

Myth, Mystery and Animism: A Reading of the Animal Presence in Select Short Stories in English from North-East India

Pallabee Dasgupta

Research Scholar, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University

Email: paldg2009@gmail.com

Abstract

The North-Eastern part of India has always been regarded as unique and mysterious not only because of its geographical and cultural insulation but also because of its primitive way of life existing somewhere between myth and reality. Thus, literature from the north-east India emphasizes on the lifestyle of the tribal people, inseparable from the nature around them as opposed to the Western dualistic structure which makes a clear distinction between nature and culture. In this, the narratives become useful not only for exploring the representation of nature in it, but also for the representation of animals, sometimes biological and often symbolic and conceptual. In this, the stories also embrace concepts like totemism and animality opening themselves up to larger significant readings. The present paper reads the animal presence in two short-stories from the north-east of India, Temsula Ao's "Death of a Hunter" published in her anthology *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) and Mamang Dai's "the boy who fell from the sky" published in her *The Legends of Pensam* (2009). Both the stories can be analyzed for the way nature and animals in particular are conceived in tribal life and imagination, often as larger than life presences and yet both familiar and intimate.

Keywords: Tribal, Oral Tradition, Myths, Animality, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai.

Introduction

The North-eastern part of India, culturally and geographically insulated from the rest of India is a world in itself. The hilly terrains covered with dense forests, the majestic Brahmaputra cutting through the undulating ravines is almost a paradise for sore eyes. Besides its beautiful landscape and rich biodiversity, the seven sister states of north east is also known for its mysterious cultural ethnoscape as a "land of witchcraft and magic, animism and wild tribes" (Barua 1991:4). However, in recent times, the area has witnessed the worst of violence with the growth of ethnic tensions, insurgency, rampant corruption, and forced exile of its native population- themes which have repeatedly recurred in the writings of eminent authors of the region. Besides this, ethnicity, quest for identity and racial autonomy, alienation from the mainland also dominate the literal expression of the area. But it will be wrong to assume that the literature of the region is only littered with violence; the pristine nature of the valley along with its primordial indigenous culture has also encouraged writings on ecosophy and ecomyicism. The eco-consciousness of the region is constructed by the authors through a unique amalgamation of history, tradition, memory and myth of the area. In this, the stories of the region also become most suitable for assessing the ecological concerns and attitudes of the indigenous people. In this ecocriticism arises as a proper critical lens to analyze the quasi-mythical religious and cultural dynamics of the region. Deriving its meaning from two Greek words, *oikos* meaning nature and *krites* meaning someone who keeps the house in good order, the term was coined much early, in 1978 by

William Ruekhart. A simple definition of the term would be, “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment...which takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies”(Glotfelty 1996:xviii).

While texts from the north-east of India easily led themselves for ecocritical readings, moored as they are in the age-old traditions and rituals for conservation, much critical attention has not been given to the animal presence in the tribal world. While a steeply dwindling animal population caused by rampant ecological destruction and increase in human population is a tangible reality in India, much of the socio-scientific studies revolve around the extinction of literal and biological animals. However, in small-scale primitive cultures all around the world, there is also a third kind of animal presence that is under threat—the psychological or the animal of the mind which occupies a large part of the tribal imagination. In such cultures, animals provide reference as deities in the human society and are accorded the central place or meaning around which human identities form. With the advent of a modern industrial culture, it is this kind of animals that are under the most threat. The present paper attempts an analysis of such a kind of a presence and its continuing import and relevance in the tribal cultures of North-East India which have still retained those ecological values and practices, integral to the Indian tradition.

The ‘Animalizing Imagination’ in the Human culture

Human relations with animals have come a long way. In the Western theology, the promise of ecological stewardship by the Genesis mandated that humans are ‘in command’ of all other creatures, as the veritable pinnacle of creation (reiterated in Psalms 8.4-8). Until the Edenic myth, man and animals enjoyed an equal relationship of camaraderie indicating equal participation of human in animal life and vice versa. It was only the story of the seven day creation and the humanist idea of the ‘Great Chain of Being’ that encouraged a hierarchical order with man closer to God followed by all other beings and inanimate matter. It was this “western tradition’s contempt for ‘the animal soul’” (Hillman 1989:95) that brought about a gradual erosion in the natural respect given to animal life. This attitude was all the more strengthened in the humanist doctrine propagated during the Renaissance. The advent of science and its associated disciplines encouraged a minute and thorough study of animal anatomy and their characteristics. Animals were reduced to biological specimens; their habitats and behavior were mapped and made a part of the epistemology of natural sciences. Under the emergence of imperialism and colonialism this was transformed into a profit making enterprise and new lands were sought for more exotic and profitable animals which could be transformed into resources to be sold or reduced to spectacles for entertainment purposes or hunted down for sport. Such attitudes continued further into the industrialization era and seeped its way into modern culture. In fact, Jean Baudrillard (1994:133) suggests that the inhuman treatment of animals resulting into their possible extinction is related to the rise of humanism. It is man’s needs to understand and experience every possible phenomenon through his own senses that relegated the Animal into the position of the ‘Other’; the inhuman.

But animals have always been indispensable for human progress and without them human survival would have been impossible. Their role have subsequently changed with every stage of human civilization,

[F]rom ‘beasts of burden’ (as productive members of a labour force in capitalist economy) to ‘beasts of demand’ (utilized as laboratory specimens), they have become ‘beasts of consumption’-the meat trade and ‘beasts of somatization’ where they have been forced into carrying a psychological life wholly invented by humans (pet worlds; training animals to perform onto show; animals in therapy; animals anthropomorphized for purposes of entertainment from Disney representations to television wildlife documentaries). (Beakley 22)

The latter is yet another way of denying animals their agency, by anthropomorphizing them or as Baudrillard states by 'extracting a confession from them' (as qtd in Beakley 23) that demonstrates that they are comprehensible to us. Thus in every step, they are deprived of their own subjectivity, of their individual agency and are made to speak in our languages, demonstrate our qualities and emotions and their actions are interpreted in terms of human understanding. It is this ethos that informs much of the West's response to animals whether biological or imaginary and with the import of western ethics of development and progress, this is also how they are increasingly being conceived in the postcolonial world. Animal presences as something more than biological are clearly perceived as irrational and therefore impossible and yet, it is the presence of the same in the tribal life of north-east India that is the basis of their very existence.

Animals in Tribal culture: The Literal and the Symbolic

In the course of the paper, we refer to two short stories by authors from the North-Eastern part of India, to analyze the presence of animals in the indigenous culture. The first story is Temsula Ao's 'Death of a Hunter' from her short-story collection *Laburnum for My Head* (2006). Here she writes about the deep understanding and concern towards nature, almost bordering on reverence and awe among her closely knit community of the Naga tribes. Ao, also known as "the Nightingale of North east India" (Das 1998: 26) is also a prolific poet from the region who has written much about the ecological degradation and gradual deforestation in her region.

The second story, analyzed is that of Mamang Dai, another celebrated author from Arunachal Pradesh who writes about the unique way of life of the Adi tribes in her collection *The Legends of Pensam* (2009). Dai, besides being an eminent poetess and journalist in her own right is also active in the welfare activities in the region and is also the founding figure of the Arunachal Heritage Society. Writing about the themes of her writings, Das (2004) says that it is characterized by,

life in Arunachal Pradesh, people's faith and her own, agriculture, mountains, streams, rivers and stones, myths and nature's magic, reveal myriad world of Arunachal's ecology ...A keen explorer of heritage, she seems to be a sentinel of traditional tribal values. Environment/ecology, profound serenity in nature and an innocent voice about the things in the surroundings have been her important concerns. She voices her emotions and feelings through the images and metaphors chosen mostly from nature. Her search for identity has exposed her to be a nature-loving humanist. (96)

Her 'the boy who fell from the sky' records the story of a tribe where "anything can happen and everything can be lived" (Dai 2006: vii). What unites these two writers is their sensitive portrayal of the primordial and unchanging tribal cultures caught between tradition and modernity and their attempt to unearth the rich oral tradition and rituals of the region which is of much ethnographical value.

In the first story, "Death of a Hunter", Ao describes a unique combination of the mythical traditions and rituals surrounding human-animal interaction with the modern culture in north-east India. The world of Imanchok, the protagonist and the eponymous hunter of the story records a culture in transition. Imanchok, is first seen polishing his gun, in order to kill the 'vicious boar' (Ao 21) who had ravaged the best of his rice fields. In retrospect, the author lets us know about the superior skill and prestige of the hunter. In a similar incident concerning a rogue elephant that had destroyed several farmlands, homes and killed several people, Imanchok was hired to kill the animal and had proved his prowess in the enterprise. However, after killing the elephant, Imanchok feels both guilt and sorrow at its plight. He is fixed to the "unblinking, unseeing eye of his adversary" (Ao 28) as if "the dying animal was trying to

convey some message to his destroyer”(Ao 29). The pathos of the situation reveals the extreme callousness and carelessness with which man destroys the forested areas in order to make way for more arable land and other developmental activities like road construction. Destroying the elephant’s natural habitat, forces them to venture into populous areas for food and inadvertently disrupting human life. The author provides literary evidence of the same, when she narrates how Imanchok had to go into the “deep jungle”(Ao 24) in pursuit of the maniacal animal, which was calm and serene when seen last in the jungle. For the indigenous tribes this is almost a daily struggle for survival in a hostile environment battling for resources with the animals in the area, but Ao records how the government also encourages and participates in perpetuating such attitudes. This shows an absolute compliance with the western anthropocentric attitude where man is given the right to dominate and exploit the nature for his own needs. The prioritization of culture over nature is an essential part of the modernity and its empiricist and capitalist discourses. This is strengthened in another instance where, Imanchok after willfully killing the head of a group of monkeys which ravaged his grains and troubled his people, shouts out,

So, you wanted to destroy me by stealing my paddy, did you? Look at you now. You scarred and bullied my womenfolk; where are your’s now? Another male will take them over while I cut up and feed my people with your flesh. (Ao 32)

Imanchok here not only anthropomorphizes the animal, by ascribing him characteristics of a patriarch but also betrays the same qualities of ruthlessness and obstinacy in him. For him, the incident is simply the destruction of another fellow patriarchal figure to safeguard his own authority as the provider of his family. He imagined himself to be at “the centre of the eternal contest between man and animal for domination over land” (Ao 29). This tendency to dominate the natural world and justify it through reason, is one of the ways in which patriarchy and anthropocentrism at large, operates. This event brings about a lull in his hunting interests, engendering within him a sense of unease and discomfort. It is during this period, that the village is beset by a wild boar which rampantly destructs the crop fields of Imanchok and his associates. The boar is also similarly invested with anthropomorphic characteristics by the tribesmen, as they spoke about its escapades from their traps, not with brutish strength but with surprising guile and wit. Imanchok, therefore has to plan with extreme dexterity and courage to pursue and kill the animal in its own terrain. Accompanied with his nephew, he pursues the animal and shoots it in the head as it rises before him in the thick forest which is believed to be haunted. Imanchok is terrified when he sees the animal, realizing that, “it looked like a boar but no earthly boar could be this big or so black”(Ao 34). With one gigantic leap, the animal disappeared into the dense foliage and everything was quite again. The death of the animal at a sort of sinister and yet sacred ground made it all the more troubling. For Imanchok, the implications of the hunt continued to traumatize him, he was deeply disturbed by the event. The whole incident is similar to the hunt in shamanic cultures where the hunting activity is controlled by the hunted and not the hunter, subject to the rules and whims of the former and is usually a life experience for the hunter. Imanchok is therefore completely devastated by the experience; his health suffered, his peace of mind completely shattered by recurring nightmares. This is true of all shamanic cultures, where the relation between the hunter and the hunted is not a lineal one but one of reciprocity and divine respect, where breaking of taboo of the hunt, could bring on fear or even trouble for the human actor (D’Anglure 1994:157).

In such a situation the only place where Imanchok could get any comfort was in the presence of his wife, Tangchetla. Only she knew, the abject helplessness and terror of her husband as he would cry and shriek in his dreams, “Look at him, he is as big as a barn and black as charcoal...I am afraid woman, he is going to come after me”(Ao 37). Tangchetla plays a pivotal role in helping her husband escape his plight and find peace again. She supports him and encourages him to confess his guilt and undertake the rituals necessary to placate the hostile spirit. The animal presence left him, only when Imanchok asks for his

forgiveness and connects to the spirit. At the end of the narrative, Imanchok returns to the hunting spot and performs a peculiar ritual to appease the disgruntled soul. He feels an inner urge, forcing him to tear a tuft of his hair and blow it towards the haunted forests. The episode became a life-changing experience for Imanchok, as he realizes the hollowness in his alleged superiority and domination as a patriarch over his wife and the immediate nature surrounding him. He grows wise and understands the larger unity binding over the man-animal or nature-culture binary.

This kind of appreciation of the animal spirit, both mythical and mortal is one of the recurrent themes of writings from this particular region. Mamang Dai, another celebrated author from the Arunachal Pradesh, emphasizes on the importance of myths, legends and oral narratives in the existence of the indigenous tribes, especially in her own community of the Adis. She writes,

We are here today as members of a particular community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we reposed belief in the 'word' as composed in our myths and legends. In the world of our ancestors this was the art of the storyteller, the medicine man, the orator, the priest. Everyone knows the stories, in one form or another; and it is this knowledge that links the individual to a group. (Dai 2006:4)

Oral literature, especially those narratives which blend both myths and memories about the creation of the world circulate among the Adi people. Besides these, stories about migration, those of the valorous heroes, benign gods merge to form a religion complete with its rituals, taboos and duties. The Adis like most of the other tribes practice an animistic faith, deriving their sustenance from a careful reverence towards forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world (Dai 2006:vii). Literally meaning 'hill' or 'mountain-top' people, the Adis are further subdivided into several small groups. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2009), celebrates the unique yet 'in-between status' (Dai 2006: vii), both geographical and cultural of the Adi community. The first generation of the community still follow the old way of living, depending mainly on hunting and agriculture, while the young members of the community are educated and actively participate in the economic and social development of the region. Dai chooses an authentic manner of narration that is the story-telling method. As the narrator and her friend move through the villages, they are warmly welcomed with storytelling sessions about the accounts of creation. Dai reiterates how such a tradition is suitable for the dissemination and continuation of age-old practices and values among the future generations. The anthology is born of such oral narratives that Dai and her friend hear, document and carefully present to the reader in order to construct a history of the tribe, their way of living and customs. The *miri* (the priests of Adis) and the elderly men know about the small personal histories about the evil affecting the people and it is they who provide the author with the storehouse of myths. They perform several rituals to propitiate the evil spirits, instead inviting blessings for the homestead like good harvests and the well-being of the family, their children and their animals.

The character Hoxo in Dai's anthology is the archetypal shaman or the *miri* figure in the tribal community. The shaman can be identified as one of the timeless people, a 'the storyteller, the healer, the rhapsodist par excellence' (Dai 1998). He is the connecting figure, a veritable storehouse of the memories of the community who preserves the local culture, myths and memories. "A Shadow man leaping up larger than life" (Dai 55), Hoxo and his family know the mysterious ways of life both inside and outside the community. Besides him, the book is populated by characters like his friend Rakut, who sings songs of creation, women like Nenem and Pinyar who meticulously guard their ancestral heritage with an utmost belief in the wisdom and truth of their folklore. All the stories in the collection defy logic of the modern world, blurring the lines between the material world and the spiritual world at several points.

The first story of the collection is that of Hoxo, the eponymous “boy who fell from the sky” who is called so because no one knows about his origins and his real parents. The narrator reveals how Hoxo himself remembers nothing before travelling piggyback on his father to his surprised and loving mother. In the Adi community, this is met only by certain recalcitrance from Hoxo’s classmates, with only Rakut warming up towards him. Halfway through the story, we learn about the tragic and curious incident in his house, the death of Hoxo’s father Lutor. His death is strange and fateful, as it is caused by the sight of the *Birbik*, a mythical creature, a kind of a water serpent at the edge of the river. The *Birbik* belongs to the vast array of mythical beings like the *Mitimili*, *Dimitayang*, *Danki* clouding the tribal imaginary of the Adis. Described as a strange creature looking both like a snake and a fish with a head of horns (Dai 9), its sighting had passed on for generations so much so that no one remembered who saw it in real. It is described as having “ancient eyes” (Dai 9) and the Adis believe that those that see it were surely to die. Hence, Lutor completely breaks down in the course of the event and is soon after killed in a hunting expedition. In the flurry of hunters in the forest, he is easily mistaken to be a prey. It is ironic that Hoxo’s father, the hunter is turned into the hunted and that too by one of his own kind. The man, who shot him, remembered a movement in the forest and saw “a dark shape that he swore was definitely not human” (Dai 10). In accordance with the traditional laws of the tribe, this man is soon banished to the forest for a month, to fend for himself away from the comfort of his family and friends. The narrator however, retains the twist of the story, its uncanny element till the very end when she tells us that what was troubling about the event was the discovery of a small fish in Lutor’s shirt pocket, its slimy body clinging to his skin. While the narrator hints at something sinister behind its presence ‘a spirit manifestation of something else’ (Dai 11), the people however much conjectured over its presence and decided that maybe it was a fish he had caught in the small stream and was bringing back for his son. The idea of the hunt and the taboos and rituals associated with it are much important in the tribal society and this is also evident in the next story of the collection, “the strange case of kalen the hunter’ which also relates another strange incident of hunting, where the boundaries between the hunter and the hunted blur and one is mistaken for the other. In this story, it is Kalen who is shot, instead of the monkey which was originally shot at by his compatriots.

The idea of the animal that emerges in both of the stories is not of the biological or the literal animal, but that of the ‘psychological animal’ (Beakley 83), which is more of an offshoot of imagination or memory. These are essentially unstable beings, unpredictable in their appearance, unlimited in their possibilities. Their appearance are characterized by their “very spontaneity, their autonomy, their intentions”(Beakley 58) and they provoke various emotions in the viewer by their appearance. They usually appear as the images of familiar beings to educate the community in some way. To conserve such animal images in our culture, we must familiarize ourselves with them like the primitive cultures. The shamanic cultures are therefore, a rich minefield of traditions against which we can imagine contemporary animal-human relationships. In the western anthropocentric world we often assume the return of such animals to be fiction or fabrications. For instance, Russell Lockhart, a Jungian psychoanalyst records the increasing number of apocalyptic dreams among his patients, portending an inevitable end of the world. This images he notes (1987:84) are accompanied by images of animals; and one is left to wonder whether this is the return of the repressed to claim space because modern culture is essentially displacing them from the geographical space? Their displacement from space is accompanied by an equally invasive attitude into their agency. Thus all non-literal animal presences, psychological and cultural that announce their presence in dreams, thoughts, literature, metaphors or simply form the ‘other’ against which we measure human subjectivity come under this category. The lack of rationality that modern culture ascribes to animals is nothing but a displacement of our impoverished relationship with them (Giegerich 1989:1). In contrast to this, the traditional totemic or shamanic cultures stress upon the unseen and unfamiliar, “the hidden presence” (Maybury-Lewis 1992).

They encourage conservation and equilibrium, for them the world is an antagonistic space, where humans have to placate the animal presence in order to survive. The animals usually appearing in the guise of a familiar image is expected to be the educator, the guiding presence which would help them. In both the stories studied in the purview of the paper, the animal appears in the semblance of the mythical animal, familiar yet unfamiliar. The only figure that can make any sense of the presence is that of the shaman or the functionary figure who maintains a sense of continuity, and a sense of balance between the spirits of the animal hunted and that of the hunter. The act of hunting which occupies a central activity in both the stories is itself symbolic of a greater meaning. In contrast to the mechanized slaughter of the modern period that has distanced the human from the act of slaughter, and reduced concepts such as God or religion into mere abstractions and ideas (Giegerich 1993:14), the traditional act of hunting and sacrifice had a 'divine and sacrificial nobility' (Baudrillard 1994:134) which was gradually robbed of its symbolic value. This has in turn reduced the scope of perceiving animals as nothing more than products for mindless consumption.

Conclusion

In the context of India, where most eco-sensitive values and ethics are largely being seized upon and displaced with a more western perspective of development, it is only the indigenous populations who remain ecologically sensitive and thus, guardians of an ancient wisdom. This is true, especially in the case of the indigenous tribes of north-east India who exist in a close knit relation with their immediate environment. More unique, is their way of apprehending animals, psychologically as opposed to only biological presences, thus investing them with more importance and centrality than the rest. This is also reflected in the writings of the authors from the region who consciously make an effort to establish the marginality of the people and espouse a revival of the traditional bond between the human and nature.

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Pallabee Dasgupta is a Research Scholar at the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University. Her research interests include Ecocriticism, Dystopian studies and Indian Literature.