

## ‘Cultural landscape’ in the Selected Poems of Nitoo Das

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**Abstract:** *The present paper aims to explore, the cultural landscape in the selected poems of Nitoo Das. Being a female poet of the North east region of India, her poems reflect the significance attached to and the intimate relationship women shares with the culture and environment of the region. Through her evocative imagery and poignant reflections in her poems, Nitoo Das invites the readers to gain insights into the rich culture, traditions, folklores and myths of the region. Her poems describe trees, forests, hills, waterfalls, rivers and resonate the eco-feminist strain of woman- nature nexus. Her poems portray how culture is intertwined with geography, history and memory of her region.*

**Keywords:** *Feminist poetry, ecofeminism, cultural landscape.*

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*“India’s North East is part of a great tropical rainforest that stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas to the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula and the mouth of the great Mekong river as it flows into the Gulf of Tonkin.....it is also its home and sanctuary.....with its mist clad hills, lush green forests and smooth valleys, the bewildering range of its languages and the rich colorful mix of its people.....”(xv)*  
(Sanjoy Hazarika ‘Strangers of the Mist’)

The cultural landscape of North East India is incredibly diverse, unique and rich with each of its states boasting their unique traditions, languages, cultures, beliefs and art forms. The region tucked up in the lap of the mighty Himalayas is a ground of fascinating and diverse cultures because of by the diverse ethnic tribes, communities and rich culture. This region is blessed with nature’s bounty and beauty. The vibrant culture, the lush mountains, the dense forests, the green valleys, the blue lakes and rivers, the different rituals, histories, beliefs and festivals serves as a compelling subject for the writers of this region who represent the cultural essence the natural landscape, and the ethos in their writings., The poetic tradition of North East India has been enriched by the contributions of numerous talented women writers like Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Uddipana Goswami, Janice Pariyat, Nitoo Das, to name a few, whose verses offer intimate glimpses into the landscape and the interactions both physical and metaphorical, that describe their lived experiences. This is wonderfully described by Mamang Dai in her novel ‘Legends of Pensam’-

*“We descend from solitudes and miracles.”*

The present paper aims to discuss the cultural landscape of the region portrayed in the poems of Nitoo Das, a prominent poet of North East India, who beautifully weaves the cultural landscape of this region into her poetry, offering a compelling exploration of their rich traditions, beliefs, myths identity, amidst the background of a lush landscape, where the people are engaged in a living and a loving relationship with their land which they call their ‘home’. An Assamese woman writing in English, Nitoo Das’s poems captures this raw essence, where she takes us into a compelling journey of sights, sounds, smells and experiences to this beautiful land, that define the true essence of the North Eastern milieu. In this paper, we will look closely some of her poems and understand the ways she explores the rich cultural landscape of this region. In 1925, Carl Sauer, the American geographer, introduced the term ‘Cultural landscape’ in his paper, *The Morphology of Landscape*. He writes-

*‘the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.’ (Sauer, 1925)*

Carl Sauer argued that landscapes are not just physical features of a place or region but are they also shaped by the interaction of human culture and activities. Sauer emphasized the importance of studying these interactions of humans with the environment which results in the creation of unique and distinctive cultural landscapes that reflect the true essence of a particular region. The North Eastern region of India cohabits two major bio diversity hotspots of India, namely the Eastern Himalaya and the Indo – Burma biodiversity hotspots. Being home to a number of ethnic tribal societies, the writings of North East India are deeply concerned with ecological concerns and environmental degradation. For the indigenous communities of North east India, preservation of nature /ecology is not just a way to ensure sustenance; it is their spiritual practice, belief a ritualistic way of life. Such an ecological understanding is ingrained in the cultural traditions of the communities, for whom preservation of Nature is not a mere realistic approach but a way of their life, echoing Sauer's ecological perspective. The writings of the women writers of this region offer an insight into the regions' cultural landscape, describing us specially the intricate and intimate relationship the women folk of this region share with their environment. In most of her poems, Das captures the landscape of this region showing the intrinsic bond shared between the bodies of women and the natural world and how such an engagements creates new emotional geographies, identities and experiences. Her poem, 'Mawphlang' opens with the description of a forest in the image of a woman, that is both elusive and enigmatic, concealing mysteries and secrets known only to itself -

*"The forest is something indecisive*

*Between twig and soil.*

*It is an old woman opening*

*her mouth. She has nothing to reveal."*

Chingangbam Anupama remarks that poetry of the region is "always marked by a unique presence of nature" in which nature sometimes forms as "a simple backdrop but more often as spirits and souls, playing an active role in the artistic creation" (2013: 59).

In her poem, 'In Which Mawlynnong is Fractal', Das puts forward a series of questions that leads to no answers- "What is Mawlynnong? I don't know." The lack of any answers itself shows that certain mysteries of nature/cosmos always remain elusive and beyond human comprehension. The fractal nature of the poem reflects the fractal duality and the dynamic aspect of the cosmos in a deeper level leading us to deeper questions than clear answers, making it equally engaging and confusing. Her portrayal of nature transcends mere descriptions to encompass deeper and complex existential themes as well as the elusive and incomprehensible mysteries of the universe. Her poem 'Root Bridge, Mawlynnong' also transport us from the concrete to the abstract, from the real to the ideal, from the physical to the metaphysical-

*"These roots are plainly amphibian, They breathe both within and without...These roots are parallel lines of real and reflection..."*

Ecological consciousness is one of the dominant themes of contemporary poetry in English from North-East India. Chandra and Das notes –

*"Indian English poetry from Northeastern part of India is rich in enshrining various aspects of ecology of the region. It has been a fashion with the poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness. The ruthless act of deforestation and oppression upon the Mother Nature in various ways by destroying the serenity of the nature, obliterating the natural environment, killing rare birds and animals and distorting the landscape and biodiversity, have been sharply reacted upon by these poets" (2007: 35).*

Many of her poems are responses to the exploitation, domination and devaluation of women and nature by the patriarchal society. As an ecofeminist, Nitoo Das celebrates nature as a 'female entity' in the poem 'Jokhini', and takes a step further by describing Jokhini in the image of a cyborg. In the poem, he corporeal Jokhini (Assamese witch) blends/merges with nature, blurring the binaries of male-female/nature-culture, leading to the creation of new emotional geographies, that is equally powerful and expressive -

*"she never combed her hair/knotted, knee-length, lice –ridden*

*hair that decode all stories.*

*Her hair is thrice song and twice surrender.*

*The split ends are tributaries: Dibang, Kameng, Dhonsiri, Subansiri,*

*the dandruff: stardust,*

*the grey: filaments of the day.*

*Her hair grew over branches, leaves..."*

*Bokul flowers like something breathing.'*

Her poem 'Margherita', echoes the ecological concerns deeply rooted in the consciousness of the women writers of this region. The poem describes the imagery of the town Margherita, her mother's home, extensively eroded by the Dihang, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, mercilessly swallowing it with each flood every year, making it smaller and smaller. This is a major concern for Assam not only leading to the loss of land but also social, cultural and natural assets of the region.

*"The starving Dihang*

*In her backyard devoured her*

*Home making it smaller*

*With each flood year."*

The poem implicitly addresses the gendered aspect of environmental activism by highlighting the perspective of the female poets and their role in advocating ecological preservation and sustainability.

Yi-Fu Tuan, a prominent humanistic geographer emphasizes the subjective experiences and perceptions of an individual/as individuals within their environment. He argues that places hold significance not only in physical terms but also as repositories of memories, identities and emotions. His study focuses on mindscape and landscape and humanity's relationship to the environment. The main emphasis was on humans as rational beings with the power to think and perceive rather than being mere responders to stimuli. Tuan examines the ways in which cultural landscapes are also with symbolic meanings and emotional attachments. He concludes that every person is simultaneously a biological being, a social being and a unique individual. He demonstrated how environmental perceptions, attitudes arise from and contribute to all the three aspects of human beings. It was Tuan who gave rise to the recognition among geographers that the intimacies of personal encounters with space produce 'a sense of place' –

*'People think that geography is about capitals, land forms, and so on,' says Tuan,*

*'But it is also about place — its emotional tone, social meaning, and generative potential.'*

The poems of Nitoo Das resonates this emotional attachment and bond of women with the landscape. In her poems, Das also invites readers to contemplate the interplay between inner and outer landscape suggesting the emotional geography that the women folk strike with their land.

In addition to celebrating beauty of the rich diverse landscape, Das's poetry is also imbued with the rich traditions, myths, legends and oral literatures of North east India., which adds a rich cultural depth in her work. D W Meinig examines the role of cultural myths, narratives, and ideologies in shaping our mental maps of the world, influencing how we perceive and interact with the landscape. North east is a repository of diverse culture, folktales and myths mainly because of the oral tradition. The myths, folktales of every community showcase their rich culture and beliefs. As the people of North East India are close to nature so their myths, folktales are entwined with nature. Their indigenous narratives and folktales showcase an intrinsic connection with land, forests, mountains and also characters that were mostly non-human. In 1908, *The Imperial Gazette* states their stories as 'superstitions'; today, the world calls this 'ecological wisdom'. Folktales of Northeast India, like most folktales, "move with grace and felicity from concerns that are larger than life, encompassing the nuanced relationships between stars and fishes, humans and land spaces, to those between parents and siblings, families and strangers" (Preface, *Fresh Fictions*). Tejimola is one such folktale. The tale depicts the suffering of a beautiful young girl Tejimola whose stepmother tries to kill her when her father who's a merchant was away from home. She depicts how Tejimola was pounded at the 'dheki' (husking peddle) by her stepmother –

*"She crushed me like grain  
Flying husk gathered  
Scattered like rain"*

She was also made to suffer at the loom by her stepmother- "*She threaded me like a loom/Strings upon strings tethered/Feathered like a womb.*"

But each time Tejimola assumes a new form, an object of nature and revives herself and asserts her identity- "*No, don't snare me /Don't scare me, said Tejimola out loud*".

The change of Tejimola into a form of nature, every time she is crushed dead, is interesting because it shows how 'nature' plays an important character in the myths and folklores of this region.

In his seminal work (1973), '**The Interpretation of Cultures**' Clifford Geertz outlined culture as - "*a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.*" Hence he believes that the analysis of culture must therefore focus on the interpretation of those symbols. In this light, the myths can be seen as rich symbolic systems through which the indigenous communities of North East India negotiate their identities, values and social structures. In this context, Mieke Bal notes that such narratives have now become an active cultural force "*enables us to make meaning out of a chaotic world*" (Bal, 2002, p.10).

In the poem, '*How to Cut a fish*', Nitoo Das explores the ritual of cutting a fish in Assamese culture. The task of cutting a fish, performed by the women folk, is described in details, step by step, offering us a fascinating glimpse into the regional flavors and the culinary diversity of the region –

*"You have to sit properly  
Woman-like on the floor  
Put one foot  
Strongly gingerly  
On the base of the blade  
Hold the fish with firm hands..."*

However, on a deeper level, the fish also takes on a symbolic significance. The dead fish also transforms from being a mere object of consumption to a symbol of helplessness and vulnerability. The lifeless stare of the dead fish evokes a sense of discomfort and empathy in the readers reflective of the violence inherent in the act of killing and consuming- "*feel the resistance of white flesh staring eye and open mouth*", ironically blurring the boundary between the dead fish and the women engaged in cutting the fish who becomes the victim. Thus the poem subtly explores themes of power and agency particularly within the context of gender roles. In most of her poems Das makes this subtle movement from the performative, the outer landscape to the inner landscapes through multiple layers and inviting innovative perspectives to her work.

In her poem, '*At Age Eleven*', Nitoo Das describes the puberty ritual of Assamese culture where the girl is married to a plantain plant-

*"One eye hunger-red  
And I curved into a woman.  
I swore never to starve again  
and never marry  
A plantain plant again."*

Poems like these not only reflect the reverence for nature but also underscore the intertwining of ecological and feminist principles which align with the ideology of Ecofeminism. The tradition of marrying girls to a tree signifies the women's bond with the natural world. Moreover, her engagement with cultural memory extends beyond myths to encompass the lived experiences of her community.

In the poem, '*Voiceless Velar Fricative*', Nitoo Das critiques the absence and lack of representation of North Eastern narratives in the dominant narratives of what constitutes the pan 'Indian' identity–

*"I am the x in oxomiya,  
xenduriyaxondhiya,  
xonjiboni. Very few can  
voice me."*

She highlights issues like alienation, marginalization and invisibility of the voices of this region and calls for inclusion and recognition of the North eastern cultures, languages and stories in the national narrative –

*"Stamped different, marked  
minority, marked unspeakable,  
I survive in small pockets of the world."  
"I am an articulated silence."*

In the poem, 'Doiboki' a woman's name breaks up into pieces which gradually turns into a taunt, a song. She is uncouth, vulgar and coarse exploding vulgar words. In Assamese 'to bok' means to mutter meaninglessly almost crazily. The marginalization and silence of the voices of the North East region find resonance in this poem. Poetry is a voice, an agency. The women writers show their angst and seek to create an identity that has always been homogenized. This anger takes the form of a rage in the poem 'Waterfall in Sohra', where she describes that the waterfall, is reminiscent of their poetic expressions which has dried up and is reduced to an "unresponsive tear, an indifferent trickle... unsure whether to wake up or crawl back into sleep." But the poet promises that soon "... it will grow in all directions, unpack itself from fear and stumble recklessly into prophesy. Out of the rains, rage will rise."

This transformation of the waterfall expanding and growing, breaking from fear and bursting forth with energy and purpose compared to the poetry of this region which may begin quietly but will soon unfold into powerful and prophetic voices.

Aruni Das in this context writes-

"...Writers from the North East India do not write with a sense of regret or bitterness though their fiction emerges from a very violent and brutally exploited region. Though India has a tenuous relationship with its northeastern states this fraught bonding seeps into the fiction (poetry) of this region in complex ways as it stresses that fiction isn't a place for confrontation, but of integration, of connection. In fact, I believe anger is a tiny and insignificant emotion..."

The women writers of North East India in their poetry express subjective realities. Their poetry are rooted in their rich and unique cultural diversity reminding us of the interconnectedness of all beings- human and non-human, the cosmos and the fluidity of one's identity. This fluidity is beautifully represented in the poetry of Nitoo Das. Her love for the land, the rich culture of her region and the intimate bond shared with nature is reflected in the surreal images and symbols of her poetry that express her lived and immersive experience, like the poetic persona of Bhobai the man who turned into a crow in "Crowbite". Das defies conventional expressions to delve into depths of the myriad experiences and consciousness of the North eastern people. These lines by Mamang Dai beautifully resonates the elusive writings of North East India, that defies all conventions-

*The History of our race begins with the place of stories*

*We do not know if the language we speak*

*belongs to a written past*

*Nothing is certain. There are Mountains, Oh! There are Mountains*

*We climbed every slope, we slept by the river*

*But do not speak of victory yet. (Misra 2011:5) ('An Obscure Place' by Mamang Dai)*

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