

Culture, Memory, and Ecological Lamentation: An Ecocritical Reading of *Cry of a Dying River*

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Abstract

Rivers have long functioned as sustainers of civilizations and cultures. Beyond this material role, they also carry the memory and bear witness to the lives of the communities that dwell along their banks, shaping and being shaped by those cultures as inseparable participants in their histories. In the poetry collection *Cry of a Dying River*, Kshetrimayum foregrounds the Nambul River of Manipur, drawing attention to its ecological degradation while simultaneously reflecting on the region's cultural, social, and political transformations. Through this portrayal, he establishes a parallel between ecological decline and the erosion of cultural life. This paper examines how the river operates as a repository of cultural memory and how its pollution and neglect give rise to ecological lamentation. Drawing upon ecocriticism, memory studies, and hydro-ecological perspectives, the study argues that Kshetrimayum's poetry performs an act of environmental witnessing, where poetic lament resists ecological erasure and exposes the cultural amnesia accompanying modern development. By reading the river as both ecological victim and cultural archive, the paper situates *Cry of a Dying River* within the larger discourse of environmental humanities and Northeast Indian poetry on ecology.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecological lamentation, Nambul river, Memory, Cultural erosion

Introduction

Environmental crisis is a global phenomenon which is manifesting in many forms, affecting different parts of the environment or the ecosystem. The environmental crisis since the twentieth century has prompted literary scholars to revisit texts that foreground human–nature relationships. Ecocriticism, as a critical framework, interrogates how literature represents ecological concerns and challenges anthropocentric modes of thinking. Rivers are essential components of the ecosystem, whose continuous flow sustains and circulates life within the ecosphere. Throughout history, rivers have served not only as sources of sustenance but also as silent witnesses to the rise and development of civilizations across the world. Consequently, literary traditions from diverse cultures frequently reflect and foreground the vital role rivers play in shaping human life, memory, and cultural practices. Within the context of Northeast India, rivers occupy a central place in cultural life, sustaining agriculture,

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livelihoods, rituals, and collective memory. However, rapid urbanization, pollution, and developmental process have deteriorated the conditions of many rivers and transformed many of these rivers into sites of ecological trauma. In Northeast India, numerous rivers are gradually deteriorating in terms of water quality, ecological balance, and landscape integrity due to increasing pollution and human intervention. As a result, many riverine writings emerge from these states, reflecting cultural associations and ecological concerns. Kshetrimayum's *Cry of a Dying River* emerges from this context as a poignant poetic response to riverine degradation in Manipur. *Cry of a Dying River* is a collection of one hundred and one poems that is dedicated to the Nambul river. The collection does not merely address environmental damage but it also mourns the loss of a cultural and ethical relationship between humans and the river.

This paper examines how Kshetrimayum's poetry articulates ecological lamentation by interweaving the image of the dying river with cultural memory, nostalgia, environmental ethics, and a sense of communal responsibility. It argues that the river functions not merely as a natural entity but as a cultural archive whose degradation traces to collective ecological ignorance and negligence. By employing an ecocritical framework, the study demonstrates how poetic lament becomes a mode of environmental witnessing that resists ecological erasure and critiques anthropocentric forms of modernity. The paper further situates *Cry of a Dying River* within the emerging discourse of riverine literature, highlighting its contribution to Northeast Indian eco-poetry and the broader environmental humanities.

The Nambul River: A Geographical, Cultural and Ecological Overview

Nambul is one of the major rivers of Manipur that stretches up to 62.70 km in total length. It originates from the Kangchup Hill Ranges, passes through the heart of the state capital Imphal and finally flows into the Loktak lake ("Nambul: River of Sorrow"). The course of the Nambul River traverses several regions of Imphal West district and Bishnupur district. Within the capital city of Imphal, it flows past the Khwairamband Market, one of the most venerated and vibrant public spaces in Manipur, renowned for its historical, economic, and cultural significance. For generations, the Nambul River has functioned as a vital source of livelihood and economic sustenance while simultaneously shaping the cultural life of the communities settled along its banks. The Nambul River is home to a diverse range of fish species, including endemic and threatened varieties. People of the state living at the bank, near and around the Nambul river depends on these species of fish for food and economic reasons. It had long been a perennial source of usable water for the people living nearby. It provides water for irrigation, domestic use, and supports local economy from fishing which is crucial for community livelihoods.

The river constitutes an integral part of the ecological system of the Manipur Valley. It contributes in replenishing Loktak Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Northeast India, and helps sustain the unique *phumdis* (floating islands) ecosystem, which is vital for the survival of the endangered Sangai deer. The river and its connected wetlands also serve as habitats for a wide range of amphibians, fish, reptiles, and bird species, thereby supporting a rich regional biodiversity. The river maintains a close and enduring relationship with the everyday lives of the people of Manipur, fostering systems of dependency that extend to cultural practices, beliefs, and local narratives, particularly in the regions through which it flows. The river is also

a part of tales, myths and folklores of the people of Manipur. Thus, the Nambul river occupies a special place in the geographical, social, historical, cultural and ecological landscape of Manipur.

Ecocriticism, Hydro-ecocriticism and Nambul

Ecocriticism, as articulated by scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and other, emphasizes the interconnectedness of literary texts and the physical environment. Recent developments in environmental humanities and ecocriticism covers and extended the critical literary engagement to the water bodies particularly oceans. A new approach in ecocriticism relating to water or the water bodies in general has been getting popular since early 2010s. It comes as an extension to “Blue Humanities” which is a subfield of the environmental humanities that derives from the belated recognition of the predominantly terrestrial focus of ecocriticism from its inception and well into the first decade of the twenty-first century (Kluwick 1). This approach began to be used under the popularized term called the “Hydro-criticism” which covers water in all forms and sources.

This extended approach recognizes rivers as active agents rather than passive backdrops. In *Cry of a Dying River*, Kshetrimayum personifies the Nambul River by giving it a first-person voice, thereby granting the river agency rather than portraying it as a passive component of the ecosystem. Through this narrative strategy, the river articulates its own perspectives, emotions, and suffering directly, enabling readers to engage with the lived experience of the Nambul from a first-person narrative consciousness. Memory studies further enrich this approach by viewing landscapes as repositories of collective remembrance. Rivers, in particular, function as “sites of memory,” carrying traces of everyday practices, seasonal rhythms, and cultural values. When rivers are polluted or destroyed, what is lost is not only biodiversity but also a shared ecological consciousness. In *Cry of a Dying River*, Kshetrimayum positions memory as a counterforce to ecological erasure.

The Nambul River: A Witness of the Socio-Political and Ecological Realities of Manipur

All the 101 poems in Kshetrimayum’s *Cry of a Dying River* opens with the refrain, “I am no longer the river I was once”. This line is repeatedly echoed throughout the collection, functioning as a powerful marker of loss and transformation. The refrain evokes the river’s consciousness, allowing it to narrate not only its own ecological decline but also the layered historical experiences of Manipur. In the very first poem of the collection which is titled, “Where Have All The Rivers Gone”, the Nambul river reminisces the bygone time when the river used to have full flowing fresh water, making the banks and nearby lands fertile. It reminisces the rich diversity of fishes it used to carry mentioning popularly wanted fish like Pengba-Tharaaks, Ngatons, Ngarois, Nganaps, Ngakijous and Ngaseps (Kshetrimayum 19) and also about the different species of birds that are part of the Nambul ecosystem adorning the landscape of the river with their music and avian presence (32). In the poem “Poetry of Protest,” the river speaks as a witness to the sins, crimes, and violence that engulf the valley in the wake of insurgency. Through the voice and agency of the Nambul River, Kshetrimayum recalls these experiences as acts of witnessing and articulates a strong protest against the

disturbing socio-political conditions produced by insurgent violence, as reflected in the following lines:

The river that was/is living witness to
 Acts of terror and terrorism
 Telling tales of forced widows
 Oh lord of the land! I am in protest mode
 (Kshetrimayum 23)

Kshetrimayum evokes a vision of Manipur's past as a landscape largely unmarked by the violence of modern political and technological systems. In the poem "Politics of Polluting Environment," he critiques the intrusion of modern political structures, reading them as mechanisms of corruption that disturb both social and ecological harmony. The poem also registers the circulation of modern weaponry within state apparatuses and insurgent groups, linking technological militarization to the escalation of human violence. From an eco-critical and political-ecological perspective, these developments signify not merely political disorder but a deeper ecological damage, giving rise to disruptions such as bandhs and blockades phenomena that have become recurrent plagues in contemporary Manipur.

In the poem "You Can Build Another Taj Mahal," Kshetrimayum critiques the moral degradation in politics and its adverse impact on the state. The poem addresses a recurring pattern in Manipur's political culture, particularly the transformation of wealthy contractors into politicians who exploit ordinary citizens for personal gain. Kshetrimayum also draws attention to the opportunism of politicians who frequently shift party affiliations to secure political advantage, often disregarding the interests of the people they claim to represent. In addition, the poem exposes the duplicity of certain social workers and civil society actors whose double standards contribute to social distrust. These forms of ethical decay are articulated through the agency and perspective of the Nambul River, which itself becomes a silent victim of exploitation at the hands of hypocritical human actors. The poem strongly addresses the cases of the Ithai Barrage and the Loktak project (Kshetrimayum 25). It openly criticizes political leaders and policymakers for their deliberate ignorance and blindness to the suffering of the rivers, and it calls for the removal and dismantling of these dams. The poem also addresses the suffering of people who lost their land and *loufams* [paddy fields] to politicians and policymakers on the promise of compensation promises that, for many, were never fulfilled. Kshetrimayum employs clear and direct language to articulate these concerns, making his protest against such environmentally destructive interventions unmistakable. Kshetrimayum also critiques the struggle for political and bureaucratic power within systems of governance and administration, comparing this internal contest for authority to the historical "Battle of Imphal." He remarks that the former is fiercer than the latter (Kshetrimayum 28), thereby underscoring the greater moral and social destructiveness of contemporary power struggles. He also addresses the consequences of the imposition of AFSPA, which led to the erosion of civilian rights, instances of sexual violence against women, and cases of enforced disappearances in the state (29). The 2019 case of the murder of Ningthoujam Babysana Chanu

in the girl's hostel of Standard Robarth School is also reflected in one of the poems as a testimony of the violent reality that plagues the state (106). These realities reflect the disturbing social, political and insurgent conditions that marked Manipur from the 1980s through the 2010s. While addressing both historical and contemporary events, Kshetrimayum employs the agency of the Nambul River as a credible and deserving witness, using its testimony to draw parallels between these human conflicts and broader patterns of ecological neglect and environmental decline.

Nambul River, The Carrier of Culture and Memories

The Nambul River does not merely carry the water that sustains parts of Manipur's ecology, people, landscapes, wetlands, and the iconic Loktak Lake; it also bears and conveys the cultural memory of Manipur, flowing as a living witness to the region's evolving cultural practices and transformations across generations. Kshetrimayum weaves these cultural elements from different times and generations in his poems through the consciousness, perspective and voice of Nambul river. Most of the poems in the collection talk about certain memory that remain significant in the history of Manipur. The birth of the famous Ima Keithel, or Nupi Keithel known worldwide for being one of its kind and run entirely by the women of Manipur is remembered through the memory of the Nambul River, beside which the market was built. The poem "Of Nambul and Ima Keithel" alludes to feminism by foregrounding the early presence of women's empowerment in Manipur, while also integrating images of a pristine landscape from a time when both Ima Keithel and the Nambul River existed at their fullest vitality. The practice of *Hi-Honba*, closely associated with the Nambul River, is recalled with a strong sense of nostalgia and loss, as the river on which wooden boats or canoes called 'hi' once glided can no longer be described as clean or pristine as it was in the past. Kshetrimayum gives a picturesque beauty of the practice of *Hi-Hona* where these boats canoe up against the stream from Thanga-Karang in Loktak to Thong-Nambonbi in Imphal. The riverbank imageries of *Nga-Kaba*, *Nga-Chaba*, and *Een-Chingbis* represent indigenous fishing practices and techniques unique to Manipur (Kshetrimayum 20). These images evoke the cultural, traditional, economic, and ecological landscapes of the state and are recalled in the poem "Where Have the Rowable Nambul Gone!" Kshetrimayum once again employs the technique of giving agency and voice to the Nambul River, presenting it as the most credible witness to these cultural scenes and enabling it to articulate their significance with authenticity and clarity. The ritual of offering *Langban-Tarpon* is also mentioned in the same poem (Kshetrimayum 20). These cultural practices and rituals are closely associated with rivers, through which Kshetrimayum highlights the eco-cultural relationship that many people of Manipur share with the Nambul River and other rivers in the region.

The poem, "Of River and Children" reminisces memories of children back in the days when life in Manipur was simpler and untouched by modern-development. The innocence and simple life of those days which revolves around the Nambul river and other rivers is elegantly yet mournfully expressed in these lines:

Children of all ages and creed

Playing flying kites and 'Nungsit Pubi' with ingenuity

Along the luscious green fields by the river banks

The river that never had enough

Of the sanguine sound of children's laughter

Oh children of the fertile land!

Where have all the laughter gone?

I am no longer the river I was once

The river that laments for all the children

No longer seen in the open playing field

(Kshetrimayum 42)

The way cultural memories are evoked alongside the ecological associations with the Nambul river and rivers in general implies the inseparable human-river relationship. Here, once again, the Nambul River is endowed with the agency of witnessing and critique, allowing it to reflect upon the changing cultural and ecological landscape that surrounds it.

Moving through both time and space, the river carries layered cultural memories shaped by ritual practices, communal life, political conflict, and ecological change. It functions as an overseeing entity that witness and records history and memories of all kinds, revealing the deep entanglement between these memories and ecological concerns. By giving the river agency and voice, Kshetrimayum challenges anthropocentric narratives and reimagines the river as an ethical witness whose testimony demands responsibility, care, and ecological accountability.

Ecological Lamentation and Poetic Witnessing

Lamentation is a dominant and recurring feature in *Cry of a Dying River*. Kshetrimayum mourns the suffering of Nambul river, employing imagery of decay, silence, and pain. This lament is not merely nostalgic; it functions as an ethical critique of human apathy and environmental exploitation. The lamentation comes in comparison of two different times; one when the river was in its full vitality and the other when human induced pollution and negligence have destroyed the integrity of the river. Through witnessing, observing and comparison, the ecological decline of the Nambul river is presented to the readers with cultural context. The "cry" of the river becomes a moral appeal, demanding attention and responsibility. In this sense, Kshetrimayum's poetry aligns with Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence". By slow violence Nixon means a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all (18). It draws attention to gradual environmental destruction that unfolds outside the spectacle of immediate catastrophe. Kshetrimayum's lamentation, voiced through the Nambul River, powerfully challenges an anthropocentric worldview. This critique is directly articulated in the lines: "Human needs the environment more than the environment needs humans" (91). His lamentation over the ecological decline and gradual erasure of the Nambul River extends beyond environmental degradation to

encompass the erosion of cultural values, social ethics, and political integrity. By linking the river's suffering to shifts in everyday life and governance, Kshetrimayum presents ecological loss as inseparable from the moral and cultural transformations that have reshaped Manipur into a deeply troubled present.

Cultural Amnesia and Modernity

One of the central concerns of *Cry of a Dying River* is cultural amnesia the forgetting of ecological wisdom embedded in traditional ways of life. Modernity, characterized by unchecked urban growth and consumerist attitudes, emerges as a force that prioritizes convenience over sustainability. The river's transformation into a dumping ground symbolizes this ethical loss and failure.

By invoking memories of the river's past vitality, the poems challenge dominant narratives of progress and development that pay blind eyes to the damages it leaves behind. They suggest that true development cannot occur at the cost of ecological and cultural annihilation. Memory, in this context, becomes a form of resistance, preserving alternative ways of imagining human–nature relationships.

Conclusion

Cry of a Dying River offers a direct and powerful eco-critical reflection and meditation on the intertwined nature of culture and ecology in Manipur. This phenomenon is universal. Through ecological lamentation, Kshetrimayum exposes the cultural amnesia that accompanies environmental degradation. The river, as both ecological entity and cultural archive, embodies the loss of ethical relationships between humans and nature. This paper positions Kshetrimayum's *Cry of a Dying River* within the emerging corpus of riverine poetry from Northeast India alongside the works of poets such as Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, and Easterine Kire as well as within the broader tradition of riverine literature. This paper argues that poetic memory serves as a crucial and effective mode of resistance against ecological erasure, reminding readers that environmental restoration must begin with a recovery of cultural consciousness. By situating the collection within ecocriticism, the study emphasizes the role of poetry as an accessible and effective medium for addressing environmental issues and concerns, and for contributing meaningfully to environmental awareness and advocacy. This paper concludes by drawing on Rachel Carson's reflection on humanity's unbreakable relationship with water, emphasizing that life itself originates in water and that, in the end, humans inevitably find their way back to it through imagination and consciousness (14). This insight of Carson points toward the growing ecological awareness and the expanding body of literary engagement that is attempting to address human-nature relation from an eco-centric point of view.

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