



## Topic: Ecocritical Approach to Hmar Folktales

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#### Abstract:

*Ecocriticism started as a separate school of criticism in the 1990s. The word ecocriticism is derived from ecology, which is concerned with the relationship between organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationship with that environment. With an approach to man's relationship with his physical environment as reflected in literature, ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary study with a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. By analogy ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how man's relationship with the environment is reflected in literature. Ecocriticism is a critique of binaries such as man/nature or culture/nature which is viewed as mutually exclusive opposition. The unusual relationship of the physical and the spiritual is reflected in the folktales of the Hmar that are oral traditions which have been passed on through generations. Folk tales are important document in giving us the knowledge of the nature and custom of the tribe.*

**Keywords:** Hmar, Folk tales, Ecocriticism.

#### INTRODUCTION:

Ecocriticism as a critical writing explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment. Literature serves to broaden one's insight towards global environmental culture. With a positive approach, with the acceptance of principles of deep ecology, with the power of re-imagination one can come to a broad term ecocultural habitat which is a combination of the physical and social, individual and global. Thus the different forms of nature and non-human in the tales selected for study which includes *Sairampa*, *The Seven Brothers* and *Ngamtawn* are suggestive of the interconnections between nature and culture that is central to ecocriticism.

According to anthropologists and social scientists the Hmar belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Tibeto-Chinese race and the language they speak belong to the Lushai-Kuki-Chin group. They settle mainly in the states of Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. The Hmar have a distinct culture and language of their own. Hmar in ordinary sense means 'North'. The people belonging to the Lushai-Kuki-Chin claims Sinlung as their place of origin.



Though a recurring theme in the old folk songs, the actual location of Sinlung continues to be a topic of dispute. However, all traditions and culture, including material culture, support the idea that they migrated from South East Asia and entered Indian Territory. The Hmar ancestors established a village on hills and mountains until they were compelled to desert their place of dwelling due to natural calamities or hostile environments such as war. The Hmar did not have any written records before the advent of Christianity; hence the early history has to be gleaned largely from the oral traditions which have been passed on through generations, and also the folk tales and songs which have been sung from past generations. (Thiek, 61)

Ecocriticism aims at looking at a piece of literary text from a perspective of ecological awareness. Ecocriticism distinguishes itself from all the other literary theories as it rejects the very notion that everything is socially or linguistically constructed, a notion which is the very basis of many other literary theories. Ecocriticism re-looks at a literary text not from an ecocentric perspective, emphasizing the representation of the natural world. The Hmar people live amidst the natural world and they earn their livelihood from various natural and forest resources. Hence, they are connected to and concerned for nature in all possible ways: economically, historically, geographically, culturally, socially. In this context, the present attempts an analysis of a select folk tales of Hmar in order to emphasize ecocritical study.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based upon a study of texts that pertain to both the primary and secondary sources. The tales under study are studied both in the original and translated texts. Among other sources, aspects related to ecocriticism include texts like Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Ann B Doble's *Theory in Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism and* Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* and John Elder's *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Ecocriticism developed as a separate discipline in interdisciplinary studies in the 1990s. The term ecocriticism is derived from the word ecology, which deals with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment. The over exploitation of natural resources like air, water and soil gave rise to the question of man and the planet as well. Humanists fight for the sustenance of the planet they live in is central to ecocriticism.



William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism* first used the term ecocriticism in 1978. According to him, “the application of ecology and ecological concept to the study of literature.” (Doble, 238) Ecocriticism is therefore concerned with the relationship between literature and environment and how literature shows the relationship of man with the natural environment.

Lawrence Buell, book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* defined ecocriticism as “the environmentally oriented study of literature and the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice” (138) and they attempt to discover “nature as absence, silence in text and construe environmental representation as a relevant category of literary, aesthetic, and political analysis; in conjunction with a focus on gender, class and race issues in literary texts.” (151).

Various social thinkers and critics have defined the term ecocriticism in different ways. The broad scope of inquiry and contrasting levels of complexity, the various approaches shared the fundamental principle that human culture is connected to the physical world. The relationship between nature and culture is the core of ecocritical studies and as a theoretical discourse; it has conferred between the human and the non-human.

The Hmar language is rich in oral literature. In fact most of their traditional history is traced from the folktales, songs and oral literature. For every occasion, achievement, bereavement and worship they compose songs and dance to the tune. Folktales as traditional heritage handed down through generation, document the cultural history and ancestry of the tribe. It reveals the dominant social, political and social attitudes of the tribe.

In the story of *Sairampa*, there lived a couple who had a beautiful daughter, named *Kungawri*. Even though she was beautiful she became crippled and could not do any work. Yet because of her beauty, even the animals fell in love with her. One day her parents announced that if anyone could cure her, they would give her hand in marriage to the person. The announcement was heard by *Sairampa* (a wild tusker who could turn into a human being) and thus arrived to the village in the guise of a human being. He opened a small container which contained the spirit of *Kungawri* which he ingeniously captured and imprisoned in the container. On releasing the spirit of the girl she was immediately cured and the elephant man carried her away to the forest. In this folk tale, elephant and man represents the animal kingdom in which the tiger represents nature whereas spirit of *Kungawri* represents the supernatural realm. (Bapui, 36,37)



In the story of *The Seven Brothers*, the father along with the seven sons decided to participate in a competition of cutting the vines of *endata* beans and whoever was not successful must lie on the tiger's path frequented by a tiger. Each of the boys was successful in making a clean cut with a single stroke, but their father failed to do so. And as agreed upon their father courageously accepted his fate. Having learnt the fate of their father, the seven brothers decided to avenge for his death. However they were all killed by the tiger. When their only sister came to know about this she became grief stricken but was helpless. One day while she was sitting weaving her loin loom, a gooseberry fell down from nowhere. She picked it up and put it in her thigh, intending to eat it later on. But the fruit vanished and she became pregnant. The foetus in her womb was able to communicate with her from the time of inception. When the baby was born the mother named her *Tekabareisuon* (the son of lightning and thunder) When he came of age the mother narrated her plight about the killing of her father and seven brothers and eventually he was able to kill the tiger. The tale explains the location of some natural elements like gooseberry to explain a phenomenon of nature. The story also teaches us that human beings must have fellow feeling and affection among themselves to enjoy nature's plenty. (Dena, 129, 130)

Again in the story of *Ngamtawn*, the character *Ngamtawn* had two sons. He was brave and strong as well. He found a wife for his elder son and married him off to her. One day the daughter in law went to the forest along with the younger brother. When they were in the deep woods a hog deer barked nearby and told his sister-in-law that he wished to kill the deer. The lady said it could be done but with a condition that he must throw a lump of soft earth when she returns and she went away. The sister-in-law turned herself into a tiger and killed the deer instantly and carrying the carcass of the deer she returned. However the young brother was so terrified that he forgot what was instructed by the sister-in-law and climbed a nearby tree. Luckily, the lump of soft earth accidentally fell from his hand and the tigress turned back into her sister-in-law. The boy revealed what happened to his father *Ngamtawn* which aroused curiosity his mind and began to spy upon his daughter-in-law. On getting the opportunity he mercilessly killed her. The story demonstrates the close affinity of man and nature. The tiger actually became a part of the family of man in the story. (Bapui, 29)



## Conclusion

Ecocriticism connects culture and nature, especially the culture and art of language and literature as a theoretical discourse negotiating between humans and nonhuman beings. The natural environment is present not merely as a framing mechanism but suggest that human history is implicated in natural history and accountability to the environment sense is a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the tales mentioned. Transformation of human beings to natural elements of the environment forms a feature of Hmar oral literature. The folktales of the Hmar attempt to explain the natural phenomena or event in its own aesthetic way is another significant characteristic of the oral literature.

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