

Postcolonial Ecology & The Cunning of Modernity: *Iyat Ekhon Aranya Asil* as a Critique of Postcolonial Modernity

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Abstract:

Anuradha Sharma Pujari's *Iyat Ekhon Aranya Asil* is a powerful critique of the effect of modernity on postcolonial ecology. The novel explores the relationship between modern city life and the loss of animal habitat in the surrounding hills and forests. The unnamed narrator, a journalist by profession, has been strategically used as a mouthpiece of the author in the novel to critique the underbelly of modern society where the ease of modern life could be sustained only by exploiting land and labour. Drawing from the findings made by decolonial critics like Walter Mignolo and Anibal Quijano on the connection between global modernity, global colonialism, and capitalism, we argue that in a postcolonial context, this double exploitation can be perpetuated only through consent and political manipulation of a complicit public. An ambivalent emotional response by the protagonist in the novel exposes the complicit nature of the privileged class which thrives on such exploitation. In this essay, we shall explore this complex networking which entangles modern life, politics, and landless squatters in a symbiotic relationship that utterly disregards non-human lives. We further argue, in this essay, that emotions like eco-anxiety and solastalgia are foreshadowed by survival needs in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Solastalgia, Ecoanxiety, Ecopolitics, The Forest Wails, Assam, Colonial Modernity

Introduction

Anuradha Sharma Pujari's novel *Iyat Ekhon Aranya Asil* won the highest literary award in India, the Sahitya Academy Prize for regional fiction in the Assamese language in 2021. Pujari's work is a powerful critique of the effects of modern lifestyle on postcolonial ecology in the context of Assam. This region has been the hotbed of violence since India's independence and issues like in-migration, border dispute, underdevelopment, encroachment of forest land,

and resource extraction have always taken a political centre stage (Misra; Baruah). This timely novel by Pujari addresses some of these critical issues by explaining how these facets of postcolonial nation-making are inextricably connected to modernity and the ecological ruination brought about by its materiality. The narrative unravels commonplace quotidian situations that we tend to overlook and live a life of comfort and ease without having any guilty conscience. It critiques modern society where spiritual needs are overshadowed by material needs. A posh bungalow, a luxurious car, a high-paying job, restaurants, shopping malls and many other such amenities have become the hallmark of a progressive modern life in Indian societies. However, such a life also has an ugly underbelly which often remains hidden from the public view. The novel explores this underbelly of city life to identify the relationship between modernity, its workforce, and its adverse effects on ecology. The nature-scape at the city outskirts has been the habitat for wildlife, but due to human encroachment, the wildlife started disappearing gradually. These hills then turn into small colonies of squatters which are used as vote-banks by the politicians (Pujari 83). It is through this double exploitation and a vicious symbiotic relationship (the exploitation of the forest, and exploitation of the poor labourers) that the city life is sustained.

The unnamed narrator, who is a journalist by profession, has been strategically used as the mouthpiece of the author to critique this dark side of modern society. Once the journalist starts investigating the land encroachment issue in the novel, she discovers that the ease of modern life is sustained only by exploiting land and labour. The privileged class exploits the unskilled labourers who can be seen as the footslogger of modernity as they make modern lifestyles possible through their cheap labour. On the other hand, this labour force encroaches on the forest land and hills thereby destroying the animal habitat. The irreverence towards non-human life and the modes of survival adopted by the underprivileged class show how residual forms of colonial modernity and capitalism subtly continue to operate in a postcolonial nation.

Consequently, the ‘neoliberal’ strategies adapted for wealth accumulation (Dwivedi) through limitless exploitation of land and labour create precarious conditions for human and non-human lives. This precarious condition is maintained by a capitalist regime which replaces nature’s ‘web of life’ with a modern web of life. The structure of the society in postcolonial nations, based on this new web of life, inevitably attracts the squatters towards city life which seems to offer opportunities for individual growth. Our objective here is to inquire how such double exploitation, of land and labour, is made possible in postcolonial context. We argue that this double exploitation can be perpetuated only through the political manipulation of a complicit population. Progress and development in a democratic set-up turn out to be a political myth because the wealthy and privileged class continue living a luxurious life by exploiting the poor. Since this wealthy class is not a closed category, it gives hope to the underprivileged the opportunity to climb the social ladder of material success, turning it into a vicious cycle as depicted by Amitav Ghosh in *The Living Mountain*. The underprivileged, by using the same means, can also become wealthy and privileged. However, the divide between the haves and have-nots remains constant. Consequently, the poor class of people are managed by the politicians to their advantage. When the journalist discovers her own complicit and ambivalent position in the novel, she reaches a moment of discovery. On one hand, she feels outraged by the government's decision to evict the poor squatters from the hills; on the other hand, after visiting the forest area, she is overcome by eco-anxiety and solastalgia to see how the animals and birds are losing their natural habitat.

Although she feels pity for the birds and animals, she empathises with her household help who lives on the same hill. The vicious cycle of exploitation and the social structure that becomes responsible for this reckless ecological damage is maintained with the help of corrupt government officials and politicians. It is important to note that the police, and other panopticon colonial structures (Foucault) that were instituted by the colonisers to control the colonised,

have been retained in the postcolonial nation through governmentality (Dey). It is by unleashing these powers, that global capitalism and global modernity are protected and perpetuated locally. Since global modernity vis-à-vis global coloniality can thrive only through a capitalist-controlled structure (see Dwivedi), the postcolonial societies, despite achieving independence from colonial rule, have ideated the colonial image of alterity (Bhabha & Viswanathan) by internalizing the very structure it resisted. A close reading of the novel will at once reveal that the hierarchized social structure in a postcolonial society is sustained by destroying nature on the one hand, and by exploiting the landless on the other hand. Since the state agencies are controlled by powerful politicians, they manipulate the law according to their needs. This form of modernity, which is posited as material progress and development, tends to be parasitic because it can thrive only through the exploitation of the other. In this essay, we take this decolonial approach to argue that in Pujari's novel modernity has been represented ambivalently where the narrator, despite being traumatized by the destruction of nature, appears complicit in the process of exploitation. The methodology for arriving at this conclusion will be based on understanding three fundamental issues addressed in the three corresponding sections in this essay. In the first section, we shall explore how environmental damage incites solastalgia and eco-anxiety in the narrator. It will be pertinent to mention here that the feelings of solastalgia are absent among the immigrant communities to a large extent. In the second section, we shall argue that emotional ambivalence is triggered by human-centric survival needs. As people are attracted towards a mechanical modern life, they seek the comfort of modern life thereby relinquishing their connection with nature. This produces a complex web of life which entangles modern life, politics, and landless squatters in a symbiotic relationship with utter disregard towards non-human lives. In the third section, we argue that the stakeholders of the state and the socially powerful exploit nature and labour to their advantage. Our reading argues that the present social structure creates an ecological impasse

where the agents of modernity act complicitly in the destruction of the environment. However, we conclude by arguing that there is yet a ray of hope as the novel foregrounds the role of the younger generation as eco-warriors. Furthermore, the reverence for nature as shown by some of the characters in the novel could reignite the lost connection with nature. Therefore, the hope lies in rekindling the spiritual connection of mankind with nature.

Solastalgia and Ecoanxiety: Prefiguration of a guilty conscience

Anuradha Sharma Pujari, being a resident of the bustling city of Guwahati, has had the opportunity to personally witness the rapid and unprecedented transformation of the environment in her city. Her first-hand experience has allowed her to observe the stark changes in the natural landscape and the impact it had on the city's flora and fauna, leaving an indelible mark on her consciousness. Drawing upon her nostalgic recollections of a time, when the city was still surrounded by lush green forests and pristine natural beauty, the novelist deftly weaves a poignant tale of loss. In the beginning, the novelist conveys her profound sense of connection with the natural world through the vivid depiction of the amazing landscapes. She incorporates elements of nostalgic emotions into the fabric of the central character's persona, thereby infusing her character with intense depth and complexity. As she meanders along the resplendent shoreline of the Pacific Ocean in San Francisco, her mind embarks on a nostalgic way, reminiscent of her cherished childhood memories. Transporting her back to the moment when her parents led her to Nimatighat in Jorhat, she imagines the “crystal waters of the mighty Brahmaputra” (Pujari 1) and the “flawless golden sand on its bank” (1). Pujari emphasises the deep-rooted longing of the central character of the novel for the beauty and majesty of her homeland: “Mesmerized by the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean [...] golden sands- just like our sands on the banks of the river Subansiri” (Pujari 1). It is because of her affection for nature that ultimately triggers a deep sense of solastalgia in her mind. The journalist recalls the time

when the hill was untouched by human habitation, with only the thickly populated valley below. However, within a mere five years, the tranquil green slope of the hill was transformed into an uneven, ravaged landscape by incessant hill-cutting and construction activities. The once frequent, loud calls of foxes and chirring of night-crickets vanished, and with it, the splendour of the hill. This evocative description can be compared to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, where she depicts the absence of non-human life in the blighted land. Parallel to the profound sentiments of anguish stemming from the irrevocable loss of their natural habitat, a poignant and interwoven sense of sorrow is effectively depicted in the novel, wherein the chapters grapple with the distressing reality of witnessing the endangered state of the water bodies, forest, and its wildlife. This multifaceted portrayal illuminates an additional facet of solastalgia, underscoring the deep emotional distress experienced by individuals confronted with the deteriorating condition of their ecological surroundings and the precarious plight of the creatures that inhabit them. The deliberate naming of the novel's chapters, such as "Unearthing the Earth," "A Single Hill and Multitudes of Folks," "Oh, the Death-soaked City," "In Search of a Forest," and "The Tree or the People" holds a deep significance as it showcases the pervasive presence of eco-anxiety throughout the narrative. The subtle bond forged between the narrator and the Southern Panjabari Hill progressively deepens to encompass a more comprehensive exploration of the "biophilia hypothesis" (See Wilson). This hypothesis establishes a correlation between the human relationship with the natural world and emphasizes "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (Wilson). The novel underscores that the failure to nurture this innate tendency directly correlates with the emergence of the feeling of solastalgia.

Through her evocative prose, Pujari captures the complex emotions of her characters, eliciting a deep sense of eco-anxiety and solastalgia that resonates long after the final page is turned. *Iyat Ekhon Aranya Asil* is distinguished by its astute exploration of the psychological

nuances of the characters and their interactions with the external events that shape their lives. Through this approach, Pujari adeptly aligns the role of the fictional characters with the overarching thematic concern of the novel, the ecocritical perspective. In particular, the narrative shows how nostalgia transforms into “solastalgia” (See Albrecht “Solastalgia”) in the novel. Solastalgia may be triggered by an immense sense of loss according to Askland and Bunn (2018) or natural calamity according to Gladwin (2017) or a place-based crisis according to Phillips, Murphy and Bresnihan (2022). Albrecht and others (2007) describe Solastalgia as the loss of solace of individuals or communities living in a place due to severe environmental degradation. It denotes the agony or anguish that results from the loss of solace associated with the negatively perceived state of one's homeland. Initially, solastalgia was used to describe the distress experienced by people living through mining and drought. However, it is now believed to be a valuable tool for understanding the psychological impact of natural as well as manmade disasters. In another article, Albrecht (“Negating Solastalgia” mentions that the emerging literature on eco-grief, climate grief, and ecological grief can be situated within the concept of solastalgia. The concept of solastalgia, which refers to the lived experience of negative environmental change (Biswas & Ryan), shares strong similarities with the eco-grief literature. It can provide valuable insights for those seeking to understand the relationship between human emotions and the state of the environment. The innate human tendency to seek comfort and solace in the familiar surroundings of one's home is disrupted by the rampant anthropocentric activity that leads to the destruction of natural habitats (Breth- Petersen). This sense of loss and displacement can cause an intense impact of distress and unease on individuals and communities alike. Based on the views forwarded by these researchers, we may argue that Solastalgia is intricately linked to an individual's psyche (Cianconi et. al.), representing a form of mental distress characterized by intense feelings of agony and grief resulting from significant changes in one's home environment (Breth- Petersen). However, we do not see all the

characters exhibiting similar emotional grief or eco-anxiety in the novel. While the journalist and the forest guard feel this loss intensely, the squatters and immigrants do not exhibit any emotion. While the journalist feels aggrieved by the destruction of the forests, the squatters show no emotional response to such destruction because they have not fully developed a sense of home in the encroached area. Since Solastalgia is triggered when people intensely feel a sense of displacement and disconnection from the familiar natural environment around them, it remains absent in immigrant communities and temporary squatters. The novel, by underpinning this difference, offers a unique and compelling reading of the connection between solastalgia and ecological crisis. The essence of the representation of solastalgia through the fictional characters of the novel is the interconnectedness of human beings with the environment and the negative impact of environmental degradation on humans' collective and individual psyche.

The destruction of forests and the hills by squatters who come to work in the city, and the city-dwellers who need the service of this cheap labour force, work in tandem to cause ecological ruination in Panjabari Hill and Amcheng Reserve Forest. Although the city dwellers are not directly involved in the destruction of the forest, yet by employing the squatters, who due to the unaffordability of an expensive city life encroach on the animal habitats, become complicit in the process. This eventually results in human-animal conflict. The novelist has articulated the intricacies of this conflict in the novel by highlighting the consequences of the encroachment. These hills, encircling the city, once served as a secure haven for diverse wildlife and avian species. However, in the present, the animals find themselves compelled to navigate to “the concrete forest of the people” (Pujari 28). Bereft of anything but their innate weaponry of sharp claws and teeth, they are confronted with spears, billhooks, and the cruelties inflicted upon them by humans. It is conceivable that these creatures would never have encroached upon human territories had their domains remained intact. Regrettably, the forests

that once sheltered them have been transformed into human settlements and towns, and ultimately those towns have progressed into sprawling cities: “But, the only movement of forests is towards its withdrawal from existence. They have turned still, helplessly silent at the cruel atrocities done to them. Men versus Forest!” (Pujari 28). Warsini and others (2014) emphasize that solastalgia is not merely a longing for the past or a desire to return to one's homeland. Rather, it is a visceral experience of losing the present, which is felt as pain or a sense of being under attack by a force that destroys any possibility of peace. This anguish is felt when one observes the extensive damage inflicted on the environment and realizes that it has been profoundly altered. The novel also registers the emotional response of indigenous people like Ranjan Das and Rajbongshi. They diligently serve in the forest department, yet find themselves powerless in their efforts to protect the forest and its wildlife from illegal destruction and encroachment. Rajbongshi's intense mental involvement with the pathetic condition of the Amching forest is shown through his emotional outburst: “I feel so helpless when I see the animals in trouble. I feel I am a hopeless father who can't even give the required protection to his own children!” (Pujari 164). The narrator also gets deeply affected by the precarious predicament faced by the homeless wildlife. The sight of a pair of pigeons fleeing from the hill and seeking refuge on the roof of her house, as well as the unexpected appearance of a civet in her residential area, grips her with a sense of eco-anxiety. This sentiment emerges from her inability to safeguard the sanctity of their natural habitat. At a certain phase in the novel, she contemplates whether the profound impact of the hillside evacuation would have influenced her to such an extent if Madhuri had not been working with her. Here, this shifting of 'self' is central to the emotional distress of the journalist and the forest worker.

Emotional Ambivalence and the Construction of the Self

After witnessing the destruction of the forest and its wildlife, the narrator feels emotional anxiety, however, she is overcome by an ambivalent feeling on seeing the precarious existence of the squatters. She faces the tension between individual liberty and the constraints imposed by social existence. Her association with two kinds of precarity, the one faced by humans and the other faced by non-humans, enables her to understand the adverse effects of modernity. The dilemma between being an individual and a social creature is very complex. She struggles with this complex dilemma, as she confronts the agonizing reality of her inability to help individuals like Madhuri, Babla, Mansur, Piklu and Bishnu, facing eviction. Her desire to assist these people is constrained by social and political forces beyond her control. Likewise, Rajbongshi says, “I feel helpless for the animals in the forest but I also feel bad for these exploited people. I too have a family; I do understand the struggle for survival” (Pujari 84). Therefore, their emotional ambivalence is constituted by a problematic self. The construction of the self in a postcolonial modern nation is different from the precolonial notion of self. In the Indian spiritual system, it is believed that the self and nature emanate from Brahma and go back to it (Lokeswarananda; Patrick). The Atharva Veda states:

Sages and scholars of Shastra and Vedas study and foster three joyous gifts of nature and divinity, versatile in form, sensitively satisfying and universally illuminative for body, sense and mind and the soul. For this purpose, they are waters for taste and sweetness, winds for energy of prana, and herbs for strength and alleviation of pain. All these three are vested and concentrated in the same source, Nature (Ram 509, verses 18.1.17)

Therefore, all creatures are equal and are a part of nature which is created by the interaction between Purusha and Prakriti (See Mohrhoff). This is why nature worship constituted the core of the Indian way of life. In colonial discourse, the self was constructed by distancing the self from the other, through a nature/culture distinction. This had its roots in Western theological

and moral conception of the self which considered nature as an external objective entity that needs to be conquered and exploited. We would briefly allude to two texts which had been crucial in understanding and perpetuating the notion of the self through the construction of the nature/culture binary. In *The Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (1590) by Jesuit Father Jose de Acosta and *Novum Organum* (1620) by Francis Bacon, the idea of nature was constructed in contradistinction to culture, where nature was outside the human subject. Mignolo points out that it was during this time that new plantation economies were coming up and brutal resource extraction (gold, silver, and other metals) had started. In the European colonies too, this epistemic shift was noticed in the new cultural and educational structure set up by the colonisers. Understanding Nature as the source of Natural resources, and its exploitation for human cause (See Mignolo), interfered with the precolonial notion of nature that prevailed in India. The allegory of destruction and cultural havoc perpetuated by the colonisers as presented by Amitav Ghosh in *The Living Mountain* has also been profoundly explained by Mignolo in his seminal work:

The mutation of nature into natural resources in the West was a sign of progress and modernisation and at the same time a sign that other civilisations stagnated and were falling behind the West...on the other hand, as far as knowledge was conceived empirically as true knowledge, it became a commodity to be exported to those whose knowledge was deviant or non-modern according to Christian theology and, later on, secular philosophy and sciences. (Mignolo 13)

Therefore, modern nation-states like India, which is struggling to keep pace with modernity, hinges on Western understanding of nature and the self. The emotional ambivalence of the narrator is affected partially by such a vision of modernity. We see that the 'self' of the narrator is constructed by the diverse experiences faced by her, and her corresponding mental states assume remarkable significance within this framework. The pain of displacement experienced

by the people living on the Panjabari Hill and the sorrow of the nature-loving individuals such as Ranjan Das and Rajbongshi serve as two primary sources of this shifting self for her. The convergence and integration of these disparate experiences and emotional states in the central character over time highlights the significance of the deep impact of solastalgia on the individual. The exploration of the ever-shifting 'self' becomes evident within the context of the novel, wherein two different facets of solastalgia are presented. Firstly, the narrative enquires into the distress caused by the intrusion of disruptive noises in the previously serene forest environment. This aspect underscores the deep impact on the individual's sense of 'self' amidst the encroachment upon their cherished natural surroundings. Secondly, the novel also addresses the experience of mental pain and anguish resulting from the displacement of the inhabitants residing in the Panjabari Hill region. These portrayals of solastalgia shed light on the intricate relationship between the dynamic nature of one's self-identity and the profound environmental changes that trigger profound extreme emotional and psychological responses.

The central character's role as a journalist is significant here in the context of an ecological viewpoint. As a journalist, the protagonist has a unique perspective on the events and changes happening around her surroundings, and her profession allows her to observe and report on the impact of environmental change on individuals and communities. Within society, journalists are often perceived as individuals who possess comprehensive knowledge about the inner workings of societal, political, and economic spheres. They are expected to resemble soldiers, fearlessly fighting on the battlefield for information without succumbing to emotions or regrets. Their primary responsibility lies in providing objective and truthful news devoid of personal biases or sentiments:

You are a journalist. You hold power in your pen. If you want, you can write a few lines to save the city's lifeline! [...]Media right now is focussing only on one side of the

story. Please focus on this side too- for the sake of this forest, for the sake of the future generations... (Pujari 161).

This mention of the media's partial coverage concentrating on only one side of the story while failing to unveil the true nature of the mafia gang responsible for the sanctuary's destruction is intricately intertwined with modernity. Modernity, in its expansive reach, absorbs individuals from all walks of life, and its connection to ecological devastation becomes apparent. This correlation between ecological destruction and modernity can be elucidated through Rabindranath Tagore's viewpoint on modernism. Tagore postulates that the fundamental aspects of human nature such as pride, greed and power serve as the underlying factors responsible for the detachment of humanity from the natural harmony that exists within the ecosystem (2022). The chapter titled "The Death-soaked City" in the novel exemplifies a stark juxtaposition between urban living and ecological imbalance:

Streets and avenues, lanes and by-lanes

Dark amidst the agony of silence

...

The distant thumps of throttled traffic

...

(The tiger and the badger blaze bright in the forest)

...

lives on the riddle of subsistence...

We are the sons of Ambrosia

Oh, the death-soaked city!" (Pujari 142)

The above-mentioned poem titled "Hei Aranya, Hei Mahanagar" by renowned Assamese poet Nabakanta Baruah (1951) captures the disheartening consequences of urbanization on natural ecosystems, particularly the perilous plight faced by forests and non-human creatures. Each

word of the poem seems to satirically critique the culture of cities, portraying them as enigmatic realms cloaked in sombre darkness and tormented by a pervasive silence. This silence symbolizes the anguish arising from the growing disconnect between humanity and the natural world. The phrase "the riddle of subsistence" aptly signifies the inherent emptiness that accompanies modernity's pursuit, underscoring the shallow and hollow nature of contemporary existence. The contrasting imagery presented through phrases such as "the sons of ambrosia" and "the death-soaked city" further accentuates the paradoxical relationship between humans and the environment. These lines allude to humanity's failure to fulfil its intrinsic responsibility towards nature, despite being an integral part of it. In the context of solastalgia, Baruah's poem resonates deeply with the contemporary environmental crisis. Pujari's use of this poem within her novel serves as a poignant reminder of the ecological imbalance perpetuated by humanity's disregard for nature. The novelist also provides a critique of the role of media and the state in addressing environmental issues through the central character of the novel. When the narrator shows her concern for the squatters by overriding her feelings for non-human creatures, a Municipal officer reminds her: "You often write about the city deforestation, the food insecurity of the wild animals and the staff. [...] What could be the reason for your changed stance?" (Pujari 20). Ranjan Das experiences the same kind of dilemma. This dilemma engenders feelings of pity within him for the displaced residents of the Panjabari Hill; but at the same time, it strikes the environmental distress within him. As a dedicated forest officer, his passion for the environment runs deep. He finds himself burdened by the distressing sight of the vast devastation and annihilation of numerous Teakwood trees within the Khanapara area, where a section of the Panjabari Hill converges with it. In the present time, he laments the transformation of a lush forest into a desolate landscape, which he refers to as a "bare hill." His anguish is further intensified by the demise of diverse wildlife species, including deer and wild rabbits. The forest, which once thrived, has now succumbed to urbanization and the

emergence of a town. Unfortunately, the indigenous people who are responsible for this destruction not only engage in illegal activities such as electricity theft but also clandestinely get involved in illicit tree felling. Ranjan Das finds himself trapped in a sense of helplessness, observing that all his fellow forest workers within the Forest Department are cognizant of these unlawful occurrences but choose to remain silent to protect their jobs. The intricate web of corruption and self-interest propagated by political parties underlies the connivance surrounding these egregious actions. The expression of his utter sense of helplessness and suffering is depicted in several dialogues exchanged between him and the central character of the novel: “We don’t have anything to do but be puppets to the government. [...] It’s no use planting trees if we can’t protect them” (Pujari 101). Ranjan Das's internal conflict showcases the emotional toll endured by individuals deeply connected to nature as they witness the deterioration and pillaging of once-vibrant ecosystems. In contrast to eco-anxiety, the novelist juxtaposes dangerous futurity, exemplified by the sentiment like “no space is left” (Pujari, 114) for wildlife and “all occupied” (114) by humans.

The Modern City and its Underbelly

In critiquing modern city life and its ugly underbelly, the narrative gradually reveals the identity of the powerful individuals who promote encroachment driven by their self-serving political ambitions. It exposes how the land mafia syndicate comprising ministers, leaders and officials operate in Assam. These people orchestrate the transfer of land belonging to indigenous minority communities into the possession of affluent businessmen, facilitating the establishment of factories, resorts, and luxury apartments. Pujari tactically shows how those in positions of power often leverage their influence to exploit the environment for their benefit. At first, these leaders rehabilitate communities like Garo, Bihari, Karbi, Bengali, and Nepali within the reserved forest land. Such individuals form an integral vote-bank for the political

leaders during the election. Apart from this, Rajbongshi informs the journalist that the Amching Sanctuary is being systematically destroyed by a nefarious group of mafia agents. This group comprises high-ranking police officials, forest administrators, revenue officers, and corrupt ministers who not only manipulate the public but also mislead them. We understand that the people who have encroached on the forest land and the hill, have been living there for the past twenty years. A sudden eviction not only makes these people homeless but also raises concerns as to why they have been allowed to live there at all. It is also been found out that these people have been provided electricity connections and other government facilities. The narrator embodies profound sympathy for those individuals who, driven by the necessity of shelter encroach upon the forested lands within the metropolis. Simultaneously, the narrative evokes a heartfelt compassion for the wildlife creatures, unable to survive without their natural habitat. Madhuri, a long-time resident of Panjabari Hill, informs her employer of an unfortunate incident that has befallen her family and her community. After having lived on the hill for over two decades, Madhuri's family, along with other inhabitants, have been instructed by the police and forest authorities to evacuate their homes. Serving as the protagonist's house help for the past ten years, Madhuri's circumstances have also affected the narrator. She states,

“For people like Madhuri, a little shelter to keep them safe and a little means to subdue the hunger is a matter of biggest concern- other things fall in a simple line.” (Pujari 36-7)

“You know Madhuri, my part-time domestic-help, she is facing a crisis [...] I am just worried what would happen to Madhuri, her children after the devastation.” (Pujari 41)

It is worth noting that in eviction drives carried out in the interest of environmental protection, it is often the underprivileged and ordinary citizens who bear the brunt. Curiously, the wealthy capitalists and influential individuals in power always seem to escape these measures in a rather enigmatic manner. A recent eviction drive that took place in Silsako Beel (Malakar), exposes that the rich and wealthy class always manage to escape the bulldozer of

the Municipality authority. The Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) initiated an eviction campaign aimed at Silsako Beel, a protected wetland in Assam. After the administration's eviction efforts, numerous families residing in the vicinity of Silsako Beel have accused the government of inhumanely evicting them without prior notice. While the eviction targeted encroachments, many individuals claimed that their lands and houses were legally obtained. A significant number of the evicted families had been living in the recently designated wetland area for several years before the enactment and passage of the Guwahati "Water Bodies" (Preservation and Conservation) Act of 2008. Presently, the evicted families are protesting to secure compensation and rehabilitation. Disturbingly, during the eviction process, a considerable number of students from these evicted families were in the middle of taking their board examinations. Furthermore, a man tragically took his own life following the demolition of his house. It is intriguing to note that the eviction drive rendered the poor homeless, yet Ginger Hotel and Ajmal Foundation remain situated on Silsako Beel. Numerous tribal organizations have staged protests to oppose the eviction, highlighting the fact that it is consistently the common people who are the easy targets of the government, while the rich and powerful are spared from eviction (Staff Reporter). The novelist highlights such oppression and class discrimination. The individuals affected by the eviction drive on Panjabari Hill are predominantly those belonging to the economically disadvantaged segment of society. Among them are people like Madhuri, Babla, Mansur, and Vishnu, who rely on daily wages to sustain themselves. Notably, these families have been residing on the hill for generations, and many possess legal documents proving their rightful ownership of the land. Representation of Piklu Deka's story is significant here. Piklu Deka, with his solitary endeavours, has meticulously preserved artefacts dating back to the Second World War and pre-independent India. His museum stands on a small hillock within Panjabari Hill. However, the imminent demolition of his museum adds another layer to the narrative. Despite appealing to the District

Commissioner, Piklu Deka received a disheartening response indicating that his plea would not be endorsed this time. Suspicions arise regarding the involvement of the son of a minister in this eviction drive, particularly concerning his refusal to acknowledge the papers provided by Piklu Deka, which demonstrate that Piklu had legally purchased the land from a Karbi individual. Many parallel incidents of this kind happen in contemporary society, however, they are suppressed by the political bigwigs. The city, which looks attractive and modern, and attracts people to come and work there, has a very macabre reality.

Conclusion

As mankind is entering into an irreversible Anthropozoic era (See Langmuir and Broecker 644), decolonial scholars like Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano have warned us that the erstwhile colonies, by replicating the colonial model of modernity and development (Mignolo 14), are continuing the structure of global coloniality. While this anthropogenic crisis has been aggravated first by the industrial revolution (Crutzen; Steffen et al 2011) and then by the great acceleration (Steffen et al 2015; Ghosh 2016) and modernization in the Global North, the precarious journey of the postcolonial nations in the same path is leading us to a fiasco (Quijano; Dwivedi). The only means to counter such perverse modernity is returning to our roots and recognising the superiority of Nature. Indian traditions have long been recognized for their profound ecological insights, with roots dating back to the Vedic period. In Assamese literature, starting from the era of Sankardeva, a strong eco-critical awareness can be observed. Sankardeva's philosophy, echoing the Upanishadic worldview, establishes a profound connection between all entities and the divine. By perceiving the presence of God (like Pantheism) in every living being, a heightened sense of realization can be achieved, potentially exerting a transformative impact on society. This perspective holds the potential to counteract the prevalent anthropocentric mindset, which bears responsibility for the ongoing ecological degradation. In the Kirtana, Sankaradeva writes: “kukkura sṛgāla gardavaro ātmān Rama/

jāniyā savāko paḍi karibā praṇāma”/ “The dog, the fox, and donkeys too have God within them, and realizing this, respect all creations” (Das 148). The novel *Iyat Ekhon Aranya Asil* beautifully weaves eco-critical perspectives through the lens of religion. The reference to ‘Chaat puja’, ‘prasad’, ‘diyas’, and the portrayal of Madhuri as a devout believer in the power of religious practices offers some ray of hope. By showcasing her unwavering faith, the author effectively highlights the significant role religion can play in shaping the characters’ relationship with nature and their environment. One notable symbolism in the novel is the preservation of the old banyan tree amidst the construction of houses by the people residing on the hill. This act represents their unwavering trust in religion and their recognition of the tree’s spiritual significance. This ancient banyan tree serves as a powerful symbol of unity among the community. Its presence reminds the people of their shared heritage and deep-rooted faith, serving as a focal point that binds them together. The tree becomes a physical manifestation of their collective consciousness, transcending societal divisions and fostering a sense of harmony among the individuals residing in the area. Furthermore, the portrayal of religious faith in the context of the banyan tree emphasizes the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. It underscores the belief that religious practices, such as offering prayers and performing rituals, can foster a sense of spiritual connection to the environment. This steadfast devotion to their religious belief is a residual longing for the past connection to the land and nature that has been disrupted with the inception of modernity.

Coupled with this, the novel also simultaneously explores the younger generation’s strong inclination to reconnect with nature. Motivated by witnessing the devastating impacts of modernity on forests and water bodies, Chanda, a spirited and energetic character, is driven by a deep desire to protect and restore the natural world. She voluntarily returns from Bengaluru to Assam for this cause. Collaborating with her peers from an environmental NGO called “Mother Nature” (Pujari 192), Chanda endeavours to halt the illegal landfilling of the beels in

Assam. Her urge to keep the ecology safe finds its evidence through these lines: “She (Chanda) earnestly desires that she and Raghu stay here and work for the state to save its forests, the beels, the animals and the migratory birds of the state” (Pujari 200). The narrative concerning Chanda's character in the novel suggests the pivotal role of eco-consciousness in mitigating the effects of environmental damage. The author employs fictional figures like Chanda, Raghu, and Tanmoy to inculcate environmental consciousness within society and urge individuals to preserve the ecology. The survival of humanity is intrinsically dependent on the natural world, as its absence reduces humankind to mere fossils. Notably, the inclusion of Madhuri's holding a plant (Jamun tree), captures symbolic significance within the context of ecoconsciousness as a solution. This indicates the beginning of a journey towards exiting the Anthropocene and entering the symbiocene (See Albrecht & Horn). The Symbiocene represents a profound aspect of ecological thinking that transcends the boundaries of the Anthropocene era. It envisions a time when humanity acknowledges and embraces its interconnectedness with all living beings and ecosystems, fostering mutual flourishing. The essence of the Symbiocene lies in its concern for the well-being of the natural environment. This recognizes the imperative need for a fundamental shift in human perception and understanding of the natural world. They challenge the prevailing anthropocentric worldview that treats nature merely as a resource to be exploited, advocating instead for a more holistic and ecocentric approach. The novel concludes with a poignant note, underscoring the urgent need to reclaim a greener future for the Earth: “My hope for a better, greener future got stronger [...] Long live this feeling – Long live the earth” (Pujari 240).

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