

‘From Romanticism to Eco-criticism’¹: A Reading of Select Songs by Vanlalbeli

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Abstract

The article initially traces the development of Romanticism to Eco-criticism. Romantic writings are often rendered to be ‘nature writing’; however, it is revealed that nature is dealt with as a ‘sign’ within a signifying system. It acts as a motivation to present an ideal world. Eco-criticism takes Romanticism forward by dealing with the merit and value of nature, not only as a linguistic construct. It also deals with the co relation between the different forms of nature where they are all interlinked. The songs selected for study are composed by Vanlalbeli. These songs have element of romanticism and eco-criticism, more so of the latter. Through analysis and interpretations, it can be assumed that the environment and ecological musings are poignantly and practically revealed through these selected songs. Even though the cause of environmental awareness has been worked upon, it is often neglected by those who need this awareness the most. This awareness is attempted to be propagated through literary work, therefore, this paper presents an eco-critical reading of these select songs.

Key words: Romanticism, Eco-criticism, Preservation, Nature.

It is a well known fact that Romanticism is a literary movement initiated by William Wordsworth. However, there is always an assumption that the literary outputs of the Romantics are ‘nature writing’. As M. H. Abrams paradoxically denotes, “...the outer scene [nature] is not presented for its own sake but as a stimulus for the poet to engage in the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking.” (186) The validation of this line of thinking can be perceived in Wordsworth’s saying, that “it is “the Mind

of Man”, which is “My haunt, and the main region of my song.”² (Abrams 186) It can be assumed that, for Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics, nature is merely seen as a ‘sign’ to convey their personal feelings and emotions. In other words, Man is prioritized when put in tandem with nature. This, however, is denoted with the acknowledgement of the constructive contributions made by the Romantics in the field of literature. Ecocriticism, not a move away, but rather a development of Romanticism “is a

critique of *binaries* such as man/ nature or culture/ nature, viewed as mutually exclusive oppositions.” (Abrams 83) According to Laurence Coupe, “One function of green studies must be to resist this disastrous error [that nature has “no intrinsic merit, no value and no rights.”]” (“Intro” 2)

Other than what has been delivered, the distinguishing feature of Romanticism is the exaltation of the rural over the urban. The rural would often be presented as an idyllic place where there exists a kind of pre-ordained relationship between nature and man. Romantic writing usually offers a “vision of life so removed from the processes of labor and natural growth that [the literary works] constitute a persistent mystification of human ecology.” (Goodbody and Rigby 49) With nature as the ‘signifier’, Imagination and Fancy act as prime instruments for its materialization. John Keats’ notion of ‘negative capability’- to be in a state of ‘doubt’, or ‘Uncertainties’ without an ‘irritable reaching after fact and reason’, is a continuance of the feature of Romanticism. The ‘mystification of human ecology’, more or less, is a turn, away from the harsh realities of life. Ecocriticism, at its best, tries to ‘demystify’ the notions of Romanticism by prioritizing reality and the many hazards and problems that the world faces at any point of time. Raymond Williams has once written:

...the idea of an ordered and happier past set against the disturbance and

disorder of the present [is an] idealization... [which] served to cover and evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time. (Goodbody and Rigby 49)

The songs composed by Vanlalbeli usually present a scenario where there is a romanticization of nature in the beginning, and ends with the confrontation of reality, sometimes providing remedies for the environmental cause. In the line of what has been said, her songs are a blend of romanticism and ecocriticism, but more so inclined to the ideals of ecocriticism. In the song titled ‘KaLungkham’³, the composer initially presents a picture where she is watching the ‘green horizon’ with awe and admiration. The song begins:

Ka hawi vela lenkaw! eng noruai
hnuai h.

A lang raltiangah lentupui cham duai,

Suihlung min len mange raltiang ram
sawn,

Tahchuan an leng e, ka lungkham ve
kha.

The lines talk about the yearning for something[s], which dwells beyond the horizon covered in greenery as far as the eyes can behold. Since the composer here talks about ‘lentupui’ (most probably, a forest) and the use of the plural ‘an’ to denote an object (inanimate or animate), it can be assumed that she is perhaps talking about creatures (particularly birds) living in the ‘green horizon’. The first stanza is followed by the chorus:

Ka dawn vel zantlaih engtin awm
maw?

Muang ten zanmu chhingin ka ring
mange,

Duat ten tangah pawmin kawplai di
nen

Biahthu tinkim hlanin ka ring thin e.

Here the speaker wonders how the inhabitants of the forest spend their nights. She believes that their nights are spent in peace and tranquility, resting in the arms of their loved ones. The song initially presents an imaginative romantic world where all the creatures are living a peaceful and quiet life. In the last line of the second stanza, the composer also adds that these living creatures never cease to sing praises of their creator- "HlimlehlawmaSiamtufakanning lo ve". The impetus here is that the song of praise is sung with joy and happiness. The first hint of the contradiction between the first creation (the creature- Man) and the other creatures is highlighted in this line. While the others always sing praises of the creator (God- in the Mizo context), man is often found to be negligent and unconcerned.

The beginning of the next stanza abruptly halts the joyful rendition of the previous stanza.

Mahse hlimni rei lo hringmi leng
vangin

...Lenlai kan ti tawi thin eng vang
kher nge?

Dawn vetehVanglai nun a rei lo em.

The delightful days are, however, numbered. The lives of the creatures are 'inhumanly' shortened by those who call themselves 'human'. Though the nature of the act is not mentioned, nevertheless, it is a pre- conceived notion that 'hunting' animals and birds is often regarded as a game by man. The song ends with the composer's belief, that the creatures would lend their 'melodious voice' and their 'precious lives' to enchant man and his land: "An nun hluleh an aw mawineihzawngte/ Hlan an nuamngeiang Mizoram tan'. Truly, the birds and animals, living in harmony with nature, can be representatives of the beauty of man's land (specifically Mizoram- the 'land' of the Mizos). Also, the chorus, as a repetitive refrain presents the ideal environment, where every creature lives in peace. Just so, the song ends with this delightful note. The purpose of 'green studies'⁴, as given by Coupe, will be apt here because this study "sees planetary life as being in a 'critical' condition; and it is to this sense of 'crisis' that it offers a response". ("Intro" 4)

In the song titled 'ThalFavang'⁵, there is an appeal for the co- existence of man and other creations. When the birds draw out a jubilant cry with the onset of autumn, every creation, including human beings should join their song. As indicated in the chorus:

Hlimtakin i zaiang aw,

...Perhkhuang tingtang rimawi
zawng nen

Zoramnuam i awiang u.

Khuanu malsawmna dil chungin
Chutin nungcha nen kan hlim tlang
ang.

The recurring mention of ‘Zoram’ denotes the importance given to a land, which would lose its eminence if there is a binary between nature and culture. In order to present the beauty of any land, every creation must come together and lend a voice in its favor. The song continues to celebrate the harmonious co-existence of ‘man’ and nature, as indicated in the third stanza:

Zoram nuam zothlifim lenna ram hi
Nang leh kei atan ram nuam a lo ni
Thing leh mau leh nungchate
Duat takin i enkawl zel ang u.

These lines also encourage human beings to preserve and look after their surroundings. The composer is aware of the ‘critical’ situation of the environment. In this situation, man seems to be the main threat; therefore, it is necessary to voice the significance of co- relation, co- independence and finally, co- existence: “With no planet, there is no future, and so no other battles to be fought.” (Coupe 5)

The aforementioned ideals are further noted in many of Vanlalbeli’s composition. In ‘Ka Ram Neihchhun’, she presents the idea of patriotism which leans towards the preservation of the resources of one’s land. Since Mizoram is the only land that we can call our own, it is imperative that we preserve our resources

and then take pride in its richness and beauty. Nature, as a whole, provides numerous things to all living creatures including man. The harmony of man and other creatures should be maintained, so that there is a peaceful co- existence. In the meanwhile, the notion of sharing the fruit of natural resources like water presents a picture of ideal harmony. This is clearly highlighted in the song:

Siktuithiang kan dawn za nungchaleng
nen,
Hah chhawl dawiang min dawn kan
hlim tlang e
Damten luang del del se kan ram
mawiah
Dawn tawi nunrawng leng I chang
bik lawng aw.

In the last line she says, “let us not be reckless”. Man should not destroy the natural resources and vegetation for his own purpose. There have been instances of mass destruction, like using explosives as baits to catch fish. Actions such as this affect nature as a whole; it destroys the purity of water, therefore making it impure for animals and birds. Even though the aforementioned facts are well known, it has been highlighted to show how these songs present an environmental awareness. Also, such reckless acts would gradually have a bearing on the population of animals and birds. As the line implies, “Thilsiamawmawizairi a rehchhuan/Hringnunchianawmzia a neibiklawng e.” (Life/Living would be meaningless if the creatures cease to lend their melodious

voices) The composer is continually hinting at an impending loss if human beings continue to treat nature as a separate entity. In "Landscape, Mimesis and Morality", John Ruskin opines, "...we shall come to perceive that all true happiness and nobleness are near us, and yet neglected by us." (Coupe 31)

In another song, Vanlalbeli presents the importance of the conservation of water. In this song, titled 'TuiThianghlim' (Pure/Clean Water), she talks about the water drawn from natural springs and rivers. The song talks about its importance, and how the natural sources have provided means of living for our ancestors. The second stanza talks of the present time:

Hmating sawnin Zonun a sang tual tual,
Zofaleng ten hma hun dawn lo rengin
Thing leh maurua siktui thiang chawmtu
Senmeipui nen maw kan fam tir.

In these lines, the composer says that even though 'Zonun' (the Mizo way of life) have developed, we are negligent of the future. Destruction of natural resources in the name of development has always been an issue for environmentalists and ecologists. During the early 1980's, Raymond Williams at an International Conference of Socialists have suggested that the new social movements like ecology and anti nuclear propaganda may prove to be key components of "the most

active and effective opposition to contemporary capitalism." (Goodbody and Rigby 45) Activists around the world have dwelt on the issue of environmentalism for decades. This shows the relevance of 'green studies' at many levels.

Even to this day, there are numerous families who live solely on farming and cultivation. Since 'jhum' cultivation is commonly practiced in Mizoram, it entails the slashing and burning of trees and other vegetations for cultivation. This procedure, though with the well known fact of its method, is not yet found to be replaceable by any other method of farming. The reason may be because it has been practiced by our ancestors for centuries, therefore rendering it irreplaceable. The other reason may be because of the hilly terrain of Mizoram. Even though other methods of farming have been introduced, like terrace farming, 'jhum' cultivation is still widely practiced. This farming technique is one of the means of deforestation; therefore, we see resonances of this in this particular song. The song conveys the message that slashing and burning trees also have impact on the natural water resources, which in turn would affect the creatures, as aforementioned. When these kinds of facts are put into words, they act as a reminder for humanity- a reminder that the planetary life is co- related.

In the third stanza of the same song, a hint of solution is revealed. Keeping in mind the importance of water, it goes:

Ram hmangaih ten biahthu min hlan e,
Kan mamawh ber kan nun chhuahna
bulpui
Siktui thianghlim humhalh zel turin
Thing phunin ramngaw I siam ang u.

These lines initiate the planting of trees to maintain ecological balance. Even though there may not be another technique quite applicable like 'jhum' cultivation, the destruction inflicted on the environment by this farming technique can be compensated by planting trees. Through this compensation the future can be assured to be 'evergreen'. In the last stanza of the song, the composer also encourages us to appreciate "Van malsawm naruahtui" (rain- "showers of blessing from up above"). There is also an implication that it is the purest form of water, uncorrupted by "dawihlo" (chemicals), like all the other natural water sources. Since that is the case, the stanza ends with the request to conserve rain-water individually- "Hrisel hmelthat damrei nun hlim nan/ I dawngkhawlang u Zofaleng ten." The message propagated in this song is the sustenance provided by nature, if only human beings have a close relationship with ecology.

In 'Zoram Dung lehVang', the initial picture presented is bleak since there is a comparison between the ideal past and the present. In the first stanza, there is a hint of sadness to witness the decrease in the vegetation.

Zoram dung lehvang hi hanthlir vel teh,

Awi maw a tlang a mualmah dang si lo,
Hmanah lentupui chawi hmun hring
cham duai,
Tunah erawh nauang tahna min
thlentu.

Even though the landscape has not changed, the composer here sees that the view has changed. The beginning of this song presents a contradictory tone to the song, 'KaLungkham'. While the latter sees a lush of green in the horizon, this song does not. However, it may be added that both these songs present an idealization charged by Romanticism. The present song prompts the past when the landscapes were once covered by "lentupui...hmunhringchamduai" (a stretch of green landscape, or forest). What was once a green space spread across the horizon has become an eyesore. In "KaLungkham", the composer sees scenic beauty across the horizon. There is no assurance, however, whether the scene is real or is the workings of the imagination. Nevertheless, the impact that the environment has on the composer can be clearly felt.

In continuance with the present song dealt with, the second and third stanzas present the importance of the preservation of trees, since they provide shelter for different creatures.

Nungcha lengte hrai leng awihna run
pui
... Zan khawrei reng dawnlo riahrun
an remna

...Kan Zoram nuam par ang tivul turin

...Thing leh mau ruate i humhalh ang u.

The equality of all creations is aptly brought out in these lines. The forest is the home of many creatures where they raise their young ones with ease and contentment. The song requests us to take good care of the trees and other resources, so that we can also be at ease, in the likeness of the other creatures. The song seems to suggest that being the destroyer of resources would not bring us peace, even if the purpose of destruction may seemingly be for our own benefit. Real happiness and ease of mind would be achieved when we do our best to provide for the creatures, by taking care of their habitat. This is an implication to plant more trees which would benefit the other creatures and in turn benefit us too. The cyclical nature of the ecological system, as purported by several scientific texts and theories is compactly revealed in these few lines.

Vanlalbeli has been an active participant in the propagation of environmental awareness. One of the NGOs in Aizawl, ASEP (Association for Environmental Protection) has often provided a platform for activists to further this cause. Vanlalbeli's songs have also been presented by artistes at seminars and assemblies organized and conducted by ASEP. One of her songs, 'KaLungkham', has been included in the XIth standard

Mizo syllabus by the Mizoram Board of School Education (MBSE) since 2009. Her songs have also been recorded and stored in the Doordarshan (DDK) channel. She has composed more than twenty five songs and has written numerous scripts for performance in All India Radio (AIR).

To conclude, the songs composed by Vanlalbeli propagate a way of life, which is built in an intimate relation with the environment. As indicated before, these songs are revelations of the already known facts. When poetically and artistically put, the message revealed becomes more poignant. Even though human beings are confronted with the degradation of the environment in many stances, there is the tendency to ignore, or to be negligent about it. These songs act as reminders to preserve the environment through various means. The praxis initiated behind these songs present the 'referential' nature of ecocriticism. Coupe says,

Green studies does not challenge the notion that human beings make sense of the world through language, but rather the self-serving inference that nature is nothing more than a linguistic construct. ("Intro" 3)

The paper can be discreetly summed up with the quotation:

"... Planetary life at long last takes its rightful place at the centre of that discipline which we might still call, though with appropriate hesitation, the humanities." (Coupe 7)

Notes:

¹ This is a quotation from Laurence Coupe's edited book- *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. A collection of works by different writers (poets, critics, linguists, socialists and so on), this book traces the development of literary works and its criticism, from romantic to ecocritical ideology.

² Taken from Wordsworth's *The Recluse*- 'Home at Grasmere', Lines 793- 4.

³ To yearn for something

⁴ Used interchangeably with the term 'ecocriticism'.

⁵ Autumn

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