

Eco-narratives of Sense of Self and Sense of Place: A Study of Place Identity and Cultural Mythscapes in Select Northeast writings

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Abstract:

Identity, concerning the people of Northeast India, imperatively entails discussions on the dynamics of place and culture, with relations to environmental psychology, psychogeography and socio-cultural dialectics. These interactive dynamics integrate temporal, spatial and cultural strands of conception or perception, impacting how these people create meaning of their past, present and future. Accordingly, social and cultural processes that contribute to the construction and comprehension of place impact patterns of identification and sense of belongingness. This paper studies *Legends of Pensam* (2006) and *Sky is my Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2018) as its primary texts to study the sense of significance and value attached to place originating from socio-ecological dialectics disseminated in culture, society and place.

Keywords: Place Identity, Mythscapes, Culture, History, Eco-Narratives, Stories

Ecological Consciousness in Literature from the Northeast Region

Theoretical discourses of the Northeast literary scene follow the recent decades' paradigm shift, from a centralised, Eurocentric standpoint towards the inclusivity of multiple realities and local narratives. Indigenous tribes all over the world have slowly severed ties with Eurocentric worldviews and are focusing on tribal wisdom, achieving multi-dimensional decolonisation amid burgeoning urbanisation and globalisation. As a result, certain avenues have been opened for multiple discourses on self-determination of identities, collective or otherwise, for communities who have been subjected to enduring systemic erasure and silencing due to dominant narratives. As a response to this, Northeast India presents a plethora of literary ventures that embody resistance and resolution, thereby opening avenues for exploration and assertion of cultural identities and traditions.

Literary works from Northeast India exemplify a significant presence of the land, rivers, valleys and hills that transcend abstractions or concepts, but manifest as an immediate experienced phenomenon of place and environment. In this literature, the land presents itself as a physical, psychological and emotional phenomena that contribute to the formulation and assertion of a distinct and legitimate identity enmeshed in the dynamics of culture, history and ecology of the place. Accordingly, the selected literary texts explicate an interwoven network of natural, historical and cultural connotations in relation to the mechanics of interaction connecting the land and the people.

Primary Texts

Legends of Pensam is a collection of short stories depicting three generations in a village in Arunachal Pradesh. Primarily based on the narrator's travel notes, the novel builds on the narrator's return to Gurdum, her ancestral village, along with her friend Mona. The stories reveal the cultural narratives of the *Adis* in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, India, recounting the mythical, political, and cultural history of the tribe and the significant historical developments that took place in this region in the 19th and 20th centuries. Translated from the language of *Adis*, the word *Pensam* means 'in-between', the in-between space, the mediating space between myth and reality. It can also signify the middle ground governing the transitional phase between the traditional and modern ways of life.

The people from the stories are portrayed as being entangled in a timeless loop of reality and myth. The book is divided into four parts, each of which signifies the phases of evolution and development of the village, different facets of the lives of the characters, and their passage through the various stages of life. In Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, we find that every aspect of meanings and inscriptions given to the representation of place exhibits deeper meaning, alluding to a perpetual sense of identity and culture associated with a deeply rooted sense of place. Delving into the Naga history from 1832 to 1880, Kire significantly reveals an insider's narrative of the clash between the British colonisers whose expeditions and occupation of native land and people were courageously contested by the warriors of Khonoma who were driven to battle by "the need to prove himself worthy of defending his village and his womenfolk".

The predominant cultural values engendered in these selected literary texts manifest strong affinities in terms of shared ethnic or tribal consciousness, knowledge, stories, myths and folktales. Moreover, these narratives also bear strong similarities in the employment of structural techniques of narration such as oral storytelling techniques, nonlinear narrations and multiple perspectives, which represent traditional means of transmitting cultural memory and knowledge, including distinct systems of understanding the world around them.

Place-based Identity

Identity, with relation to place, is a fundamental aspect of both environmental psychology and social geography that emphasises the affective and emotional attachment of the self to places bearing cultural, political, or historical significance. Thus, place and identity are significantly linked through temporal, spatial and cultural dynamics, thereby determining how an individual or a group "weave meaning around our past, present and future" (Kenny et al. 16). Therefore, the selected texts are not to be simply studied through the lens of environmentalism as these have deeper and multilayered cultural significance, a sense of the collective that involves an ecology inclusive of a society, a past and a place.

Psychological theories of the human–environment posit place identity as an integral part in the conceptualisation of a sense of self since one's identity/spiritual self is intimately and reciprocally linked with place (Momaday 48). Buell also discusses how the integration of environmental reflection using the medium of literature broadens preconceived notions of the environment as a dimension of a personal and communal sense of place (Buell 260).

The concept of place identity was initially introduced by environmental psychologists like Prochansky who defined it as "those dimensions of self that define the individual's identity concerning the physical environment employing a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioral tendencies relevant to a specific environment" (Proshansky et al.

155). However, this definition has individualistic inclinations that have led to it being criticised, reevaluated and redefined by later researchers who established a broader ‘social understanding’ of place identity.

‘Place’ can have multiple entailments, constituting the crux of identity, culture and history through the experiences of place’s spiritual, physical and moral significance. In this light, cultural identities and entitlements delineated in the texts serve as reflections of the reclamation of belonging to contested places, a reterritorialisation by way of distinct knowledge, narratives and collective symbolic codes tied to place. Therefore, an ecocritical probing into *Legends of Pensam* and *Sky is my Father* imperatively implicates the role of the reciprocating channel operating between socio-cultural dialectics and place in the collective self-determination of identities.

The integration of ecocritical reflections in critical approaches to place has been extensively debated through dynamic engagements undertaken by place-based ecocritics. The sense of place advocated by these critics is essentially a derivative of the connection between the human and nonhuman components. Accordingly, ecocritical approaches to place crucially situate, as Neil Evernden argues in “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place & the Pathetic Fallacy” (1996), the individual as existing in context to place and as a component of place (101). Moreover, Terry Tempest Williams explicates that the equation “people + place = politics” significantly contributes to the rhetoric of place, politicising human relationships and interaction with the nonhuman (3).

Mythscape and Identity Formation

According to researchers, mythological formation delineates how humans’ reactions to the phenomena of nature are culturally and traditionally guided. These mythologies function as maps through which the country of a people or community is mapped and boundaries maintained with geographical, cultural and ecological stories and knowledge inherited from one generation to another (Mudrooroo). Hence, this chapter attempts to probe into the mechanisms of cultural myths which exemplify the conscious employment of the ecology, the land and the spirits of the land. Accordingly, the concept of “mythscape”, proposed by Bell, can be used to formulate a comprehensive and integrated comprehension of the reciprocal connection between myths and place/landscape.

According to Bell, mythscape is “the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myth[s] of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated and reconstructed constantly” (63). Additionally, Hall comprehensibly denotes a sense of place that serves as a distinct reflection of multiple layers of culture and cultural narratives, as well as a place identity that is “constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (226). The myriad of narratives that imply multiple layers of narratives constituting a mythical, historical, political and territorial consciousness in the texts establish origins and reaffirmations of identity.

Literature as a decolonising agent

In the contemporary context, the Northeast region, the result of colonial expeditions led to a long history of cultural transformations, bringing about questions and assessments of identity. As a result of certain ongoing political issues, problems of recognition, representation, and identity have become a driving political force, finding a mark even in literary endeavours. Literature, as a decolonising agent, focuses on events recollected through stories and memories stored as shared or collective memories, which reflect a historical consciousness. This facilitates reconstruction and representation of an identity

enmeshed in culture and place. These narratives contribute to identity construction and the establishment of spaces where shared meanings and cultural memories motivate cultural and communal harmony. For the tribes of the Northeast, this narrative space allows discussions of spatial, historical and cultural dimensions where the personal is blended with the collective.

Postcolonial critics like Graham Huggan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie address the exoticisation of postcolonial literature through a disproportionate focus on magic realism, affirming orientalist thinking while disregarding the full range of narratives. Eva Rusk Knudsen also criticises the tendency of postcolonial analyses of Indigenous literature to often recolonise texts by excessively focusing on experiences of marginalisation, domination and resistance while disregarding indigenous knowledge, ontologies and dialectics which are integral to their existence (Knudsen 2004). Postcolonial studies of indigenous literature often put exorbitant focus on indigenous writers' engagements with colonial history and its repercussions, overshadowing the writers' engagements with transcendence. Moreover, it is often argued that the writers' engagements with distinct indigenous knowledge, ontologies and dialectics can be defamiliarising to outsiders.

However, this paper tries to position these aspects as significant cultural signposts that contribute to the creation of spaces for representations to make comprehensible their history, culture and identity that have been misrepresented and misinterpreted or, in the words of Huggan, exoticised. To understand the full range of narratives, it is imperative to revisit the imaginative and creative articulations of identity and cultural reformulation by the writers of Northeast India.

Orality and the Narration of Identities

The selected novels Dai and Kire reiterate the oral storytelling technique with strong allusions to myths, beliefs, rituals and traditions, embodying not only the writers' creative reinvention of the past but also a generation of a reformulated perception of the past to answer contemporary questions of culture and identity. In the selected texts, the authors pose a challenge to dominant narratives through creative endeavours by reinventing and reasserting their tribal comprehension of the complex nuances of their indigenous culture and identity. Consequently, the narratives, therefore, challenge the exoticising gaze and exertion of power by way of self-determination and self-representation, constituting a capacity to reverse the gaze and power they are subjected to. Basing their stories on their people's first contact with the colonisers as well as their survival and continuance, they retell the history of their people through carefully selected characters and stories enriched with myths, legends and rituals.

Mamang Dai's implementation of her characters as mouthpieces delineates a timeless identification with and attachment of individual self and culture to the land, the continual spiritual connection between the people and the land existing and inherited through generations by means of oral narrations and storytelling. Dai structurally and thematically integrates mythical implications in delineating her land and people's significant history, alongside the cultural or collective environmental consciousness. The narrative voice in *Legends of Pensam* introduces, as early as the prologues, an ambience of orality through language and stories linking the living memory and verbal tradition with geographical, historical and mythic purport. The prologue to *Legends of Pensam* bears a metaphorical significance in which the author journeys back into the passage of time by returning to her ancestral village, housing multiple stories distinct to communities.

Meanwhile, in *Sky is My Father*, Kire creates a sense of subverted historical chronology that challenges Eurocentric linearity through a delineation of sequential historical events integrated with a sense of oral

fluidity that connects past time and present time. Kire blends the historical narrative of colonial contact with the cultural narratives of stories, songs, and rituals to create a sense of timelessness. Kire asserts the significance of oral storytelling tradition as a driving force of the novel, and explicates this through her characters, whom she uses as mouthpieces to delineate the oral history of her people in contrast to the chronological historical framework that runs through the novel.

As Owens conceptualises, cultural narratives/stories, place, and identity are inherently linked, sans distinction that separates the individual and the collective experience, or the mythical and the historical that is realised in the memory of the land. This concept of Owens can be seen in these texts through the writer's utilisation of "indigenous notions of sacred, spiral time" (DeLoughrey 1999: 59), necessarily accentuating indigenous sacred time and wisdom that disrupt the linearity of political historiography.

Place, Culture and Identity Reclamation

Dai prioritises making her readers comprehend the thematic and structural framework of *The Legends of Pensam*, the spiral temporality, the tribal spirituality and wisdom, as well as the blending of the mythical and historical. Moreover, the voice of the storyteller impacts a line of interaction and communication between the reader and the writer through orality. Arguably, the employment of orality in *Legends of Pensam* gives the novel a distinctiveness not only on culture and tradition but also indicative of the non-linearity and perpetuity of eco-narratives. However, by recreating and retelling the "lost stories" that are silent, separate and misplaced, Dai deftly brings her readers into the world of her people's stories through a clarity that ultimately defies what critics often call defamiliarising agencies.

Legends of Pensam narrates the 'struggle for existence' of the marginalised Adi tribe and revisits the hidden places and stories of Arunachal Pradesh. Dai takes care to narrate momentous events like the construction of Stilwell road in 1945, the war instigated by the colonisers and the devastating land dispossession and subjugation of the natives by the British and Zamindars, thereby retracing generations of experiences of both people and place.

Pensam as a metaphor for a magical land becomes Dai's means of crafting a creative representation of a complex geospatiality, which is replete with fantastical stories, myths, legends, songs and secret gardens. It becomes the space where multiple realities exist in harmony and all barriers dividing human and non-human nature are critically explored, unravelled and undone. Dai presents us with geospace where the natural elements become sacred cultural signifiers in which the tribe's connection with place serves as a locus of history, hinting at a sense of ethical and spiritual connection and interaction as well as an exemplar of communitarian care and collective survival. For instance, the tragic earthquake and its involved pathos, such as the ruined village, the geographical alterations, and the destitution of the villagers, parallel Nenem's life that epitomises the tribal love and attachment to their land.

In this light, the postcolonial study of the idea of homeland as a fractured place for fractured identities emerges as a space for reterritorialising places and retracing identity, a postcolonial and postmodern rebuttal of earlier concepts of identity formation. The narrator's return home or homecoming becomes a metaphor for a quest for roots and identity through a journey into the world of collective inherited memory that is rooted in place, or in the context of *The Legends of Pensam*, home. Therefore, postcolonial identity rebuilt through stories becomes a tool for protest and reclamation by the Northeast writers subjected to a fractured sense of self and sense of place. In this channel of interconnectedness, the landscape not only denotes a dwelling place but also scripts and stories of the lives of people that are fundamental to postcolonial identity formation or reformulation through collective self-determination.

In conjunction with Dai's, Kire's proposition of a tribal perspective also presents the reader with the traditional lifestyle of her people thriving in an agrarian system signified by an interconnectedness with the spirits of the fields, mountains, rivers and forests. The delineation of a strong sense of place inculcated by these people evolves as a quintessence of the cultural or traditional beliefs of this region, thereby signifying and validating the attachment of individual and communal identity to a place. For instance, Kire narrates about *Terhuo tsiese*, or spirit-erected stone, which mysteriously appeared erected near the settlement one fateful morning to eventually evolve as a crucial marker of their identity as well as geographical territory. The attachment of identity to this stone exemplifies the significance of an all-inclusive place or spirits of place in the conceptualisation and extension of the self.

The contested space provides Kire with grounds for the confrontation of her readers with the people's strong sense of identity and conceptions of self intimately tied to the landscape, a consequence of generational inherited memory alluding to intimation and bonding with the land. Kire's portrayal of Levi's strong feeling for the land when he returns from imprisonment exemplifies the tribal consciousness of an interconnection thriving in the realms of the spiritual and beyond the limits of the physical. As Levi steps on the soil of his village, "impulsively he picked up a bit of soil and smelled its earthiness. He felt bonded to the village, to the land, and feelings surged up in him that he'd never before." (Kire 70). Even "the caves afforded natural shelters which could house up to hundreds of people at one given time. The British had their cannons but the men of Khonoma were protected by the natural world they had always lived so close to." (Kire 2018: 122). This divulges the fact that the Khonoma warriors' determination to fight against the plunder of the British colonial force was borne not only out of an attempt to protect their lands but extends to a communal desire to preserve their culture, selfhood, identity and integrity strongly bound to the land.

Kire presents a glorification of their traditional way of living where every aspect of creation lives in perfect harmony with another, where the people believe that "the sun and rain are Creator's blessings. They rain and shine in turns to make our fields and get our harvests." (Kire 2018: 30). This exemplifies the traditional belief in the harmonious interconnection existing between the human and non-human aspects of the land. It is through these cultural narratives alluding to generations of experience, memory and oral transmission that Kire weaves her people's legends, beliefs, taboos and rituals into the fabric of her narrative to serve as a crucial identity and cultural signifier. As quoted in the novel,

The village was full of them, the unclean places of the forest, the dark water sources... stories nestled in them but would never be told... There were the other things of the spirit, not strange, but clear truths with no mystery surrounding them, the truths that protected the people if they had lived their lives protecting those truths. (Kire 2018: 71)

These truths, alluding to stories and myth, become a way of life, defining and sculpting a consciousness that establishes cultural narratives for them to live by. Kire allows her narrative to be inhabited with myths and beliefs of spirits and deities, which are traditionally believed to be inhabitants of the hills, rivers and forests. As Levi introspects in the novel, "So it was true what the elders said: *If you honour the spirits, they will bless you, if you defy them, you will learn how mortal man is.*" (Kire 2018: 70). By delineations of the spirits, sorcerers and deities, Kire successfully presents her readers a clear view of the cultural and traditional narratives that have been playing crucial roles in sculpting the Naga consciousness as well as identity. The title of the novel itself is suggestive of the Angami belief in a supreme being called Ukepenuopfu, the creator which is also often invoked by Vilie in Kire's other novel *When the River Sleeps* that goes, "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death!

Kepenuopfu fights for me...!” (Kire 2014: 105). Therefore, the employment of cultural mythologies acts as an active cultural force that decolonises the tribal psyche by reasserting cultural values and identity, challenging dominant narratives and aiding these tribes in making sense of their tribal worlds, history and experiences through traditional knowledge.

Findings

A close analysis of these literary texts imperatively involves questions about dynamic tribal identity orientations and inclinations, thereby revising and challenging the dominant representations of attitudes towards spaces, places and lands. Landscape as a purely visual representation is the ‘Cartesian worldview’ which is ‘based on metaphysical dualism and laden with perceptions that derive from the Enlightenment: the fragmentation of human knowledge and the distancing of oneself both physically and mentally from the research object’ (Kuokkanen 413). This scientific approach towards the landscape ‘delegitimises alternate ways of knowing’ (Murton 143). Although the Cartesian worldview seems to contradict the Indigenous concept of relationality, Deloria still vouches for the possibility of a space for indigenous and Western worldviews if the latter does not dismiss ‘personality’ and ‘sense of purpose’ as ‘mysticism and superstition’ (39).

In these novels, the writers’ manifestations of distinct tribal perceptions of places as well as evolutions of new ways of perceiving places propagate that there is no distinction between the individual and the racial experience, between the mythical and the historical and between place and spirits of place because these relationships are realised in the memory of the land. The Northeast region, as a place, provides Kire and Dai with a space for literary explication of a sense of place, a sense of history, a sense of community and a sense of identity, and these writers utilise this place to narrate their collective history into meaning and shape. Moreover, through their mythological references, we can conclude that place is a significant aspect of their belief systems and that their conceptions and perceptions of place render sacred roles in a wider context.

On the contrary, Heise’s *A Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* critiques place-based ecocriticism by proposing “eco-cosmopolitanism” that rejects place and sense of place for a wider environmental world citizenship. Although Heise’s argument undoubtedly responds to the global call of the hour, it discounts the ordeal of these dispossessed tribes that is a crucial matter to be recognised and reasserted, especially in today’s scenario of a globalised world. Arguably, Heise’s concept of “eco-cosmopolitanism” is incohesive with the circumstances of a myriad of ethnic communities all over the world, as its loophole lies not in its critique of the fetishisation of the local but in its failure to acknowledge the historical and cultural realities of these minorities.

As mentioned before, culture, politics, place and identity are revisited and revised through storytelling, language and imagination, thereby becoming the centre of their sense of self and sense of place. Momaday proposes that language touches the earth, thereby making places; human relationship to place is, therefore, a result of imagination. As evident in the selected literary texts, the authors make sure to depict how the colonisers’ perception of place differs from how the tribes perceive place. It is significant to acknowledge that the colonisation and oppression of the people also impacted the same place. While research in anthropology, political and legal research is often taken up to study the connection to and representation of the concept of place, literature significantly opens new avenues for the expression of tangible and intangible realities through language, which helps in the articulation of a sense of self and a sense of place. Therefore, Dai and Kire use stories in literature to voice the unspoken and articulate the

suppressed histories through the faculty of imagination, language and storytelling to exhibit a strong sense of place and a sense of identity derived from a culturally coded and oriented symbolic order on a physical topography. This is fundamental in decolonising, healing and perceiving the fractured landscape and fractured self through narratives that imbue place, culture and individual with meaning and belonging.

Consequently, Dai and Kire's narratives recollected through stories manifesting from shared or collective memories reflect a distinct consciousness that facilitates a reconstruction and representation of an identity rooted in place. These narratives encourage not only identity construction but also the construction of spaces where shared meanings and memories stimulate cultural and communal consensus. As Kathleen Dana observes, "Literature, by its text-bound nature public, enduring and authoritative, is markedly distinct from traditional shamanic practice, which is secret, fleeting, and oral...however, both poet/artist and shaman are equipped in remarkable ways to negotiate between worlds, and in the hands of shaman-poets, text becomes to tool of prophecy and mediation" (7). This spiritual mediation, between place and literature, eventuates in the discussion of spatial, historical and cultural dimensions of existence where the personal is blended with the collective. Thus, these texts embody a rootedness in the fabrics of culture and place that constructs a "narrative identity" seeped in distinct collective tribal knowledge, ontologies and dialectics bearing social, cultural, historical and political significance.

These narratives symbolise an attempt to achieve a reconciliation between a mythic sense of place and a contemporary sense of place to engender a reterritorialisation of places, hence the reformulation of identities. These narratives become a delinking or decolonisation for the tribes of this region, striving for political and historical reinvention and reassertion of traditional and cultural pasts along the boundaries of place. Anne Whiston Spirn extends and employs "dialogical" in Bakhtin's use of the term to propose landscape as "loud with dialogues, with storylines that connect a place and its dwellers" (16-18). As a consequence, the landscape is further represented as "shuttling" between material and immaterial, perception and presence, human and nonhuman, emotions and sensations, and encounters and experiences (17). This crucially stimulates the reconstruction and reclamation of a consciousness alluding to historical, geographical and cultural purport evolving into a political tool for these tribal identities to instigate a form of cultural politics that blends contemporary existence and traditional codes.

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