



**Ecocritical Reflections in the Poetry of Mamang Dai and Kynpham
Sing Nongkynrih: A Comparative Study**

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an ecocritical comparative reading of Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh) and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (Meghalaya), two major poetic voices from North-East India whose writing is shaped by riverine landscapes, biodiversity, and tribal cultural memory. Using ecocriticism as the primary framework, the study examines how their poems represent nature not as passive scenery but as a living presence that carries agency, history, and ethical meaning. Dai's river imagery, especially in poems such as 'The River' and 'An Obscure Place,' figures water as sacred continuity, linking community life with ancestral memory and spiritual renewal.

The river becomes both nurturer and warning, capable of creation and destruction, and thus resists human claims to mastery. Nongkynrih's treatment of the river, notably in 'The Discovery,' is more overtly critical and socio-political: the river records social transformation, modern anxieties, and the pollution produced by human intervention. Together, the poets expose how modernization and greed destabilize ecological balance while eroding indigenous values of reciprocity with the earth. The paper argues that their poetry functions as ecological witnessing and cultural resistance, revitalizing local knowledge systems to advocate sustainable coexistence. By foregrounding local ecologies and indigenous ethics, their poetry widens Indian English environmental discourse and invites readers toward sustainable coexistence. It concludes that regional poetry can broaden environmental consciousness by restoring moral attention to place and water.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, River Poetry North-East India, River Symbolism, Indigenous Ecology, Cultural Memory, Environmental Degradation & Sustainable Coexistence etc.

1. Introduction

The North-East region of India occupies a unique place within Indian ecological and cultural imagination. Its mountains, rivers, forests, rainfall patterns, and biodiversity shape not only the physical lives of communities but also their myths, oral narratives, rituals, and everyday ethics. Literature from this region frequently carries a sense of place that is intensely lived, not abstract. Therefore, when poets from the North-East write about nature, they often write from within nature rather than about nature as an external object.

Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh) and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (Meghalaya) are significant contemporary voices who express ecological consciousness in distinct yet overlapping ways. Their poetry is rooted in landscapes that are not merely scenic backgrounds but living environments that sustain identity, memory, and community. Both poets portray reverence for natural life, but they

also express concern about environmental destruction, cultural erosion, and developmental violence.

This comparative study uses ecocriticism as a framework to understand how these poets shape ecological meaning through imagery of rivers, land, and living ecosystems. The paper argues that natural imagery in their poetry becomes a form of cultural memory and resistance. It serves as a reminder that ecological crises are not only scientific or economic problems; they are ethical, emotional, and cultural crises as well.

2. Ecocriticism as a Critical Framework

Ecocriticism is a literary approach that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It asks how writers represent nature, how texts influence environmental attitudes, and how literature responds to ecological crises. In ecocritical readings, nature is not treated as a silent object placed behind human action; it is seen as a dynamic force interacting with human history and cultural imagination.

Ecocriticism is especially relevant today because the world faces major ecological problems: climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, river pollution, and unsustainable development. Literature cannot stop these processes directly, but it can shape consciousness. It can make ecological destruction emotionally visible, ethically urgent, and culturally meaningful. Poetry, in particular, has the power to condense ecological experience into images and rhythms that stay with readers.

In the poetry of Dai and Nongkynrih, ecocriticism becomes a way to interpret nature as an active presence. Both poets use poetry not merely as artistic expression but as a form of ecological awareness. Their works highlight indigenous and local ways of living in harmony with nature, while also warning against modernization that threatens ecological balance.

The North-East as Ecological and Cultural Space:

The North-East is often described as a region of ‘rich biodiversity,’ but such a description becomes meaningful only when we recognize how people live within that biodiversity. Tribal cultures across the region do not always separate nature and culture into two unrelated categories. Rivers, mountains, forests, and animals are frequently associated with story, spirit, and ancestry. Nature is not simply a ‘resource’ to be extracted; it is a living presence that creates belonging.

When development arrives through roads, dams, mining, logging, and commercial expansion, ecological damage often appears alongside cultural disruption. In such contexts, poetry becomes a record of loss and a language of protest. It also becomes a method of remembering older relationships between humans and the earth. Both Mamang Dai and Nongkynrih write from this tension: the beauty of the natural world and the threat of its destruction. Their poetry preserves ecological sensibility not as romantic nostalgia but as ethical resistance.

River Symbolism in Mamang Dai’s Poetry:

In Mamang Dai’s poetry, the river becomes a recurring motif symbolizing continuity, life, and spiritual renewal. Dai’s poems such as ‘The River’ and ‘An Obscure Place’ portray rivers as sacred entities closely connected with ancestral memory. The river is not simply a geographical feature, it becomes a living presence, carrying within it a sense of time, tradition, and spiritual depth.

- **The River as Living Presence:**

Dai's poetic imagination treats the river as animate. It 'lives', 'moves,' and 'remembers.' This worldview reflects a tribal cosmology in which nature is not dead matter but a meaningful force. Rivers are associated with stories that communities carry across generations, and therefore harming a river is not only environmental damage but also cultural injury.

- **River, Memory, and Ancestry**

The river in Dai's work often functions as a bridge between the present and the ancestral past. It holds the memory of communities: their migrations, their rituals, and their survival strategies. In this sense, the river becomes a cultural archive. When Dai writes about rivers, she is also writing about identity, belonging, and continuity.

- **Creation and Destruction**

Another important dimension in Dai's river imagery is its double power. The river is a force of life and creation, yet it can also destroy through floods and erosion. This duality suggests that nature cannot be controlled fully by human desire. It carries its own agency. Dai's treatment, therefore, challenges modern attitudes that see nature only as something to be dominated.

River Symbolism in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's Poetry:

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih also uses the river as a metaphor, but his approach often emphasizes social transformation and modern anxiety. In his poem 'The Discovery,' the river becomes a site where human interference pollutes natural purity. The river therefore symbolizes ecological loss caused by developmental practices and careless modernization.

- **River as Mirror of Modern Life:**

In Nongkynrih's poetry, the river frequently reflects human emotions and the changing moral condition of society. It becomes a 'mirror' through which we can see not only physical pollution but also ethical decline. The contaminated river represents a contaminated relationship between humans and nature.

- **Critique of Human Intervention:**

Where Dai often emphasizes sacredness and mythic resonance, Nongkynrih often foregrounds critique. Human actions driven by greed, consumption, and development appear as destructive interventions that disturb ecological balance. The river's pollution becomes a symbol for the loss of innocence and the erosion of sustainable cultural values.

- **Ecological Protest and Cultural Loss:**

Nongkynrih's poetic voice often carries protest. He does not treat ecological destruction as accidental; he links it to modern structures that prioritize profit over life. As traditional ecological ethics weaken, both culture and environment suffer. Thus, in his work, ecological crisis becomes inseparable from cultural crisis.

3. Comparative Ecocritical Analysis:

Although Mamang Dai and Nongkynrih belong to different cultural contexts, both share a strong ecological sensibility. Their poetry emerges from landscapes that are culturally alive, where nature shapes community identity.

- **Spiritual Ecology vs. Socio-political Ecology:**

A useful way to compare them is to observe their tonal emphasis. Dai's perspective is often more spiritual, rooted in myth, memory, and reverence. Nature appears as sacred companion and

ancestor-like presence. Nongkynrih, while also valuing nature, often writes with sharper socio-political critique. His poems emphasize modern disruption, exploitation, and the anxieties of cultural change.

- **Nature as Ethical Teacher:**

Both poets suggest that nature teaches ethical lessons. Rivers, forests, and landscapes are not merely ‘things’, they carry moral meaning. They remind humans of limits, interdependence, and responsibility. Such poetry challenges the modern capitalist view that reduces nature to commodity.

- **Indigenous Ecological Ethics and Resistance**

A major point of convergence is their shared belief that indigenous ecological ethics offer an alternative to destructive modernity. Their poems testify to ways of living that value balance, respect, and coexistence. By representing such values, their poetry becomes a form of resistance against ecological exploitation and cultural erasure.

4. Findings and Discussion:

This comparative study finds that the works of Mamang Dai and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih contribute significantly to ecocritical discourse in Indian English literature. They do not write nature poetry merely to celebrate beauty; they use nature to question human arrogance, to expose ecological damage, and to revive indigenous wisdom.

Their poems achieve three major ecocritical functions:

1. **Celebration of the natural world:** They depict rivers and landscapes with deep sensitivity and respect.
2. **Critique of ecological exploitation:** They reveal how modernization and greed threaten ecological balance.
3. **Revival of indigenous ecological wisdom:** They present nature as culturally meaningful and ethically powerful, advocating sustainable coexistence.

Importantly, these poets remind us that ecological protection is not only a technical or policy matter; it is also a matter of imagination. If humans cannot imagine nature as living companion, they will continue to treat it as disposable. Poetry helps reshape that imagination.

5. Conclusion:

The comparative ecocritical reading of Mamang Dai and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih demonstrates that North-East Indian poetry can serve as a powerful site of environmental thought and ethical reflection. In their work, rivers, hills, forests, and rain are not treated as decorative backdrops but as living presences that sustain cultural identity, historical memory, and community life. Dai’s poems foreground a sacred and ancestral ecology in which the river functions as continuity and spiritual inheritance, reminding humans of interdependence and natural limits.

Nongkynrih, while equally attentive to place, often adopts a sharper critical stance: the river becomes a witness to pollution, developmental intrusion, and the slow erosion of ecological balance and indigenous values. Together, these poetic visions expose how modernization and human greed transform landscapes into commodities and weaken sustainable relationships with nature. At the same time, they recover local ecological wisdom grounded in reciprocity, restraint, and respect for non-human life. This study concludes that their poetry performs ecological witnessing by naming loss, preserving indigenous environmental ethics, and inviting readers to



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rethink human-centered ideas of progress. By restoring moral attention to place especially to rivers as lifelines the poems encourage a responsible imagination that supports sustainable coexistence and environmental justice.

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