)

Her poetry lends credence to apprehend nature from an organicist viewpoint. Yet her eco-poetics does not place priority on the visionary and transcendental. Her self-conscious use of nature imagery into the fabric of her aesthetics and to extent her apprehension of natural phenomena as therapeutic to human health. She privileges external nature against all intellectual and conceptualized views of nature. She knows that the silence, in the process of birth, death and decay, is different language of nature. Trees, flowers, grass grow in silence. Sun, moon, stars move in silence. With a metaphysical bend, she in "Midday at Bashistha" deftly uses 'stone-tree' metaphor to illustrate mystical bond between soul and the natural world:

My soul became merged with the  
Hollow in the stone...  
With the wild creepers  
With the hands of the tall trees.

Remained as witness the silent midday. (Barua, 62)

Emily Dickinson, in poem 155, evinces both the physical and metaphysical dimension of nature. The maturing and philosophical mind benefits immensely from natural landscape more than from institutionalized learning. The psychological relationship between the poet and nature provides creative material. The last stanza is an important clue to the note of eco-psycho-aesthetics:

The breaking of the Day  
Added to my Degree  
If any ask me how-  
Artist- who drew me so-  
Must Tell! (P 155)

In poem 1241, the lilac is 'an ancient shrub,' suggesting again the idea on continuity, the changelessness that is nature's change. The daily decline of the sun is a cycle as regular as that which governs the renewal of the seasons. The teachings of science and religion are superfluous. In addition affirming to nature's autonomy and infinity, she emphasizes the persistent alienation of nature from culture:

The Lilac is an ancient shrub  
But ancients than that...  
The Flora unimpeachable  
To Time's Analysis-  
"Eye hath not seen" may possibly  
Be current with the Blind  
But these be detained. (P 1241)

Again in poem 812, the speaker is also troubled by transience. When the first light of spring passes, she is afflicted with a sense of loss. The

speaker here mourns the ephemeral light of spring: "It passes and we stay", there is a resistance to change, and inability to see loss and dissolution as an emblem of renewal:

A Light exists in Spring  
Not Present on the Year...  
Without the Formula of sound-  
It passes and we stay-  
A quality of loss  
Affecting our Content ... (P 812)

Trade refers to the exchange of commodities for money or personal gain and suggests the speaker's desire for an immediate compensation for the loss she has experienced. Harsh reality intrudes upon the illumination of an early spring day just as the impersonal, materialistic concerns of "trade" intrude upon the ceremony and spirituality sacrament. This is, of course, a clue to trace an eco-critical bearing with it while the poet expresses her concern on trade's intrusion upon a sacrament.

A quality of loss  
Affecting our Content  
As Trade has suddenly encroached  
Upon a Sacrament. (P 812)

Emily Dickinson's most distinctive exploitation of nature's forms is a novel approach. Turning away from the traditional and the popular in nature poetry, she, like Whitman, focused her attention upon the neglected oddities of nature- upon the life forms usually considered ugly, un-poetic, or unworthy of a writer's serious attention, such as the rat, fly, snake, worm, frog, spider, caterpillar, mushroom, bat, beetle, cricket, mouse, squirrel, and weeds. Emily Dickinson seems to challenge the conventional romantic response to nature by finding something like rat which is, to her original and fresh vision, not only a rodent specious but integral part of nature. In poem 1356, she writes-

The Rat is the Concisest Tenant  
He pays no Rent...  
Hate cannot Harm  
A Foe so reticent-  
Neither Decree Prohibit him-  
Lawful as Equilibrium. (p 1356)

Against the present practice toward the status of a rat as scorned by civilization, Dickinson depicts him as one who scorns civilization because of its reliance upon the laws of property. He is "concisest", terse, and succinct toward man, occupying little room for which he will not pay rent. Although he is beyond our understanding of usefulness and "Decree" he deserves his part in the scheme of things and remains "Lawful as Equilibrium" (p 1356).

Another nature's poetically neglected species is snake. In the poem "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass" (P 986), Dickinson evaluates the fascination and fear that a snake can inspire in its onlookers. Initially, the snake is observed for his strange beauty and behavior. His spotted body is given a degree of regal power when he is narrated as "a Whiplash / Unbraiding in the Sun." Yet the effect the snake's hidden and unpredictable slithering movement in the grass provokes fright in the narrator's mind. The

biblical associations of the snake with evil are hinted at in the snake's fondness for empty, unpleasant places- "a Boggy Acre / A Floor too cool for Corn." Though she had been using words like 'fellow', 'boggy' etc, given an impression of causality and friendliness, the fact remains that she cannot take him for a friend. The snake is looked upon only as a threat for nature:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass  
Occasionally rides-...  
But never met this Fellow  
Attended, or alone  
Without a tighter breathing  
And Zero at the Bone. (P 986)

From an interested fascination for the creature, the poem develops the snake's associations with an evil power that threatens at the last to restrict man's freedom and dignity. "Some critics, identifying the snake with the phallus, view the explicit metaphor as a paradigm of Dickinson's fear of sex. Others consider the image an indication of her feelings of aloofness toward nature in general and sexuality in particular. The annual molting of the snake skin implies unending existence, while the fact that it lives on the earth, in touch with its primeval instinctual forces, identifies it as a source of psychic energy" (Knapp 106).

A student of these realms of imagination from eco-critical perspectives evinces some associations to reality. It is a matter of concern that man indulges in indiscriminate killing of snakes without understanding their true nature. "The fact is that out of the 2500 species of snakes on 20% are venomous. They have their own part to play in the ecosystem. Being top level predators, a single snake can consume over a hundred rodents a year. Moreover, all snakes form a part of the diet of other predators such as hawks and foxes and thereby sever to link the higher and lower feeding levels" (Sumathy 36). But with his highhandedness man has been trying to affirm his superiority over his fellow creatures by putting them in danger. And he remains unaware to the fact that ill-effects are sure to retaliate on him.

Advocating for a progressive human society and harmonious human- nature relationship Wordsworth urges that humans must practice the discipline of love and equal rights to existence and nurture a sense of place. The poet Wordsworth is known for "the deep rooted affiliation of his writings with that particular place" (Mckuick: 2000). His personae conceive the Lake District as a sacred place humans should respect. The pastoral poems of Nirmalprabha Bardoloi also express deep veneration to her locale eco-systems: call of the cuckoo, the village boys and girls, *Keteki* flower (Pandamus odoratissimus), *Anhat* tree (Ficus religiosa), *Jetulipaka* (A kind of gooseberry), the sound of drums and pipes. Like most contemporary poets, she was also disturbed by the upsetting of traditional practice with natural means in the pretext of modernization. In one of her "Bihu" poems, she writes:

The young woman of the village  
Till yesterday were weaving  
The sound of the pipe

In their looms.  
 Today on their feet  
 The dancing fields  
 Have hung the bells of dust. (Baua, 68)

Nirmalprabha Bardoloi's poetry, discussed here, is implicated in the truth of inaccessibility and mystery of nature. They do not subscribe to the view that non-human world exists for human welfare. The ecological degraded earth by technological intervention is not a triumph of man over nature but a warning of chaos and apocalypse where all human delusion of victory is defeated and demolished. With Nirmalprabha one comes to concede in the chain of eco-criticism that nature is not "reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice" (Barry 252).

#### Conclusion

The poetry of Nirmalprabha Bardoloi and Emily Dickinson not only glorifies nature through a mystic mode but mediates between human and non-human worlds pitched against an ethical measure. All these poems maintain an eco-centric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world. They also underscore humanity as a prerequisite for man in his relationships with the non-human world. These poems analyzed in this pursuit are a composite mix of Indian and American and what brings them close is their concern for the environment. To Nirmalprabha and Dickinson, human and non-human beings are interdependent in nature and should live in harmony. They, like Wordsworth and Emerson, criticize man's ruling of nature and non-human beings and express their negative opinions on science as they have witnessed nature's destruction by it. They have the eco-system at the centre of their view of nature. This pursuit ventures to conclude that Nirmalprabha Bardoloi and Emily Dickinson are poets with immense ecological awareness and shoulder ecological responsibility.

#### Notes

**Keteki:** a kind of flower which scientific name is *Pandanus odoratissimus*.

**Anhat:** a kind of tree which scientific name is *Ficus religiosa*.

**Jetulipaka:** A kind of gooseberry.

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