

Nature, Myth, and Indigenous Consciousness: Eco-critical Perspectives on Selected Mizo Folk Tales

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Abstract:

This paper explores the relationship between nature, environment, and human life in selected Mizo folk tales through an eco-critical perspective. Ecocriticism, as a literary approach, examines how literature reflects ecological consciousness and the interaction between humans and the natural world. The study highlights the close connection between the Mizo people and their environment, particularly in the pre-Christian period when religious beliefs, livelihood, and social values were deeply rooted in nature. Forests, rivers, mountains, animals, and spirits formed an inseparable part of Mizo cultural and spiritual life, including their conception of the afterlife through places such as Rih Dil and Mitthi Khua. Through selected folk tales such as Liandova leh Tuaisiala, Mauruangi, and Lalruanga leh Keichala, the paper examines themes of compassion toward living beings, environmental ethics, dependence on nature for survival, and the moral responsibility of humans toward the natural world. The study further argues that Mizo folk narratives preserve indigenous ecological wisdom and reflect a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, making them significant sources for understanding traditional environmental consciousness in Mizo society.

1. Introduction

Eco-criticism is an academic discipline and a critical tool used to study the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It serves as an instrument through which students of literature examine literary works that relate to ecology and environmental concerns. Ecocriticism mainly focuses on promoting awareness of the importance of the environment to human life through literature, while also encouraging appreciation and protection of nature by reflecting on the actions and attitudes represented in earlier literary works. The term ecocriticism is a combination of the words ecology and criticism. The word ecology originated from the Greek term oikos, meaning "house" or "dwelling place." The credit for coining the term ecology in 1869 goes to Ernst Haeckel, a German zoologist who is also regarded as one of the founders of biogenetics. Ecology is a branch of biology that deals with the relationship of organisms with one another and with their physical surroundings. It is also concerned with the interaction between human beings and their environment, and is sometimes referred to as bionomics. An understanding of ecological systems helps society predict the consequences of human activities on the environment.

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Etymologically, the word criticism is derived from a Greek word meaning “judgment,” and literary criticism refers to the exercise of judgment on works of literature. Criticism is the intellectual engagement with a literary text, examining its merits and limitations in order to evaluate its artistic value. Ecocriticism is also known by several other terms such as “Green Cultural Studies,” “Eco-poetics,” “Environmental Literary Criticism,” “Literary Ecology,” and “Eco-theory.” The term ecocriticism was first coined in 1978 by William H. Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” Ecocriticism adopts an interdisciplinary approach by analysing the works of writers, researchers, and poets in relation to environmental issues and nature. However, ecocriticism was formally established as a major field of literary study with the publication of two seminal works in the mid-1990s: “The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology” edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and “The Environmental Imagination” by Lawrence Buell (Origin of the Word Ecocriticism).

In the Mizo context, the Mizos were historically a migratory and agrarian community, and jhum cultivation was the most common means of livelihood. Even today, many Mizo people continue to manage their lives within the rugged hills of North-East India. For a community such as the Mizo, the forest and the environment were not merely resources for survival; rather, they formed an inseparable part of life and existence. The forests were believed to be inhabited by *Lasi*, the guardian spirit who protected and cared for animals, as well as by ancestral spirits and other supernatural beings with whom the people believed they co-existed and settled. Furthermore, in the spiritual realm, the Mizos had various deities and spirits closely associated with nature and the environment. Such ecological consciousness and environmental connections can also be observed in the Mizo conception of the afterlife.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between the environment and selected Mizo folk tales through an eco-critical perspective. It further highlights the historical background of the Mizo people, their traditional beliefs closely connected with nature and spirits, and their indigenous awareness of ecology, environmental preservation, and the significance of the natural world.

2. Pre-Christian Mizo Beliefs and Nature

The pre-Christian era of the Mizos was deeply rooted in their indigenous religion, commonly known as *Mizo Sakhua*. This traditional belief system centred on ‘Sa’ and ‘Khua’ who were regarded as divine beings. The term ‘*Sakhua*’ itself was later used in the Mizo language to translate the word “religion,” and it is derived from the two terms ‘Sa’ and ‘Khua.’ Alongside these, the Mizos also believed in *Pathian* and other deities who were considered protectors and benefactors, granting blessings in agriculture, hunting, and daily life.

As James Dokhuma explains in his book *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*,

“Our ancestors had a religion (*Sakhua*) derived from the two terms ‘Sa’ and ‘Khua.’ ‘Sa’ was considered the main creator of everything, while ‘Khua’ was believed to be the protector. ‘Khua’ protects humans and blesses them” (46).

This belief system reveals the close relationship between the Mizos and nature in the pre-Christian period. Their dependence on agriculture, hunting, forests, and natural surroundings shaped their religious worldview, where divine powers were closely associated with protection, survival, and harmony with the environment.

The Mizo pre-Christian belief system was closely connected with nature and the environment, especially in relation to the spiritual journey after death toward the abode of

spirits known as *Mitthi Khua* and *Pialral*. Along this journey, the spirits of the dead were believed to pass through the famous Mizo lake, *Rih Dil*, which still exists today. According to traditional belief, *Rih Dil* was a significant place that every spirit had to visit after death. The renowned Mizo historian B. Lalthangliana states in his book *Mizo Culture* - "After their death, the family hosted a farewell ceremony known as *Thiṭin*, which marked the spirit's departure along the path of *Rih*, from where it would never return." (115). Even the surroundings of *Rih* Lake were associated with the spiritual world and death, as the Mizos believed that *Rih* Lake was the place through which every human spirit passed on its journey toward *Mitthi Khua* and *Pialral*. The trees around the lake were called *Mitthi Pal*, meaning "the fencing of the dead," while the birds inhabiting the lake and its surrounding areas were known as *Mitthi Ar*, meaning "the chickens of the dead," before they later came to be called *Rih Ar*.

As B. Lalthangliana further highlights, not only *Rih* Lake and the trees surrounding it, but also the subsequent stages of the spiritual journey were closely connected with nature and the environment. After crossing *Rih* Lake, the spirits reached *Hringlangtlang*, a place from where they could still look upon the human world, especially their own villages. At this stage, they deeply longed for their families, homes, and the life they had left behind. The very meaning of *Hringlangtlang*, "the hill from where the human world could still be seen," reflects the emotional attachment of the Mizo people to their homeland and family (116). It is significant that even the spirits of the dead were believed to experience longing and homesickness. This portrayal reveals the deeply sentimental and emotional nature of the Mizo people, particularly in relation to family, home, and the landscape with which they were closely connected. The beautiful hilly setting of *Hringlangtlang* further intensified the feeling of loneliness and longing.

When the spirits were overwhelmed by loneliness and memories of their past life, nature again served as a source of healing. *Hawilopar*, literally meaning "the flower of no return," prevented them from turning back to look at their villages and former life. Although it could not completely erase their longing, it restrained them from looking back. Another important element was *Lunglohtui*, the water that removed sorrow and eased their emotional attachment to the past. Through these elements, nature functioned not merely as part of the spiritual journey but also as a means of emotional and spiritual comfort. The entire journey toward *Mitthi Khua* clearly reflects the central place of nature and the environment in pre-Christian Mizo belief. During life, nature was inseparable from human existence; it was their source of livelihood, identity, and emotional belonging. Even after death, this relationship did not come to an end. Rather, nature continued to play a vital role in the spiritual realm, guiding the souls of the dead toward rest, peace, and contentment in the afterlife.

The Mizo ancestors were deeply superstitious in their everyday lives. Whenever they intended to do something, they first considered whether it was safe or whether it was permitted by the divine powers and spirits believed to watch over them. Such beliefs were an inseparable part of their daily existence. According to traditional Mizo belief, every element of nature possessed its own soul and guardian spirit, especially large trees, huge rocks, mountains, lakes, rivers, and pools of water located deep within forests, commonly known as *Sih*. These places were widely regarded as dwelling sites of numerous supernatural spirits and guardians.

Before cultivating their jhum fields and cutting down trees, the Mizos performed certain verbal expressions that reflected their respect for nature. Rev. Zairema records the following statement in his book *Pi Pute Biak Hi*: "It is not because we despise you, nor because we take pleasure in mocking you, that you are cut down by the Mithun; rather, it is through this act that

we seek food and sustenance for our survival” (89). This expression reveals the traditional belief that trees also possessed souls. The Mizos were therefore reluctant to cut them down without acknowledgement or apology. As reflected in this statement, they maintained a sense of reverence toward nature and expressed remorse before felling trees for cultivation. They believed that killing any form of living creature was a grave wrongdoing before the Creator. For this reason, whenever they burned their jhum cultivation fields, they were conscious that many animals and even insects would perish in the fire. Rev. Zairema states that after setting fire to their jhum fields, they would rest on the following day to mourn the death of those creatures, as they believed that the animals had died because they burned the forest for their own survival (145). Although jhum cultivation was necessary for their livelihood, they carried out the practice with deep sorrow and a strong sense of moral responsibility toward nature and its living beings.

They clearly understood that the forest and its environment were the source of everything they needed for their livelihood. This was the reason they protected the forest with great care and used only the areas necessary to meet their yearly needs. They neither attempted to exploit the resources excessively nor sought to accumulate them for many years ahead; rather, they lived and worked according to their immediate necessities. One practice that clearly demonstrates their deep awareness of the importance of nature was the strict regulation observed before burning cultivation areas. Every cultivator was required to make a proper fire-break, known as *Mei lam*, to prevent the fire from spreading into the reserved forest. If anyone failed to do so and the fire reached the protected forest, they were subjected to a severe fine called *Salam*, which was regarded as a strong form of punishment. Thus, such customary practices reflect not only their dependence upon nature but also their strong sense of environmental responsibility and communal discipline.

Another example of the Mizo ancestors’ ethical code and social prohibitions can be seen in a story about a man who captured many monkeys using a trap known as *zawngtlak*. Rev. Zairema further emphasizes the incident, stating that, “The man captured monkeys, cut off their hands, and tortured them with a blade. It was believed that, after he later had sons and grandsons, the descendants born into his lineage carried dark patches on their hands as a consequence of his cruelty” (145). The Mizos also considered it sinful to kill animals that were carrying their young, pregnant, or feeding their offspring; even birds in such conditions were protected. Although they lived in a society where a man who killed many animals was often regarded as brave and admirable, there were still clear moral boundaries regarding the treatment of living creatures. Such practices reveal a remarkably advanced ethical consciousness, comparable in some ways to modern hunting regulations and conservation principles observed in many Western societies today. In this sense, the Mizo ancestors may truly be regarded as environmentally conscious people who lived in close harmony with nature and practiced an eco-friendly way of life.

3. Human–Nature Relationships in Selected Mizo Folk Tales

As a subtopic, this section explores selected folk tales that highlight the importance of nature and the environment in human livelihood. Although many folk tales contain references to nature and ecological values, only a few selected stories will be examined in order to provide a deeper understanding of the topic.

Firstly, the relationship between humans and the environment can be observed in the folk tale *Liandova leh Tuaisiala*. In the story, *Liandova leh Tuaisiala* encountered a small white snake in the forest during heavy rainfall. The continuous rain had left the snake weak, cold, and

nearly dying. Fearing that it might be killed by someone passing through the area, Liandova expressed sympathy for the creature, saying that, “He is as poor as we are, having not even a place to stay during the rainy season” (Khiangte 217), and they carefully wrapped the snake with leaves and placed it in a safe and warm location to protect it from the cold.

Their act of kindness later brought them prosperity, as they were blessed with abundant rice harvests that year because the snake was, in fact, the child of a powerful *khuavang*. However, Liandova and Tuaisiala had no knowledge of its supernatural identity at the time. To them, it was merely a small white snake in need of help. Nevertheless, they chose to protect and care for it. This episode clearly highlights the kindness and compassion of Liandova and Tuaisiala toward all living beings, while also reflecting the deep connection between humans, nature, and moral responsibility found within Mizo folk traditions.

The second folk tale that deeply highlights the importance of the environment in both human life and the afterlife is the story of *Mauruangi*. In this folk tale, one can observe a unique connection between nature and religious concepts such as “Karma” and “Reincarnation”. According to the definition of karma provided by the *Hindu American Foundation*, “One of Hinduism’s most fundamental teachings is that every living being is a physical incarnation of an immortal soul. Though these physical bodies die, each immortal soul continues to exist” (Allard). This suggests that every living being possesses an eternal soul temporarily housed within a physical body.

Similarly, in the story of *Mauruangi*, Mauruangi’s mother was intentionally pushed into the river by Mauruangi’s father, which led to her death. Later, she was reincarnated as a catfish. However, after Mauruangi’s stepmother discovered that the fish was secretly feeding and taking care of Mauruangi, she pressured the villagers into killing it. After the catfish was killed, Mauruangi received its lungs and bones. The lungs transformed into a beautiful necklace, while the bones were reincarnated as a *Bombax ceiba* tree. This tree later provided Mauruangi with food and nourishment, protecting her from hunger and suffering and helping her remain healthy. (Vanlallawma 102, 105).

In Hinduism and Buddhism, reincarnation into elements of nature such as trees, animals, or rivers often symbolizes the unity of all life, the law of karma, and the continuation of consciousness. In the story of *Mauruangi*, the reincarnations of Mauruangi’s mother appear meaningful and closely connected to the natural environment. When she died in the river, she became a fish, and when parts of her body entered the soil, she transformed into a tree. From a Mizo cultural perspective, this form of transformation appears both logical and symbolic, as it reflects the intimate relationship between human life and nature.

More importantly, the transformation of Mauruangi’s mother into natural forms can be interpreted as an act of maternal protection and sacrifice. By becoming a catfish and later a fruit-bearing tree, she was able to continue caring for her daughter without attracting the suspicion of Mauruangi’s father and stepmother. In Hindu belief, reincarnation as a tree is sometimes associated with a state of reflection, peace, and selfless service, as trees provide shade, food, and oxygen to all living beings without discrimination. Likewise, Mauruangi’s mother chose forms within nature that could nourish and protect her daughter. Through these transformations, the folk tale clearly emphasizes the essential role of nature and the environment in sustaining human life by providing food, shelter, and daily necessities in every part of the world.

Lastly, in the story of *Lalruanga leh Keichala*, it can clearly be seen that the killing of

animals was not merely done for pleasure or out of habit; rather, it was often carried out for necessary and meaningful reasons, which reflected the close relationship between human beings and the environment in their daily lives. Lalruanga's father, Zauhranga, killed a huge wild pig in the cultivation field belonging to Zawtleipuii's family. However, the wild pig belonged to the queen of *Lasi*, Chawngtinleri, who was regarded as a supernatural guardian responsible for protecting animals. Chawngtinleri took away and saved the wild pig she loved and replaced it with a smaller one. Nevertheless, when Zauhranga later explained that the wild pig had repeatedly destroyed vegetables in their jhum cultivation, Chawngtinleri accepted his reason as justifiable and eventually returned the original wild pig to the place where it had been killed (Dahrawka 31).

This episode clearly depicts that the killing of animals was often considered acceptable only when there were reasonable causes behind it. Even the *Lasi*, who served as protectors of animals, permitted animals to be hunted or killed when they caused harm to human life and livelihood. Such ideas can also be observed in the story of *Sichangneii*. After Sichangneii fled back to the sky, she left her children behind on earth. Following the death of their father, her sons later found her and joined her in the sky where she resided. However, Sichangneii's brother could not accept them and continually attempted to kill them. As a result, Sichangneii advised her sons to return to the earth and instructed them to use trapping devices for catching animals in the place known as *Mual Sarih*. After returning to the earth, the brothers became highly successful in capturing animals by using the traps taught to them by their mother (79).

This narrative further suggests that human beings depended greatly on animals for survival during earlier times, as was the case with many societies across the world before the spread of modern education and development. The Mizo people also relied on hunting and consuming animals for generations, primarily for survival, sustenance, and the fulfilment of their daily needs. However, the unnecessary killing or torture of animals was never socially accepted. As discussed earlier, although animals were utilized for human survival, there also existed a strong sense of responsibility toward their protection. In the story, the brothers survived through the animals they captured using traps, even after becoming blind, as these animals became their principal source of food and livelihood. This clearly highlights the significance of the environment in human life, the dependence of human beings upon animals for survival, and the recognition of the need to preserve and respect nature within traditional Mizo society.

4. Conclusion

As with many other tribal communities across the world, the Mizos and their ancestors maintained a close and inseparable relationship with nature and the environment. Their religion, daily life, food habits, and value system were deeply intertwined with the natural world. Particularly before the advent of Christianity, traditional Mizo religious beliefs were strongly associated with nature, animals, spirits, and other supernatural beings. These beliefs, myths, and spiritual concepts significantly influenced Mizo folk narratives, which frequently reflect the ecological consciousness embedded within their culture and religion.

Nature and the environment are consistently represented in Mizo folk tales and oral traditions, revealing their importance in both the physical and spiritual life of the people. From an eco-critical perspective, these narratives demonstrate how the Mizos understood human existence as closely connected with the natural world. Even the spiritual journey after death, especially the path towards *Rih Dil* and *Mitthi Khua*, is portrayed through landscapes, forests, lakes, and other environmental elements, further emphasizing the cultural and spiritual signif-

icance of nature.

Moreover, these folk tales and oral narrations continue to be retold and preserved across generations, serving not only as cultural memories but also as reminders of the essential role of nature and the environment in Mizo life, identity, future, and historical consciousness.

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