

## Place Affinity in Select Oral Narratives of the Meiteis of Manipur

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### Abstract:

Place has been a significant element in literary studies. Place as a concept, studies the relationship humans have with places they inhabit. Emerging through the contributions of several thinkers in humanistic geography, cultural geography and phenomenology, the study of place attempts to explore how humans experience their environment and how specific locations shape their lives. Among the several dimensions of place experience, place affinity refers to the emotional bonding which individuals form with their physical space and plays a crucial role in the shaping of ecological consciousness. The present study is an attempt to unravel the emotional attachments the Meiteis form with their physical surroundings and how these attachments nurture a deep ecological consciousness. This is pursued through the study of *Tutenglon*, an important folk narrative of the Meites that narrates the story of the two brothers, Yoimongba and Taothingmang who clear the channels of the Imphal and the Iiril rivers. The Meiteis, one of the major ethnic communities of Manipur, possessing a rich repertoire of folk narratives that are not only transmitted orally but also in the form of manuscripts and texts. Drawing on the theoretical insights of humanistic geographers, Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph, as well as Arne Naess's concepts of self-realization and bio-egalitarianism in deep ecology, this study examines the place affinity of the Meiteis, and how such an attachment cultivates and deepens ecological consciousness among the communities.

**Keywords:** Place affinity, deep ecology, oral narratives, Meiteis, ecological consciousness

### Introduction

When we live in a place, we get acquainted with it and with every sound, sight, and object related to it. We make memories there, identify ourselves with it, and ultimately evolve a strong affinity with the place we dwell in. An important element of environmental psychology, Place affinity is the expression of place attachment that encourages humans to develop emotional bond with a place. As Irwin Altman and Seltha M Low view, "For many people, the longer they live their lives in one place, the more they become attached to it" (107), place affinity endures longer and stronger as one continues to stay in a particular place for a longer period and formed a deep-seated attachment towards the place.

Scannell and Gifford in "Defining place attachment: A tripartite organizing framework"

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(2010) define place attachment as a three-dimensional framework which function with person, psychological process and place dimension. In the level that functions with person, place attachment for an individual involves personal connection with place; and with group, it is associated with symbolic meaning shared among the members of a place. The psychological process involves psychological interaction of a person or the groups with the place which are based on emotional attachment that relate with memories, beliefs and meanings associated with the place. And the place dimension measures place attachment with the spatial nature of the place involving social interaction (2-4).

Edward Relph in *Place and Placelessness* (1976) perceives place attachment through his notion of place identity, and insideness and outsideness. He states, “To be inside a place is to belong to it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger in its identity with the place” (49). Being inside the place indicates that you belong to the place and you experience it.

Yi-Fu Tuan, in his seminal 1974 work *Topophilia* expresses that the idea of place attachment is associated with the notion of topophilia or the love of place. He broadly defines topophilia “to include all human being’s affective tie with the material environment” (93). He felt that a prolonged contact with physical environment can arouse topophilic sentiment, and one’s topophilic sentiment led to place attachment. And, he puts forth that a person with deeper attachment to the place will never let him leave his place in any circumstances, “Attachment to place can also emerged, paradoxically, from the experience of nature’s intransigence” (97). His idea of topophilia brings humans in proximity with the environment, and ultimately forms an emotional bond not just with place but also with every unit of it - the natural surrounding that includes the non-humans residing in it. Topophilia’s deep attachment for one’s place and environment pave way to realize the intrinsic value for all life associated with the place, and a deeper eco-consciousness of the environment.

Arne Naess in “Deep Ecology Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects” (1986) argues for a fundamental shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentric worldview. Naess, in his work rejects human’s perception of considering nature a mere resource for the use of the humans, and calls for a non-anthropocentric worldview fostering the realization of the intrinsic worth of all beings and ecological self-realization.

Introduced by Arne Naess in the 1970s, the concept of Deep Ecology draws out ultimate norms of Self-realization and Bio-centric egalitarianism through its principle:

1. All life forms have inherent value.
2. Rich and diverse life forms have value in themselves.
3. Humans should not reduce the diverse life forms except for satisfying vital needs.
4. The flourishing of life forms is affected by the increase in population.
5. Humans have been interfering with the non-human world excessively.
6. Thus, policies that are affecting basic economic, technological and ideological structures must be changed.
7. The ideological change should be based on the quality of life rather than the quantity of life.

8. Those who adopt the above principles must implement necessary changes (Devall 23).

In *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered* (1985), Bill Devall and George Sessions view the concept of Deep Ecology as significant in improving the relationship between man and nature by recognizing the intrinsic worth of nature, and placing humans on equal footing with the non-humans and not a superior being. Bill and Devall further views place as a living entity that endows anybody living there an identity. Considering it as a living structure, deep ecology calls for love and respect towards place just like all other beings on the earth. It views wilderness or wildness of place as,

a process of 1) developing a sense of place, 2) redefining the heroic person from conqueror of land to the person fully experiencing the natural place, 3) cultivating the virtue of modesty and humility and 4) realizing how the mountains and rivers, fish and bears are continuing their own actualizing processes. (Devall and Sessions 110)

It teaches us to consider place as an important life form just like the humans and other beings.

### **Methodology**

The study on place has become significant for the understanding of the relationships between man and the natural environment. However, the area seems to be in less exposure with regard to the oral literature of the Meiteis. Thus, the present study attempts to explore the dynamics between man and its milieu. The study shows how the notion of place affinity intersects with the Meitei worldview regarding the environment he dwells and the ecological consciousness through the study of the select oral narratives of the Meiteis. For the study, the legend of *Tutenglon* is explored from the perspective of the concept of place and deep ecology. The study is grounded upon the concept of place of Edward Relph presented in his book, *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and Yi-Fu Tuan's idea reflected in *Topophilia* (1974), and the deep ecological framework presented in the works of Arne Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions.

### **Intersection of Place Affinity and Deep Ecology**

The Meiteis are the major ethnic community of Manipur. The community's rich folklore conglomerates the folk literature, beliefs, and practices of the Meiteis. Being passed down since ages through orally, they express the way of life and worldview of the Meiteis in early period. An important genre of folk literature, the oral narratives the Meiteis that comprises Myths, Legends and Folktales present a vivid understanding of their worldview and how they perceive their place. Place for the Meiteis are not just mere piece of land but are living entity that shape their moral ethics, identity, and eco-consciousness.

*Tutenglon* is an important legend of the Meiteis narrating the tale of two Meitei princes, Yoimongba and Taothingmang cleaning the silts on the Imphal and the Iril rivers that were created by their mother, Nongmoinu Ahongbi. One day the elder brother, Yoimongba felt the need to dredge the rivers that were once created by their mother. Being elder to Taothingmang, he decided to rinse down the Imphal River that runs down from the Koubru hill as it was vast, deep and the current was strong. He instructed his younger brother

Taothingmang to clean the river with lesser slits, the source of the Iril river, where there lived many Gods and from where human beings came into being, the place where the frog, Konthing Nurabi once stayed, and where Pakhangba, the serpent once reigned.

*Sanou nangti lilwai ee maru fatlou laiylimkon, mira pongthoklam...hangoi konthing nurabina waikoiram, tangja lila pakhangbana waichatlamda, Sanou nang thounao*

“Brother, you dredge the place where the Gods reside, from where the humans came... where once the frog Konthing Nurabi had lived, the serpent Pakhangba had reigned”

(*Tutenglon*; my trans.; 2).

For the two brothers, the rivers were not a mere source of livelihood, but a place that bears the memory of their beloved mother. The rivers were not just a random place they passed by, but something created by their mother and were closed to their hearts. That was why they were concerned about the need to clean and preserve them. And keeping aside their emotional attachment towards the place, the rivers, in the legend is represented as the source of varied life forms; it is projected as an aquatic world in which many beings and organisms, known and unknown prosper. And Yoimomgba, by acknowledging the existence of the beings in the river indicates the presence of ecological self-realization as he widens his understanding and accepting of the thriving of the rich and varied life forms of the planet as a part of their existence.

The legend displays the idea of bio-centric egalitarianism at its best when Yoimongba commenced his work accompanied by humans and non-humans that live in his place: hens, chickens, and many other birds. The *mongba* bird and his relative the *thingri* bird enjoyed the journey by consuming alcohol. The *wakhrek* bird sent message to other birds to go along. The *songaraba* bird engages himself in arranging things. Those birds that stayed far and wide came along by tying their heads with red cloth and breast with the white ones. The *urok* bird makes arrangement for foods. The long legged *chaokhong* bird called humans and other beings and started to clean the river. The *kangkruk* bird pulled trees by singing the song, sung while pulling trees. The *tharuk* bird sung back to him. And Ngangoi Yoimongba along with all of them, and being helped by them continue to clean the river.

It not only reflects the brother’s acceptance and loving all the other beings, who share the same place with them, but also shows the absence of representing humans as superior, but, as one of the living beings among many others. It showcases the living together of humans and non-humans, flourishing in harmony and in mutual respect. The story possesses the symbolic meaning of the interdependence of all beings, the idea which bio-centric egalitarianism profess. As Bill Devall and George Session observes “all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth” (67), the legend display the worth of the non-humans symbolically through the imageries of the birds as they show their capabilities while helping Yoimongba in cleaning the river channel.

After they cleared the channels, the two brothers reached a village that has hundred houses, called Haoyim. Reaching there, an old widow named Tetnou Tonthangnou told them to go away as the village was terrorized by *Kakyen Mingamba*, a monster bird that comes there

everyday and gobbles up anything from fishes and animals to humans in turns. On the day he was to eat fishes, they did not come out of their holes; on the day he was to eat animals, they remain behind the closed doors of their homes; and on the day when humans were to be eaten, they remained inside their houses in terror. Here, the legend projects humans as a member of food chain, and not as someone who is above all.

With substantial efforts, Yoimaongba and Taothingmang killed *Kakye* *Mingamba*. Sooner, the two brothers made some of the villagers as their slaves, and asked the widow to come along with them too, she just replied,

*Eidi laija emei huithaba asidadum kheina leirage. Emom Laithongkhu Laitonghan animabu lairen Ngagoi Yoimongba nangna lumnaruo. Haonukhu Haonuhan animabuna unou konde Yaiheiton Taothingmangna luman suno haitharabaga laija imei kheibidi, Haoshi panthong ngakna leihoure*

“Let me stay happily in this place from where all the water flows. You take my daughters Laitongkhu and Laitonghan as your wives, Ngangoi Yoimongba. And let my daughters Haonukhu and Haonuhan as your bother Yoiheiton Taothingmang’s wives”

(*Tutenglon*; my trans.; 21).

The deep bond of affinity the widow has with the place she spent her whole life, does not allow her to leave her place. Instead, she gave away all her daughters to the two brothers but not her belongingness to the place she loves. Bill Devall and George Sessions view wilderness or wildness of place from the perception of deep ecology as a process that develops the sense of place (110). For the widow, her land is her soul from where she was not ready to apart. She loves her place dearly, that was why she had endured to stay in the place when cowed by the man-eating bird, and thus decided to stay behind in the hills.

## Conclusion

This study is an examination of how the Meiteis perceive their environment, the place they live in, and the other natural beings that had been parts of their lives. By exploring *Tutenglon* through the perspective of deep ecology and the concept of place, it comes to light that the Meitei storytelling is the embodiment of a powerful ecological discourse. Storytelling among the Meiteis is not a mere cultural practice that narrates the stories of their forefathers to entertain or to inform people, but it is intertwined with high philosophical overview. The study brings to the forefront that a deep-seated affinity towards a place paves way for people to accept all the non-humans not as a different entity, but as their co-existing partner who has equal footing on the Earth with the humans. The folk narrative of *Tutenglon*, attempts to display a colourful and joyous environment when biocentric egalitarian attitude is maintained towards all beings of the Earth. Through the study, the Meitei’s love for the environment and all the entities that belong to it, is revealed in a most picturesque manner.

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