



Ecocritical and Thriller Narrative in Ankush Saikia's *The Forest Beneath the Mountain*

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Abstract

Literature of the North East India is marked by a wonderful vividness of nature in the form of background or setting in every genre, it plays an active role on the themes and narratives of the writings. The reason behind is closeness to nature and nostalgia about its glory. The term ecocriticism is an ecological concept applied to the study of literature. It is popular hence the people are conscious regarding deteriorating eco-system and environment. Ecocriticism is a critical reading of the literary texts in relation to ecosystem, nature and environment. The government is also making new policies like sustainable development goals and millennium development goals to live in eco friendly manner. This kind of study is a kind of support in this direction. Thriller is a kind of narrative or story imbedded with suspense or tension by creating dangerous life and situations of the characters. The settings of such kinds of novels resemble menace and possibility of violence therefore the reader is thrilled. Ankush Saikia vividly depicts a society ravaged by environmental degradation and modernisation in *The Forest Beneath the Mountain* (2021). Abhijit is the protagonist who searches reason responsible for his father's death. He conveys through his narration the issues brought about by contemporary socioeconomic growth, the resiliency of indigenous traditions, and the vulnerability of the forest ecology.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Thriller Narrative, Ecology, Environment, Crime Fiction

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Introduction

Ankush Saikia is an India author and journalist. He is born in North East India. His well-known works are *The Girl from Nongrim Hill* (2013), *Red River, Blue Hills* (2015), *The Forest Beneath the Mountain* (2021) etc. The paper presents the traces of ecocritical and thriller narratives in Ankush Saikia's *The Forest Beneath the Mountain*. The setting of the novel is detailed landscape and natural scenario of Assam. Through anecdotes the narrator Abhijit, the writer Ankush Saikia portrays the struggling life of the indigenous residents and deforestation due to modern development. Abhijit is in search of his father who has been died, here the writer presents environmental scenery:

Wild animals roamed the land and man was nowhere to be found. In the midst of it all a vast body of water, raging down as several rivers from high mountains in a corner of this land and then flowing deep and wide on its journey westward. The first people who came down from the mountains and set eyes on this immense river wouldn't go to close to it, out of fear. Whence did it come from; whither did it go? Later, they wouldn't settle near its banks, because of the seasonal floods. (Saikia 101)

It makes sense that nature would have a special role in the literature created in these North East states. The legendary Garden of Eden and the jungle where Rama was exiled are only two examples of how nature has been portrayed in ancient literature, classic works, and even religious writings worldwide. The roles of wildness and trees have included protector, provider, and occasionally destruction. With the exception of Tripura, the North East States, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Sikkim—are tucked away by the Himalayan Mountain ranges, making them a natural playground. A deeper examination of the region's green writing will uncover other hidden facets of Northeastern literature.

Ankush Saikia's *The Forest Beneath the Mountain* is an environmental thriller or ecological crime fiction. This novel has similarity of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* because both the protagonists of the novels journey through physical and psychological tough routes in the dense forest. This is a combination of environment, history and nostalgia. Its setting is Bodoland, rich in natural surroundings. As the story progress the narrator reveals the ecological richness of Assam.

An Ecocritical Study

William Rueckert coined the term eco-criticism in his seminal work, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in the year 1978. But the term was not popular those days, after the initiative of Modern Language Association published a series in 1990s to encourage ecocriticism, the writers included in the literary scenario, as stated earlier it is need of the present time. Rueckert points that "Experimenting a bit with the title of this paper, I could say that I am going to try to discover something about the ecology of literature or try to develop an ecological poetics by ecological concepts to the reading teaching, and writing about literature." (Rueckert 107)

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Northeast Indian writers in English have rich background to write as they inherently reside and breath into, Ankush Saikia is not exception. Through the medium of intricate narrative and nostalgia, the writer decorates environmental aspect, the ease and challenges before every species. The urgency and militancy are situations in these regions, the residing people fear of losing the greenery and natural resources due to increasing depleting developments. There is environmental degradation due to modernization and yielding needs of human race. As stated by Sandeep Kumar Mishra,

Ecocriticism is not merely the study of nature as represented in literature. Nature here does not mean a mere fancy of its beautiful aspects like plants and animals. Nature here means the whole of the physical environment consisting of the human and the nonhuman. The interconnection between the two creates a bond which is the basis of Ecocriticism. (Mishra 2016)

Saikia gives his protagonist an unbiased indifference that consistently clash with any romanticisation of the wilderness. He works as a journalist and, to some degree, an ethnographer. Despite frequently implying the influence of global capitalism, his pursuit for the truth is ultimately rooted in the local, the region where he exists. The finer points of detail could seem pointless and insignificant. The scenario in the Eastern Himalayan foothills is both very diverse and eerily similar due to the particulars. Pramod K Nayar has said in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*,

Ecocriticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches. (Nayar 242)

Saikia narrates human and animal relation through the activity of Elephant catching. Earlier it was the fashion of the wealthy and strong people, but the middle class was respecting elephant as a deity. Now the situation has been changed, due to greed of profit govt and non-government organizations are killing Elephant for the shake of ivory similar to Conrad's *Heart of Harkness*. Similar to the elephant catcher, Saikia cites a number of traditional means of livelihood that were essential to maintaining forest economies but were eventually eradicated due to pressures from the capitalist market system, which left many households in poverty. The government's hypocrisy in pursuing illegal resource extraction that, in a matter of decades, completely destroyed an entire forest that was home to thousands of these animals while simultaneously demonstrating a sincere desire to end animal cruelty is further highlighted by the cessation of actions like elephant catching. Thus, the land's ecological past entails intricate dynamics of power that require careful dismantling.

Saikia leaves plenty of space for nuance in the work while not discounting the cultural past that permeates the surroundings. As he looks into his father's death and comes to terms with his contentious part in environmental degradation as a forest trustworthy, Abhijit is also

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compelled to acknowledge his close ties to his hometown's ecology. In order to reveal what really happened about his father's death, Abhijit must solve the mystery of forgotten past, which is also at the centre of the plot. The book humanises the militants and subverts the reader's expectations about them and their violent actions, much like Abhijit's father did. The militants are also shown to have contributed to the forest's destruction, which serves as the main thread that ties all of the book's disparate characters together.

The concept of climate fiction is derived from ecocriticism. Ecological or environmental crime fiction has gained popularity at present time, Saikia's novel is one among them. Environmental thriller or ecological crime fiction is a kind of writing which covers the incidents of decay of natural resources. This novel is a combination of environment, history and nostalgia. It adds the significance of local geographical locations.

Saikia's work emphasises both the irreversible harm caused by human activity and the need for sustainable development grounded in indigenous practices. The *Forest Beneath the Mountain* offers a poignant illustration of the delicate balance between expansion and preservation, making it a key work for ecocritical analysis. The novel is set in the northeastern Indian district of Tezpur, which is known for its abundant natural and cultural heritage. Saikia critically portrays modernisation projects that encroach upon the land, dismantling the community and destroying ecological diversity.

We learn that modernisation, which includes economic gain, has contributed significantly to environmental degradation without regard for ecological concerns. He goes on to discuss how some people reject their moral need to preserve the environment. Stated differently, the unequal devastation and gain derived from the taking advantage of the ecosystem serve as the basis for the moral argument. Therefore, there is an obligation to repair harm caused by the commercial use of the natural environment for the advantage of those who were deprived of that resource when one party has profited from it.

The settlement of individuals in the Chariduar reserve jungle was carried out by certain politicians and approved by political parties who made sure the new settlers could vote in both the state assembly and the national assembly, according to Saikia, who also attacks the exploitation committed by politicians in forcing these indigenous groups to relocate in order to make new settlers encroach on this landscape for power and political gain. After shedding light on the imbalance in biodiversity, Saikia continues, saying, "His research into the human-elephant crisis had shown Abhijit that there were links to the issue of deforestation" (Saikia 205).

In order to gain power, Indigenous people are being exploited economically and forcibly removed from their ancestral lands. As a result, new settlers disrupt and encroach on the environment without any ecological ethics or protecting the environment awareness to preserve nature for future generations. Ankush Saikia's *The Forest Beneath the Mountain* (2021) is a work which contains nostalgia by narrative and environmental obliteration by setting the writer said "Thus had Abhijit come to an understanding of the factors that had led

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to the disappearance of that great forest he had known as a child. And all of these factors came together in a sort of perfect storm just before the end of the century” (Saikia 250)

Thriller Narrative

The form and subject of Northeastern fiction are likewise hybrid, with the region’s geography serving as the only loose connection. There are three kinds of thriller; first political thriller, second legal thriller and the third is legal thriller. This novel has the narrative of all the three kinds of thrillers. It is a story of a young man who returned from Delhi, a modern city to his village Sonitpur in Assam situated on the north bank of Brahmaputra River. He came to know the death of his father by the narrative of his mother, he felt more mystery in the reason for the demise of his father. In this essay, I will examine a subgenre of crime fiction from the Northeast that hasn’t received much attention. Prior to delving into a thorough examination of Ankush Saikia’s *The Forest Beneath the Mountains* how crime fiction may be used to both narratively depict the climate problem and to illustrate how a place’s imagination is evolving. The current surge in popularity of the environmental or green crime fiction subgenre, to which Saikia’s book can be assigned, is something that particularly full of details.

The history of the contemporary metropolis and the evolution of crime novels or detective stories are inextricably linked. Large, contemporary cities and the restrictive ideologies they were founded on were, in a sense, the seeds of the processes that would eventually lead to the current climatic catastrophe. The widespread plunder of assets from the colonies served as the foundation for new consumption patterns and a new lifestyle that big cities came to represent. There was a core and a perimeter, even in cities, with the latter being teeming with slums and ghettos that were thought to be magnets for crime.

Saikia’s story defies linearity at multiple points, and the reader is repeatedly reminded that Abhijit’s main quest is an introspective journey to re-examine his relationship with his violently removed parent, as well as, indirectly, the location and surroundings that his father stood for. Amidst its whodunit plot, the book offers a historical overview of the capitalist exploitation that has afflicted the Northeast’s mineral-rich regions for decades and still does, as well as the existence of morally dubious political circumstances.

Abhijit is also compelled by his investigation work to face his own idolisation of his father as well as his involvement as a forest official in the devastation of Sonitpur’s natural environment. In addition to giving its audience a sense of excitement, crime fiction literature in India has produced some extremely complex depictions of the current situation of the Indian nation, particularly in the age of globalisation and the shift to a capitalist economy. The writer presents in the novel “There was no time to ponder on those remains, or gaze at the nearby mountains, as it had started growing dark, and his companions decided to return by another route so that they stayed out of the path of the two herds that had been calling from within the forest.” (Saikia 212)

Similar to the section above, which consistently rejects any romanticisation of the wilderness, Saikia gives his protagonist an air of objective nonchalance. He works as a journalist and is also somewhat of an ethnographer. His quest for the truth is ultimately

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connected to the local, the location he lives in, even though it frequently alludes to forces of global capitalism. The smallest details could come seen as pointless and boring. However, it is the specifics that give the Eastern Himalayan foothills situation its uniqueness while still making it seem somewhat familiar.

Each and every detail that Saikia records represents a fragment of history that could be lost. The lives of the individuals he meets are frequently linked to these specifics, and each one of them contributed to preserving the area's biological equilibrium. For example, he meets and talks about his father's coworker, an elephant catcher. One of the last people still working in this field, the individual is obviously accountable for a large number of animal abuse cases. However, Saikia also explains to his readers the contradictory role this practice played in preserving the interaction between humans and animals as well as the significance of this indigenous knowledge system in preserving the harmony between nature and humanity.

Similar to the elephant catcher, Saikia cites a number of indigenous livelihood systems that were essential to maintaining forest economies but were eventually eliminated due to pressures from the capitalist market system, which left many households in poverty. The government's hypocrisy in pursuing illegal resource extraction that, in a matter of decades, completely destroyed an entire forest that was home to thousands of these animals while simultaneously demonstrating a sincere desire to end animal cruelty is further highlighted by the cessation of practices like elephant catching. Thus, the land's ecological past entails intricate power relationships that require careful dismantling.

The author also deliberately chooses Abhijit's father's terrible story in the book to highlight the different ways the region's climate issue intersects. He composes:

The effects of change upon tribal societies in the hill states of north east India is a topic of interest among academicians, but it is unlikely anyone will study the inner contradictions of people such as Khagen Saikia and Pradip Deka (and their friends), caught as they were between the Britishruled society of their parents and the mutations of democracy in a distant corner of a newly independent country. (Saikia 17)

As was briefly mentioned before, the development of contemporary police forces and attempts to manage populations thought to be disorderly led to the emergence of crime fiction as a genre. In these works, the colonial/racial other was viewed as a single location for a variety of moral and cultural concerns. In practically every form of cultural creation, there is a problem with cultural representation.

Conclusion

We have not yet thoroughly examined how climate change will affect the way we write fictional stories, but there is no denying that fiction has the power to illustrate how climate change appears like. From an ecocritical perspective, the shifting imagination of the location in crime fiction provides a clear explanation for how storytelling modes change over time. As demonstrated throughout this article, the nature of thriller narrative has the ability to offer a distinctive viewpoint on civilisations, despite the genre's frequent treatment as one deserving of little critical acclaim. This essay contends that Saikia's novel functions as a warning and a

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demand for environmental protection, presenting biodiversity not only as a setting but as a crucial component of a development that strikes a balance between human needs and ecotics. The history of insurgent violence in the Northeast is an obvious narrative of criminality, is one of the numerous conflicting narratives that have been etched into the region's ecology. For a very long time, the area's forests served as havens for law-abusing extremists, turning these hallowed areas into areas that needed to be monitored and, in certain situations, destroyed for security. The work advocates for an ethical approach to nature based on indigenous wisdom and customs that respect biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

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