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**Eco-Critical Consciousness in Gumlat Ong Maio's The Tortoise Prince
and Other Singpho Tales**

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Abstract:

Man, in their ruthless pursuit of comfort in scientific development, has shaken the ecological balance and environmental equilibrium. The reckless trend of replacing the natural world with human society has resulted in a devastating ecological crisis. The utmost need of recent times is to create environmental awareness for a safe and healthy world. In such critical times, literature can play an essential role in cultivating environmental consciousness to develop an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between man and nature. Folktales are stories that talk about man's relationship with the physical world. It sensitizes the human mind to ecological sustainability and ecological conservation. Therefore, the present paper, in the light of ecocriticism, examines the relevance of folktales in cultivating eco-consciousness by illuminating the relationship between man and nature. The researcher has delimited her focus on The Tortoise Prince and Other Singpho Tales authored by Gumlat Ong Maio.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Eco-consciousness, Singpho folktales, The Tortoise Prince and other Singpho Tales.

Introduction: Our planet, the Earth, is a home of numerous lives. We live in a world where all life forms are symbiotically connected. From the smallest organism to the biggest, they have an equal share of the Earth. However, as human society evolves and grows, humans become more dominating and aggressive toward nature for their own needs and greed. They overused all the natural resources and disrupted the environmental stability. The reckless action of humans towards nature has degraded nature to its maximum limit. If the equilibrium between man and the natural world is left unchecked, it may trigger apocalyptic consequences. Literature can play a crucial role in resolving this alarming threat by raising environmental awareness for a sustainable world.

Ecocriticism: Beauty and wonders of nature have always drawn poets to write about them. Literature is filled with works on adoration of nature and its role in the evolution of human society. Elements of nature, such as birds, trees, animals, plants, flowers, clouds, mountains,

rain, and rivers, have been explored by poets to emphasize the importance and necessity of nature for the continuity of life. In the history of English literature, an era known as the 'Romantic Age' where a group of writers like S.T Coleridge, William Wordsworth, P.B Shelly, and John Keats devoted their works to inspire social change through appreciation of nature. By giving voice to nature, poets contributed significantly to shaping a discourse advocating for positive change towards a sustainable world. Literature can speak to people of all ages about the idea that might be essential to inform the condition of being human. It can effortlessly capture and influence the human psyche. The function of literature, along with offering the pleasure of reading, also enlightens and inspires minds to be more sympathetic and empathetic and develops an understanding of one's surroundings. When P.B. Shelly says poets are unacknowledged legislators of the world, he defines the strength of poets to transform human hearts and minds through verse. By writing on the subject of nature, poets deepen our understanding of the world around us and our place within it.

Furthermore, it engages poets with ecological themes and promotes environmental responsibility by writing about nature. By writing about nature, poets encourage the reader to connect with nature, think critically about our relationship with the planet and spread awareness of ecological challenges. Poets help to inspire empathy and promote eco-friendly practices.

Ecocriticism is a branch of literary studies that is devoted to studies of environmental literature. It establishes a common ground between literature and the environment. It is a critical mode that examines the relationship between literature, culture and the environment. Ecocriticism views human culture and nature as influencing one another. It believes that there is a close link between man and nature, which is interrelated and interdependent. Texts that investigate this interaction are expected to embody ecological consciousness and create environmental awareness. Eco-critics analyze text from ecocentric perspectives to address environmental issues. The motive is to awaken human consciousness and contribute to repairing and restoring the ecological crisis. Eco-critical reading intends to develop an emotional relationship between man and nature and proposes respect not only for animals but also for mountains, rivers and landscapes.

Role of Folktales in Cultivating Eco-Consciousness: Folktales are found around the world. It is an integral part of every culture. Especially in pre-literate societies, folktales are essential oral traditions for the continuity of culture and tradition. It is an ageless narration of ethnic and aesthetic values that is transmitted orally from the older generation to the younger generation. Folktales carry the fundamental principles of the community they belong to. Folktales have a considerable influence on the belief system of a community. Folktales are Embedded with moral and social values. It emphasizes respect for nature. These stories are significant in shaping the values, beliefs and social behaviour of the community. The values reflected in folktales account for the rules, customs and stability of social order. It is the justification of the cultural behaviour of a community. An essential function of folktales is that they dictate and guide individual behaviour. These tales are the stories of man's relationship with the Earth and the sky, the Sun and the moon, and plants

and animals. To provide critical insight into the relationship between man and his natural environment. Folktales humanize the non-human characters. It tells the stories from the perspective of non-human characters to instil eco-conscious values.

The stories with primarily plants and animals as central characters, along with humans, established the fact that all forms of life on Earth are interconnected and interdependent. These stories are not just to entertain and to teach moral lessons; they are potent tales of ancient wisdom that are metaphorically and symbolically rich in instilling reverence for nature and teaching sustainable practices. Folktales can be instrumental in creating environmentally responsible behaviour and respect for the flora and fauna that cannot speak for themselves.

Therefore, Folktales, as a part of literature, especially oral literature, can be a crucial means of cultivating ecological consciousness and ecological sensitivity.

The Study of *The Tortoise Prince and Other Singpho Tales* in the Light of Ecocriticism: Arunachal Pradesh is known for its rich oral tradition. Folktale is an integral part of the cultural life of Arunachal Pradesh. Folktale is one of the most popular forms of oral literature among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. It is a prime source to learn the nitty-gritty of traditional culture. It is a product of the collective belief that binds the group with a sense of solidarity and also constitutes the cultural identity of a group.

In recent times, many Arunachalee writers have employed the element of folktales in their creative writing, viz. poetry and prose. Gumlat Ong Maio is one of the essential writers from the Singpho community of Arunachal Pradesh. In his anthology of poetry, *The Tortoise Prince and Other Singpho Tales*, he retells the age-old Singpho folktales in the form of fourteen narrative poems.

Singphos are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They follow Theravada Buddhism. Although Singphos converted to Buddhism a century ago, they still hold their age-old belief system of animism, where nature plays an integral part in their cultural belief system. It is an unusual hybrid spiritual system with the essence of non-violence of Buddhism on one side and animism on the other. Like any other tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Singphos belong to a pre-literate society. They have a rich cultural heritage of oral tradition. Folktales are an inevitable part of Singpho's cultural tradition. 'Pung' is the Singpho term for folktale. It mirrors the worldview and values of the Singphos. It also justifies their cultural practices and principles of social conduct. Singpho believes that mountains, forests, and rivers are the abodes of the malevolent and benevolent spirit. Any harm to them without any specific purpose may offend the divine entities and invite misfortune. For them, plants and animals are their distant relatives. The anthology *The Tortoise Prince and Other Singpho Tales* explores these folk beliefs of the Singpho tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The anthology enhances and expands our understanding of the non-human world to promote the harmonious existence of all forms of life on Earth.

The first poem of the anthology, *The Tortoise Prince*, is a story of a prince who took birth in the form of a tortoise but could change his shape into a human form. *The Smell of the Dragon Princess* is a love story of a Singpho man and a dragon princess named Jaing Rong, who transforms into a human during the day and turns into a dragon at night. The transformation from animal to human metaphorically represents the idea that with love and kindness, humans can form a bond with animals. Here, Maio emphasizes the idea of the preservation of non-human life with care and affection.

The interdependent relationship between man and nature is explored in the poem *The Snake and the Goat*, which tells the story of an older woman who saves the life of a snake from a forest fire, but in return, the snake tries to bite her. To solve the dispute, the old woman called a meeting with the Forest Council of Mammal, Reptiles, and Birds. The leader of the group, who supported the old woman, was a goat. In the defence of the old woman, the Goat speaks,

"We goats owe man our lives form
when they tamed us from the wild.
with them around as sentinels,
carnivorous dangers shrank to mild.
We could now graze in peace and
when there was nothing to eat,
we and our goatlings were fed well and
a place granted to rest our tired feet.
When the time does come
to quench man's hunger and thirst,
we look not at our deaths
in man's hands as the worst." (Lines 57-68)

Here, Maio projects that the relationship between humans and animals is mutually beneficial. The old woman takes help from the animals to defend herself from the snake. The character 'Goat', an animal speaking in the defence of the old woman, represents the interdependence of man and animals for their survival.

The utilitarian perspective of the modern urbanized world has disconnected humans from its natural world. It views animals as resources to be used for work, food, clothing and amusement. Failing to see the inherent worth and significance of animals for the welfare of human lives has disintegrated the balanced relationship between man and animals. The disconnection has led to instances of animal cruelty. Maio sheds light on the reality of human cruelty towards animals in the poem *The Elephant and the Tiger*. The poem is in the form of a debate. In the poem, the elephant and the tiger get into a debate. They challenge each other to exhibit their strength and show their worth to establish who could be the king of the jungle. They attack and counterattack each other's weaknesses based on how humans treat them. The tiger says to the elephant,

"The pain, the sweat, the torment, O dear!"

the tiger yapped with a perverse grin,
"How man turned you into burdened beasts!
How they chained your kith and kin!" (Lines 39-42)

The elephant counterattacks the tiger and reminds him how humans feast on his meat and use his bones and hides for their amusement.

"The elephant, quite incensed,
launched a veiled counterattack,
"At least man doesn't smoke our meat
to partake as a medicinal snack
or skin our monochrome hide
to decorate his bamboo shack." (Lines 43-48)

The poem grapples with the theme of animal cruelty. Through the poem, Maio appeals to compassion and to be mindful of wildlife.

The growing human population and advanced technological development increase the consumption of the natural environment, which breaks the natural stability of wildlife habitat. The effect can be seen in the destruction of flora and fauna from the face of the Earth. The poems *Revenge of the Unborn Egg*, *The Tiger and the Cat* and *The King They Chose* are based on a famous Singpho fable that raised this concern. The poems empathetically present the twin struggles of animals, i.e. against other animals and hostile humans. It makes an emotional and ethical appeal for the welfare of animal life.

The poem *The Sun Twins* is based on the Singpho myth that exhibits that in the beginning, the Earth had two suns. There was no night. Exhausted by the heat, humans shot an arrow at the heart of one of the suns to injure her. Due to its injury, the wounded Sun fell from the sky and gave out a dim light (which Singphos believed to be the moon). Singphos believe that since then, the human world has begun to experience night. Lonely in the sky, the other Sun begs the wounded Sun to come back to the sky. However, the wounded Sun, despite being injured by humans, does not agree to go back into the sky for the welfare of humans. Conversely, plea the other Sun to focus its nourishing light on the human world needs it more than her. The wounded Sun says:

"Forget me, divert your divinity
to millions who look up to you,
Their forests breathe in your light,
their crops you abet anew.
You brew the seasons,
the storms, snow, winds, rain;
you ensure the strength
that their bones attain." (Lines 33-40)

The poem revolves around the role of nature (symbolically represented by the injured Sun) in sustaining life on Earth. Maio represents nature as not merely a physical

phenomenon but a living entity with life and feelings and will and purpose. The act of shooting at one of the suns metaphorically represents humans' wanton cruelty towards nature, but nature never backs down to nourish human life on Earth. The poem projects that nature is the ultimate giver. The poem reflects Maio's humility and reverence for nature. Tuning to a similar theme, the poems *Fowl's Fate*, *Origin of Fireflies*, *When Man Met Fire* and *Origin of Cha* promote the nurturing and healing spirit of nature.

The *Origin of Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi Festival* is about the origin of the dance festival Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi, which is celebrated by the Singpho community to honour their ancestor Shapwang Yawng whom they believe to be the first Singpho man. The poem narrates the tale of the bird who taught the art of dance to humans. Therefore, the poem depicts the close association of birds and animals with humans.

The poem *Genesis* is a creation tale. It is based on Singpho's myth of the process of the creation of humankind on Earth. Singphos believe that the Goddess *Phunggam-jan Woisun* created life on Earth. The first human life was formed from the haze of fog and mist. The tale depicts the process of man's evolution from nature. Through the poem, Maio appeals that we, humans, must realize that we cannot dictate and place ourselves above nature. We cannot use nature for our purposes without caring about the impact of our reckless actions because nature is the source of all life's creation on Earth.

Maio ends the book with the poem *Origin of Cha*, which tells the tale of how humans learn the recipe for preparing *Cha* (rice wine) from a porcupine. The poem is set in a mythical time of Singpho belief. It was the time when humankind was sent to the Earth from the divine abode for the expansion of the human population. Mutham Mutha, the guardian God of humans, advises them to seek grace and guidance from Nats, the benevolent spirit, in times of trouble. However, he forgot to teach the rites and rituals to appease the *Nats*. The lack of knowledge on how to summon and appease the *Nats* for divine assistance leads humans to despair and misery. Compassionate deity Mutham Mutha, unable to witness the misery of humankind, sends a porcupine for their aid. When a woman saw a porcupine approaching, she tried to kill it to quench her hunger. Porcupine asks the woman to spare his life in exchange for the knowledge of a mysterious drink called *Cha* that can appease *Nats* and bring joy and happiness into their lives. The porcupine says:

"A drink no less than cherished nectar,
A drink that dissolves all despair,
...that will appease even the Nats, I swear.
If my life you spare, I will share
the secret of its recipe rare,
truly a drink without compare." (Lines 39-40, 45-48)

According to Singpho culture, *Cha*, which is actually a rice wine, is considered an essential requirement for performing traditional rituals. Shamans use it to summon and appease the benevolent spirits. It is believed that *Cha* enhanced the strength of shamans to

communicate with the spirit world. Thus, the poem demonstrates the interdependency of man and animal; we need animals as much as animals need us to survive in this world.

Conclusion: Despite the preponderance of modern means of entertainment, folktales continue to be a living phenomenon in the cultural life of Arunachal Pradesh. Folktales are representations of the ideology and practices of the communities of Arunachal Pradesh. The stories of folktales with animals such as birds, animals, plants, and trees as central characters convey the message about living in harmony with nature. The personification of plants and animals encourages environmentally sensitive behaviour. Revolving around the theme of nature, folktales are an effective means to educate the values of living in harmony with nature. It evokes positive emotions by instilling respect, understanding and appreciation for nature. Along with entertainment, folktales also offer a possible way to conserve and preserve nature. Thus, folktales unwittingly contribute in shaping eco-conscious and eco-sensitive mindsets in people.

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