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Poetics Of The Living Earth: Environmental Humanism In Northeast Indian Poetry

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between environment, culture, and poetic imagination in the works of Mamang Dai, Nini Lungalang, and select other poets from Northeast India. Framed within the interdisciplinary context of Environmental Humanities, it examines how these poets reflect ecological consciousness, sustainable ethics, and a profound sense of place. The study argues that their poetry not only captures the natural beauty and socio-political tensions of the region but also articulates an environmental ethic rooted in indigenous knowledge, memory, and cultural belonging. The approach combines close textual analysis with theoretical perspectives from ecocriticism and postcolonial environmental studies. By doing so, the paper illuminates how poetic voices from the Northeast critique modernity's extractive ethos and affirm alternative models of sustainability that arise from affective ties to land, community, and tradition.

Keywords: *Environmental Humanities, Sustainability, Northeast Indian Poetry, Ecopoetics, Indigenous Ethics.*

INTRODUCTION

Environmental Humanism in the poetry of Northeast India reflects an intricate interplay between ecological consciousness, cultural identity, and indigenous epistemologies. Rooted in the verdant landscapes, animistic traditions, and complex socio- political realities of the region, poets such as Mamang Dai and Nini Lungalang articulate a profound environmental ethos. This ethos transcends the conventional romanticisation of nature commonly found in classical or pastoral poetry. Instead, their works invoke a deep, often melancholic meditation on ecological loss, cultural displacement, sustainability, memory, and the violence inflicted upon both the human body and the land. Their lyricism offers compelling insights into a relational worldview, one in which nature is not a backdrop for human drama but a co-participant in shaping historical, spiritual, and cultural consciousness. Mamang Dai, a distinguished literary figure from Arunachal Pradesh and recipient of the Padma Shri, vividly captures the organic bond between her community and their physical surroundings. Her poetic collections such as *The River Poems* (2004) and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014) offer poignant reflections on an endangered way of life and a rapidly transforming ecological consciousness.

In her widely discussed poem *Small Towns and the River*, Dai writes, *"...the river has a soul. / It holds its breath / waiting for something to happen."* This evocative line is more than metaphor—it represents a paradigmatic shift towards recognising nature as sentient, spiritual, and intersubjective. In Dai's poetic landscape, rivers and forests possess memory, agency, and emotion. They are repositories of ancient knowledge and trauma, sites of communion and resistance. This approach aligns with Val Plumwood's critique of the Cartesian separation of human and non-human worlds. Plumwood (2002) argues for the recognition of "nature-as-agent," challenging Enlightenment assumptions of human superiority over nature.

In Dai's poetic universe, the landscape is more than terrain—it is a spiritual cartography. Her river is a dynamic figure of life and death, embodying both continuity and rupture. Edward Casey's theory of "place-memory" becomes relevant here; for Dai, the river holds the collective memory of the community, one that surpasses the boundaries of individual remembrance (Casey, 2000). These memories are not static but constantly revised, as landscapes shift under the pressure of development and modernisation. Dai often invokes the loss of myth, the intrusion of roadways, and the emergence of modern infrastructure as threats to this fragile ecological consciousness. By contrast, Nini Lungalang, a prominent poet and educator from Nagaland, writes in a starkly minimalist style that distills meaning through silence, suggestion, and spatial form. In her haunting poem *Dust*, she depicts the aftermath of violence with painful clarity: *"A young man / was gunned down / at the market square, / and the dust / raised its voice in protest."* In this powerful stanza, Lungalang reanimates the earth as a moral witness. The dust becomes a metaphor for enduring grief, embedded memory, and quiet resistance. Her poetic form, spare and precise, demands close reading and reveals how trauma reverberates through both body and land.

Lungalang's style exemplifies what Rob Nixon (2011) has termed "slow violence"—the unseen, insidious forms of environmental degradation and socio-political oppression that occur incrementally. The poetic dust becomes emblematic of the layered sediment of such violence—violence that is both environmental and epistemic. Her work also resonates with Sara Ahmed's concept of "affective economies," in which emotion sticks to objects, words, and places, thereby generating fields of meaning (Ahmed, 2004). In Lungalang's work, seemingly neutral images—wind, rafters, dust—are laden with affect and history, subtly critiquing modernity's detachment from place and memory.

Despite their aesthetic differences, both Dai and Lungalang engage deeply with what Lawrence Buell (1995) terms the "environmental imagination"—a literary mode in which the non-human world is not a passive background but a central character in human narratives. In *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, Dai elegises a lost world: *"Roads where none existed / made us / forget the journey."* The imposition of linear progress—manifested in roads, bridges, and cities—erases organic pathways of cultural transmission. The journey becomes abstract, severed from its ecological context. This sentiment echoes Arundhati Roy's critique of development as displacement: the erasure of traditional ways of knowing, living, and moving (Roy, 1999). Similarly, Lungalang's poem *Going Home* meditates on estrangement from nature. She writes:

"The wind / still sings in the rafters. / But it sings / a different tune." The changing song of the wind becomes a symbol for dissonance—a poetic expression of the alienation brought by colonialism, modernity, and cultural erosion. This subtle sonic imagery can be interpreted through Kate Rigby's framework of "ecopoetics of mourning," which addresses the emotive power of poetry to register ecological and cultural loss (Rigby, 2004).

What is particularly striking is how both poets integrate indigenous worldviews into their environmental ethics. Mamang Dai's poetry invokes tribal cosmology, where the natural world is alive with mythic resonance. Her poetic voice is deeply shaped by oral tradition, and her works often reference spirits, forest gods, and ancestral stories. Nini Lungalang, too, grounds her work in the rhythms of oral storytelling and local knowledge systems, though her focus is more anthropological than mythic. These approaches correspond with Eduardo Kohn's anthropological proposition in *How Forests Think* (2013), where he suggests that forests—and by extension, non-human life—possess their own semiotic agency.

Furthermore, the gendered dimensions of their ecological imagination deserve attention. Both poets write from a position of indigenous femininity, and their work can be read through the lens of ecofeminism. Vandana Shiva (1989) emphasises the interconnectedness of ecological degradation and patriarchal oppression, proposing a "feminine principle" grounded in care, interdependence, and sustainability. Dai's "crone of the forest" and Lungalang's resilient landscapes reflect this ecofeminist ethic. Their poetic worlds are not spaces of domination but of nurturing and endurance—spaces where healing is possible but never easy.

Other Northeast Indian poets such as Temsula Ao and Mona Zote also enrich this environmental discourse. Ao's poem *The Old Story Teller* demonstrates how landscape is preserved not only in memory but also in myth: *"The trees, the hills, the streams all know / how the stories have shaped the people."* This is a profound recognition of how nature and culture co-evolve. Mona Zote's *Dream of the Red Road* similarly explores the longing for rootedness in a disappearing world. These poets collectively represent what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) describe as "postcolonial ecocriticism," wherein local environmental experiences are intricately entangled

with histories of colonisation, militarisation, and marginalisation.

In comparative perspective, Mamang Dai's poetry may be said to offer lyrical cosmology, weaving together myth, memory, and environmental ethics. Lungalang, in contrast, writes with economical poignancy, capturing the slow ruptures of modernization through minimalist aesthetics. Yet both share a profound commitment to place and an unwavering attentiveness to the moral dimensions of human-nature relations.

In sum, Mamang Dai and Nini Lungalang contribute significantly to the field of Environmental Humanism by foregrounding indigenous relationships with nature in poetic form. Their works complicate dominant ecological narratives and demand that we take seriously the epistemologies rooted in oral tradition, spiritual ecology, and gendered resistance. Their poems are not only literary artefacts but ethical gestures—resonant with care, remembrance, and an urgent call to rethink our role in the more-than-human world. Their verses affirm that sustainability is not a technocratic aspiration but a deeply cultural and spiritual practice. In listening to rivers that breathe, dust that protests, and winds that remember, we are reminded that the earth speaks—and that poetry, in its finest form, teaches us how to listen.

Temsula Ao, one of the most formidable poetic voices from Nagaland, extends the environmental discourse of Northeast India through her profound engagement with memory, myth, and place. Her poetry seamlessly fuses oral tradition with a profound ecological awareness. In poems such as *The Old Story Teller* and *Stone People from Lungterok*, Ao does not merely preserve ancestral tales; she reactivates them as living archives of environmental wisdom. These poems establish a continuum between land and lore, in which the human and the non-human are deeply intertwined.

In *The Old Story Teller*, Ao writes: *"The trees, the hills, the streams all know / how the stories have shaped the people."* This line encapsulates her eco-cultural philosophy. Nature here is not passive or external; it is a witness, a partner, and a silent narrator of history. Her vision resonates strongly with the work of anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, who in *How Forests Think* (2013) argues that non-human entities—trees, rivers, animals—are capable of semiosis, meaning-making systems that transcend human cognition. Ao's poetry implicitly acknowledges this, allowing ecological systems to narrate and respond.

Ao's "Stone People from Lungterok" invokes ancestral emergence myths rooted in the Ao Naga cosmology. The people, it is said, emerged from stone—a detail that metaphorically bridges geological time with cultural history. The poem, through its invocation of stone as origin, defies the Cartesian dualism that separates nature from humanity. Here, nature is lineage. This mirrors what Val Plumwood (2002) has described as the "relational ontology" of indigenous knowledge, where the boundary between person and place is not rigid but fluid and reciprocal.

What distinguishes the environmental humanism of Northeast Indian poetry, particularly in the works of Ao, Mamang Dai, and Nini Lungalang, is its indigenous epistemology—a mode of knowing that refuses the colonial partitioning of nature and culture. These poets do not romanticise the environment as an idyllic escape, nor do they treat it merely as a symbolic vehicle for personal introspection. Instead, they construct poetic spaces in which nature is entangled with lived histories, moral memory, and communal identity. This is in contrast to mainstream Indian environmental poetry, which often privileges aestheticised landscapes over culturally embedded ecologies.

The ecofeminist framework is particularly salient here. Vandana Shiva's foundational work *Staying Alive* (1989) argues that indigenous women often embody a relational and caretaking model of environmental ethics. The poetry of Ao, Dai, and Lungalang is imbued with such values—care, interdependence, resilience—but also reflects the scars of exploitation, both ecological and cultural. Ao's storytelling women are not merely custodians of the past; they are also ethical agents confronting a wounded present. Their voices speak not just for the preservation of biodiversity, but for the preservation of worldviews endangered by modernity and militarisation.

The trauma of political unrest—insurgency, armed conflict, and systemic displacement—pervades this literature. As Rob Nixon (2011) has argued, environmental degradation in postcolonial contexts often occurs through "slow violence"—violence that is incremental, invisible, and disproportionately affects the marginalised. Northeast Indian poetry becomes a site of resistance against such violence. The land is not just the setting for conflict; it is an active casualty. In Ao's work, this is expressed through the silence of hills that "remember," through rivers that "turn away," and through forests that "mourn." Mamang Dai similarly captures the devastation wrought by development projects—roads, bridges, urban encroachments—which she presents as disorienting to the tribal sense of place. Her poem *The Missing Link* includes the haunting lines: *"Roads where*

none existed / made us /forget the journey." Here, the loss is epistemic as well as environmental. The road—ostensibly a symbol of connectivity—becomes a metaphor for cultural severance. It maps over indigenous routes, replaces embodied knowledge with cartographic abstraction, and replaces communal rhythms with the noise of the state.

In recent years, younger poets such as Mona Zote from Mizoram have continued and deepened this discourse. Zote's poetry brings a lyrical sophistication that expands the thematic horizon of environmental humanism. In her poem *Dream of the Red Road*, she writes:*"I will dream of the road / that once knew my name."* This is a profound articulation of eco-cultural alienation. The road, once familiar, is now spectral—its memory severed by erasure and imposition. The poem reflects on a vanishing world where spatial memory is undone by state power, market logic, and urban sprawl. It gestures to what Kate Rigby (2004) terms the "ecopoetics of mourning"—the elegiac mode through which ecological and cultural losses are registered and mourned.

Zote's work also demonstrates how spiritual geography and political cartography collide. The "red road" is at once a physical path, a metaphor for personal and communal continuity, and an elegy for the obliteration of ancestral routes. This desire to re-map and re-member is central to environmental humanism in the Northeast. It is not merely a call to conserve but to restore—to reconnect narratives that have been interrupted, to walk again the paths that carried stories, and to recover the ecologies of meaning buried under the debris of modernisation. These poets do not preach sustainability; they enact it through form, symbol, and tone. Their metaphors are not ornamental but functional; their cadences echo oral traditions; their silences are densely eloquent. The land in their poems is sentient, ancestral, and ethical. It cries, remembers, retaliates, and forgives. In doing so, it displaces the Enlightenment notion of an inert, exploitable Earth.

As Lawrence Buell (1995) explains in *The Environmental Imagination*, literature can give voice to the voiceless, especially in the context of ecological injustice. The poetry of Ao, Dai, Lungalang, and Zote does precisely this. It speaks for the rivers diverted, the hills desecrated, and the stories forgotten. In its lyricism, the region finds a form of reparative speech.

Ursula Heise (2008) has argued that cultural narratives are essential to any serious conception of sustainability. Technical and policy solutions alone cannot address the cultural disorientation that accompanies ecological crisis. These Northeast Indian poets offer narratives that are deeply situated in place, time, and tradition. Their poems serve as affective archives—repositories not just of information but of emotion, memory, and moral insight.

These poets also disrupt the hierarchy between oral and written forms. Temsula Ao's storyteller figure is not merely a character but a metaphor for the *method* of ecological knowledge transmission. In this sense, their environmental humanism is deeply methodological—it privileges listening, storytelling, and non-linear thinking over abstraction and empiricism. Such an approach resonates with postcolonial ecocriticism's call to recognise alternative epistemologies (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010).

To view this poetry solely as cultural expression is to miss its critical function. It is a counter-discourse that resists erasure and demands attention to the moral costs of so- called progress. Whether in Dai's rivers that breathe, Lungalang's dust that remembers, Ao's stones that birth ancestors, or Zote's roads that forget names—there is a persistent critique of dislocation, fragmentation, and epistemological violence.

This body of work helps us reconceive sustainability not as a project of conservation but as one of continuity—of stories, identities, relationships, and rhythms that have sustained communities for centuries. In the face of extractive development and homogenising modernity, the poets of Northeast India offer a radical alternative: a vision of the earth not as resource but as *relation*.

The environmental humanism of Northeast Indian poetry offers a powerful and necessary intervention in global ecocritical discourse. It challenges the dominant binaries that have long structured Western epistemologies and practices—nature versus culture, traditional versus modern, subject versus object—offering instead a radically relational worldview grounded in indigenous cosmologies and lived ecological realities. In the works of Mamang Dai, Nini Lungalang, Temsula Ao, Mona Zote, and others, we encounter a poetics that affirms interdependence, memory, and the more-than-human world as co- constitutive of meaning, survival, and resistance.

At its heart, this poetics insists that the environment is not an externality to human life but is instead embedded in the very fabric of language, identity, and community. The rivers, forests, winds, and stones in their poems are not literary ornaments or metaphors— they are presences, agents, and participants in historical processes and

personal subjectivities. In this way, Northeast Indian poetry aligns closely with Val Plumwood's (2002) argument that environmental justice demands the dismantling of hierarchical dualisms and the recognition of non-human agency.

This conclusion seeks to synthesise and critically deepen the insights explored throughout this discourse. What does it mean to reimagine sustainability not as technocratic management but as ethical intimacy with the world we inhabit? What does a poetics of ecological entanglement tell us about resistance, memory, and survival in a region often marginalised in mainstream Indian literary and environmental narratives? And how do these poetic voices—born of oral traditions, animistic worldviews, and geopolitical precarity—reshape our understanding of environmental humanism?

To begin with, these poets expose the epistemological violence inherent in colonial and capitalist frameworks of development. As Arundhati Roy (1999) has famously remarked, development has often been a euphemism for displacement, disenfranchisement, and destruction. In the context of Northeast India, the incursion of roads, dams, military camps, and mining operations has not only disrupted ecosystems but has also severed the delicate web of cultural memory and ecological belonging. Mamang Dai's poem *The Missing Link* captures this poignantly: *"Roads where none existed / made us / forget the journey."* The journey here is not merely physical; it is ontological—a path of knowing, remembering, and being. By building over indigenous routes, the state not only alters the terrain but also erases the embodied knowledge that those paths carried. Dai's lyricism becomes a counter-mapping—a form of spatial resistance and reclamation.

In a similar vein, Nini Lungalang's minimalist poetics speaks to what Rob Nixon (2011) describes as "slow violence"—a form of environmental harm that is gradual, invisible, and disproportionately affects the vulnerable. Her poem *Dust*, in which the earth raises its voice in protest after a killing, resonates with Nixon's call to make visible the violences that escape media spectacle and policy discourse. The dust is not just a physical trace of the dead; it is an ethical witness, a mnemonic presence that refuses erasure.

Temsula Ao's work takes this further by reactivating oral traditions as repositories of ecological ethics. In *The Old Story Teller*, nature itself is remembered as a narrator: *"The trees, the hills, the streams all know / how the stories have shaped the people."* In this formulation, landscape is not merely the backdrop to human stories—it is the condition of possibility for those stories. Ao's poetry reminds us that environmental loss is also the loss of meaning-making systems, of worldviews rooted in reciprocal relations with the land. In this regard, her work echoes the concerns of postcolonial ecocritics such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010), who argue that environmental destruction in the Global South is not just material but symbolic—it entails the erasure of indigenous ways of knowing.

Mona Zote's *Dream of the Red Road* offers another register of this loss. Her lament for a vanishing road—"I will dream of the road / that once knew my name"—is not a longing for infrastructure but for continuity. The road here becomes a ghostly trace of identity, history, and belonging that is being effaced by the brute machinery of development and modernity. Zote's lines are haunted by what Kate Rigby (2004) calls "the ecopoetics of mourning"—a mode of writing that registers the grief of ecological and cultural dislocation.

All these poets share a deep commitment to what might be termed relational ecology. This is an ethic and aesthetic that sees land not as resource but as kin; not as property but as presence. It draws upon indigenous philosophies that are often misread as pre-modern or mystical but are, in fact, sophisticated systems of ecological stewardship and moral reasoning. Eduardo Kohn (2013), in his anthropological study *How Forests Think*, argues for the recognition of non-human semiosis—trees, animals, and rivers as thinking beings. The poetry of Northeast India offers ample textual evidence of this worldview.

Moreover, these poets do not separate environmental crisis from political violence. The military occupation of certain regions in the Northeast, the displacement of communities for infrastructure projects, and the silencing of dissent are all entangled with ecological degradation. Their poems function as what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls "affective economies"—circuits of emotion that accumulate around bodies, places, and histories. When Mamang Dai writes of a river holding its breath, or when Lungalang describes wind singing a different tune, these are not just atmospheric devices; they are expressions of felt dissonance, of emotional disjunction between people and place.

Importantly, this environmental humanism is not sentimental. It does not offer false solace or easy redemption. These are not poems of return but of reckoning. They do not yearn for a pristine past but confront a wounded

present with clarity, care, and poetic precision. Their commitment to sustainability is not grounded in conservationist clichés but in moral continuity—in the refusal to sever the ties between land and language, between body and belonging.

As Ursula Heise (2008) has argued, any viable model of sustainability must include cultural narratives that articulate how people relate to their environments. Without such narratives, sustainability becomes a technocratic exercise, stripped of affect and community. The poetry of Northeast India provides precisely these narratives—tender, fierce, elegiac, and enduring. It models what Naomi Klein (2014) might call "the story we need to tell ourselves" in order to survive not just physically but spiritually in a time of ecological crisis.

What makes this body of work especially urgent is its intersectionality. It is simultaneously a poetry of gender, region, race, environment, and memory. It addresses not one injustice but a constellation of interrelated harms. Its environmental humanism is not an abstract ethic but a grounded praxis—rooted in specific geographies, languages, and histories. These poets demonstrate that to speak of the environment in Northeast India is to speak of insurgency, displacement, oral history, and the politics of representation.

They also offer an important challenge to the mainstream Indian literary canon, which has often marginalised or tokenised voices from the Northeast. By centring indigenous experiences and ecological epistemologies, they decolonise both space and form. Their use of orality, myth, fragmentation, and landscape disrupts the narrative realism that dominates metropolitan Indian literature. In doing so, they expand the very possibilities of what Indian poetry can be and what it can do.

To conclude, the environmental humanism expressed in the poetry of Northeast India is not simply a thematic preoccupation; it is a philosophical orientation. It resists the instrumentalisation of nature, the abstraction of culture, and the silencing of memory. It affirms a world in which rivers remember, dust protests, trees narrate, and roads mourn. Through their lyricism, these poets not only map terrains of ecological beauty but also expose the violence that renders them fragile. They compel us to reimagine sustainability not as policy but as poiesis—as a creative, ethical, and intimate mode of inhabiting the world.

In this poetic reimagining, sustainability is not a checklist but a relationship; not a solution but a sensibility. It is the ability to live with land, loss, and longing in ways that honour both fragility and resilience. The poets of Northeast India do not offer utopias, but they do offer songs—songs of sorrow, survival, and sometimes, hope. And in those songs, we may find the beginnings of a more humane and sustainable future.

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