

# Echoes of the Land: An Eco-Critical Study of Selected Poems from Soso Tham's Ka Duitara Ksiar

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## Abstract

Ecocriticism as a theoretical approach investigates the connection between literature and nature, providing understanding of how texts interact with ecological ethics and sustainability. Indigenous literature, in this case, that of the Khasi people, portrays a profound respect for nature, pointing to the interconnectedness of all living things. Soso Tham, an early Khasi poet, infuses his poetry with environmental awareness, depicting the Khasi conception of coexisting with nature. By means of ecocritical evaluation of some poems like U Khun U Adam, Ka Dak ha U Maw, Ki Kshaid ba Rymphum and Ka Pyrem, this paper delves into different aspects of human-nature relations, ranging from admiration and reliance to neglect and exploitation. Through the analysis of Tham's poetic depiction of rural existence, seasonal rejuvenation, and environmental consciousness, this paper highlights his ecological philosophy, enlightening readers on how Tham perceived Nature and its relevance in the modern environmental context.

**Keywords:** Nature, Soso Tham, Ecocriticism, Ecological Consciousness

## INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism as a theoretical framework explores the intricate relationship between literature and the environment, shedding light on how texts engage with nature, ecological ethics, and sustainability. Indigenous literature, particularly that of the Khasi community, reflects a deep-rooted reverence for nature, emphasising the interconnectedness of all living beings. Soso Tham, a pioneering Khasi poet, intricately weaves environmental consciousness into his poetry, capturing the Khasi belief of coexisting harmoniously with nature. For this paper the selected poems such as Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum, U Khun U Adam, Ka Dak Ha U Maw and Ka Pyrem from his collection Ka Duitara Ksiar (The Golden Duitara) present varying dimensions of human-nature interactions, ranging from appreciation and dependence to neglect and exploitation. By comparing these poems through an ecocritical lens, this paper aims to highlight the poet's ecological philosophy and its significance in contemporary environmental discourse. The Khasi Tribe are one of the major ethnic communities residing in the state of Meghalaya, India. One of the most distinct feature of this particular tribe is their devoted respect for Nature probably because their original religion is known to be Niam Trai which revolves around the belief that Nature or its various different elements have their own spirit, that they are an entity to be worshiped and paid respect to, as it is only through them are the Khasis able to live a self sufficient life provided with food, shelter and other basic necessities. In the words of Anupama, "Nature is not just a source of sustenance for most

of the NE states but more of an extension of identity and roots. Thus, harm to nature immediately affects the question of identity. Nature becomes a space where an individual identifies himself” (Anupama 63)

### Literature Review

Sharma also states that the majority of “The ethnic communities depend on nature for everything, including their food and pleasure. They lead a fulfilling life. Therefore, it can be argued that they lead an ecosophical life. Further, it can be argued that since nature is an integral and sacred part of their lives, it should not be exploited.” (Sharma 16). Thus, reinforcing the idea that Nature was truly significant for the tribal communities, which here refers to the Khasi community.

Dr Suryya Kumar Bhuyan (1894-1964) is one of the pioneer literary figures from the Assamese community. He can be considered as one of the the avant garde, who had delved deep into the literature history of his community. He has written and published 31 books out of which 13 is written in English. He was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Literature from London University. When he turned 60, Dr Bhuyan wrote a book titled *Men I have Met*, In it he has recorded and wrote a brief history of all the men he met who have significantly contributed to his literary growth. The list consist of missionaries, teachers, professors, authors, writers and others. Out of the 152 people he has mentioned 3 people belonged to the Khasi community and they were, Prof R. R Thomas, Dr Homiwell Lyngdoh and U Soso Tham. His initial meeting with Soso Tham was when he was working as a teacher in Government High School and it was only in the year 1926 did he realised that Tham actually had a very special talent, as his works were read by Dr Bhuyan, they were deeply appreciated and Tham was given the title “The Robert Burns of the Khasi Hills” (Warji 2). Additionally, seven years later, Edison Blah, Editor of “U Nongkit Khubor” addressed Tham as “The First Poet from the Hills” (Warji 2).

“The newly established Missionaries and the arrival of the printing press had a very significant impact in the Northeast in terms of both religion and education. But in terms of literature, it was after independence that we see prominent writers coming out with multitudes of written work from the region.” (Mazumder 506), In the case of Tham, one of his famous work *Ka Duitara Ksiar* was first published in the year 1925 as *Ki Poetry Khasi*, few more poems were added and published in 1936, it is in this edition that the title was also changed into *Ka Duitara Ksiar ne Ki Poetry Khasi*, which was before India got its independence.

In *Tale of Darkness and Light*, a book written by Janet Hujon she talks about the life of Soso Tham and also the whole book is the translation of one of his magnum corpus *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynniew Trep* (The Olden Days of the seven huts). She expresses in the form of words on how Soso Tham “came in from the wilderness to carve in words the identity of his people - He made us see, he made us hear, he made us feel, he made us fear”. Further she gives an understanding on how romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Keats were a major inspiration for Tham, he has translated a number of their works, a deed that can be seen as an attempt to pass his knowledge to his fellow people. Without Wordsworth’s contribution, The “Khasis may have never benefited from Tham’s Translation”.

Soso Tham was a famously known khasi poet, born in Sohra, Cherrapunji in the year 1873 and died in the year 1940, there was one similarity that he shared with the British romantic poets and that was his purest love for nature in addition to the reverence he had for his homeland and his pride for his tribal community. “Soso Tham had a dream to preserve the rich cultural heritage of his people and enriching the khasi literary world” says Madeline Tham in the introduction of her book *Translations from Soso Tham’s Duitara Ksiar* 2015 (Tham vi), he sought assistance from numerous people that he knew but no

one was ready to lend him a helping hand in his quest to give more significance and to let the world know about Khasi Literature, this led Tham take matters in his own hand and thus the hills saw the rise of a prominent Khasi literary figure.

### **Ka Dak Ha U Maw (The Sign on the Rock)**

Ka Dak Ha U Maw by Soso Tham is a very introspective poem which combines individual mortality with natural decay, showing him to be environmentally aware. Through rich imagery of rivers, forests, and seasonal changes, Tham implies that man and nature have the same life cycle of birth, decay, and rebirth. This poem is not only a meditation on mortality but also an ecological warning, illustrating the way that nature itself carries evidence of how change is irreversible.

The childhood of the poet is presented as a period of innocence and harmony, echoing an unconcerned natural world "...the world is my playground/ I boast, I jeer in childhood glee;/ I laugh, I giggle to be good I cannot" (Tham lines 2-4). As he matures, the river, as a symbol of the relentless flow of time, "When the rivers roars and froths" (Tham line 5) endlessly echoes how humans and nature alike are subject to constant change. The poet's awareness of aging and death is tied to the sight of receding water levels and withering grass, implying that his own mortality is inevitable and is explicitly linked with environmental change as the grass wither so as the poet. This is in agreement with deep ecology, which posits that human life cannot be separated from nature.

The sinking water levels and the red, withering grasses are potent signs that winter is coming and also of environmental degradation, Tham relates them to his own awareness of death. The transformation from a flourishing landscape to a dying one is a symbolic reminder of the end of human life and ecological loss. By inserting these images in his reflection on death, Tham implies that the vanishing of natural features marks an irreversible loss, both to people and the environment. "When the grass is dry and rivers are running low,/ There I see, - The Eire that comes;/ Tongue-tied and cannot speak,/To the depths of thought for winter has arrived" (Tham lines 13-16)

The poet's awareness that "Winter has arrived" is a metaphor for both individual and environmental endings. It is evident that among the Khasis nature and spirituality are intertwined as seen in the significance of the various sacred groves, in the words of Srijani Bhattacharjee, she states, "It is considered the space through which the people associate themselves with the Almighty by performing rituals and sacrifices" (Bhattacharjee 71). The imagery of winter and death in the fourth stanza implies that human ignorance or complacency about environmental change can result in irreversible damage, this belief is rather different from Shelley where in his poem Ode To The West Wind he states that death is necessary for rebirth, he saw the west wind as a significant force in the formation of new ideas regardless of it being a destructive entity he calls it the Destroyer and also the Preserver, Shelley believes that even when the coldness of death accompanies a person there is also a possibility for a positive end as it is written in his words, "The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (Shelley lines 69-70), Tham attempts to persuade his readers to contemplate on their actions as once the elements of nature die it would never lead to a positive end, especially when all the living being are interconnected with nature. This is in line with environmental ethics, where awareness and respect for nature's signs are essential for sustainability.

Tham's poem is a cultural and ecological archive, reminding people in the future to look out and learn from nature. His poetry brings awareness to his readers spreading environment ethics and proving that just like human existence is important, so is nature, unless human beings take good care of the

environment there is no guarantee to a ecologically sufficient living. His work is just as relevant in the present due to climate change, deforestation, and loss of resources challenging natural ecosystems, because of all these issues it is evident that there is a need to make the masses aware on the importance of nature, why there is a need to preserve it elements, It is where here Soso Tham's poems comes into play as an approach to kindling the lost ecological consciousness of his people.

### **Death and Warnings from Nature in Ka Dak Ha U Maw**

In contrast to the other poems, Ka Dak Ha U Maw (The Sign on the Rock) is a darker, more contemplative poem that ponders death, rot, and environmental devastation. The poem speaks of dropping water levels, withering grasses, and the arrival of winter, signifying both human mortality and environmental disaster.

The poet, who is now old, compares time to a flowing river which froths endlessly, where he demonstrates that change is certain—both for humans and the environment. While observing the dying red grasses and the declining water levels, he comes to understand that nature itself is indicating a coming conclusion. "Winter has arrived" is used as a metaphor for ecological collapse, just like how climate change today is threatening ecosystems around the globe.

The poet is also rendered speechless, representing the powerlessness of people when environmental destruction occurs, as expressed in the lines "There I see, - The Eire that comes;/ Tongue-tied and cannot speak,/ To the depths of thought for winter has arrived" (Tham lines 14-16). The poem makes in obvious that most people tend to overlook the signals of nature and suffer the irreversible results. As opposed to Ka Pyrem, where nature was alive, in Ka Dak Ha U Maw, nature appears to be delicate and dying, and the immediate need for ecological consciousness is emphasized. Tham's imagery of vanishing landscapes and unuttered terrors speaks to today's debates regarding the slow violence of environmental ruin, where the destruction of nature happens slowly until it is undeniable.

### **Agrarian Ethics and Ecological Responsibility of U Khun U Adam (The Son of Adam)**

U Khun U Adam (The Son of Adam) is a poem published as a part of Tham's collection Ka Duitara Ksiar praising the farmer's life and his uncompromising loyalty to the soil, it was originally written by one of his friends, Hewitt Singh with whom he shared his love for poetry and literature. His daily life, his love for his profession, and the blessings that stem from his toil are mentioned and emphasised in the poem. In contrast to the capitalist cultures of the present era, where "the youth is convinced that agriculture is not for the educated mass and thus they are ready to choose any profession but agriculture" (Mandal 50), Tham presents farming as a religious obligation and a moral act—one that is fused with Khasi identity regardless of one's profession. "Over the Hills and Valleys, too,/ O land of seven Huts;/ To be a garden of fruits and flowers/ We will stand tall and farm" (Tham lines 89-92)

The farmer's life is one of meticulous labor, working day and night, indicating a sustained, harmonious coexistence with the earth. There is a subtle link to the agricultural system that was implemented by the British in the following lines "He gazes at his veggies patch,/ His fruits, and sugarcane;/ In a row his cauliflowers,/ Never to be a slave." (Tham lines 69-72), The Son's or the farmer's crops are said to never be "slaves," suggesting that nature's bounty should be honored and not exploited as how the farmers were exploited through heavy and unjust taxation system, Karmakar states "To pay off taxes, farmers often borrowed money from zamindars or money lenders and were reduced to the status of bonded laborers or slaves as the borrowed amounts could not be repaid due to the high rates of interest

levied by the moneylenders” (Karmakar 282). This image creates a moral difference between old Khasi agriculture and colonialism, where the farmer is referenced as “The Son of Adam.” This term may be taken to be an indirect condemnation of colonialism, which attempted to displace native farming practices with commercial agriculture for profit.

Tham's poetry solidifies that Khasi identity stems from agrarian knowledge and ecological ethics. The last stanza of U Khun U Adam invokes readers to realise that their pride is in nature, something which is still topical today with rampant deforestation, land degradation, and intensive agriculture. Through the poem, Tham calls for people to return to sustainable land stewardship, hailing the Khasi farmer as a face of sustainability and resilience against today's ecological odds.

### **The Celebration of Nature's Cycles in Ka Pyrem (Spring)**

Ka Pyrem (Spring) is a hymn of seasonal renewal, wherein Tham describes the coming of spring, bursting streams, and flowers in bloom. In contrast to U Khun U Adam, which centers on human sweat, this poem turns the focus to nature's autonomous vigor and its power to influence human feelings.

Tham speaks of streams teeming with life, cattle basking in delight, and lambs leaping, presenting nature's profusion as worthy of appreciation rather than exploitation. The poet identifies poetry as an expression of nature, instating the belief that human imagination lies close to the beat of the natural world. In his words, “Spring, Oh Spring/ You are a giver of joy;/ In your shadows, Forever I'll rest;” (Tham Lines 32-35), Tham idealizes nature as a refuge, providing shelter, inspiration, and regeneration.

Though the poem mostly extols the virtues of spring, it is also a veiled warning, hinting that nature's equilibrium is tenuous and has to be maintained. The teeming streams and greenery are contrasted with Ka Dak Ha U Maw's desolate landscapes, foretelling the consequences of environmental abandonment. Tham's vision of nature in Ka Pyrem follows indigenous ecological knowledge, where nature is not a resource to be used but as a living thing that supports the existence of humans.

### **Nature's Wrath and Human Vulnerability in Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum**

Though most of Soso Tham's poems rejoice in nature's beauty and harmony, Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum (The Cascading Waterfalls) brings forth a contrasting view of nature—its fierce and destructive energy. The poem is an account of a giant storm that blows through the Khasi hills after every spring, with copious rain, landslides, and thundering waterfalls. In contrast to Ka Pyrem, where nature is kind and supportive, Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum illustrates nature as a power of irresistible force, reminding man of his insignificance in the presence of its power.

Tham's rich imagery in Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum describes the drama of a storm, where nature reasserts itself through thunderous cascades, darkened skies, and rivers overflowing from their banks. The poem begins with a picture of the waterfalls bursting with uncontrollable energy, transforming placid streams into torrents that gouge deep into the earth. This imagery underscores the dynamic and changing nature of the Khasi landscape, where water, rife for life, is also capable of destruction.

The Khasi mountains, with their many waterfalls and highland rivers, are subject to heavy monsoons, and thus landslides and floods become a common sight. Tham's poem captures this fact, showing nature as giver and taker of life. The fury of the storm is not arbitrary; it has its own rhythm, sculpting the land over a period of time. This repetitive destruction and renewal are in harmony with indigenous ecological knowledge, which perceives nature's forces as essential for preserving balance.

Tham's storm is not just a natural calamity, it has deeper symbolic interpretations.



The thundering waterfalls and pounding waves can be interpreted as nature's rebuke of human arrogance and environmental neglect. In the Khasi oral traditions, storms and floods are sometimes viewed as warnings from spirits, reminding humans to be dutiful to the earth. The poem's powerful imagery creates a sense of awe and fear, compelling readers to question their relationship with nature.

Meanwhile storm is also an agent of rebirth. Like fire cleansing forests to allow new growth, storms restock rivers, carve valleys, and enrich the soil. Tham does not portray the destruction as absolutely negative; instead he recognises its function in keeping nature in balance. This reflects Khasi beliefs, where nature is neither good nor evil but a force that need to be obeyed and reckoned with. Similar to the belief that Shelley shared in his poem *Ode to the West Wind* as he addressed the west wind as both the "Destroyer and Preserver," (lines 14).

One of the most striking features of Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum is the depiction of human powerlessness in the face of nature's wrath. Tham recounts how villagers stand by as the storm develops, powerless to stop it or anticipate its trajectory. Houses can be destroyed, but there is no bitterness, only the understanding that nature does what it wants. This passive accommodation mirrors the Khasi world-view, wherein the human does not strive to dominate nature but tries to accommodate it.

The poem is starkly different from contemporary views, in which technology creates the impression of dominance over nature. Tham's imagery reminds us that though human development had taken place, we are still at the mercy of natural forces that are not under our control. His poetry defies the colonial and capitalist mentality that wishes to exploit and control nature for gain, promoting instead humility and co existence.

### **Ecological Significance: Perspectives from Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum (Glorious Waterfalls)**

Within the scenario of the present-day environmental issues, Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum is an intimidating message concerning how humanity's oversteps can provoke nature into showing its fury. The occurrence of increasingly common severe weather, floods, storms, and landslides, reflections the turbulence expressed in the poem. Tham's vision impels us to recognise the future negative impacts of logging, land depletion, and poor management of the environment.

His writing also underscores the significance of native ecological knowledge. The Khasi themselves, for centuries, have coexisted with the natural rhythms, learning to practice sustainable living through sacred groves, regulated land use, and rainwater conservation. Tham's poetry urges a return to such practices, with a focus on regard for the land and an appreciation that nature's cycles must be respected and not exploited or abused, as in the words of Leopold "Conservation is getting nowhere Because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." (Leopold viii)

### **Conclusion**

Soso Tham's poetry presents a powerful ecological vision, focusing on sustainability, environmental ethics, and the profound relationship between humans and nature. The Selected poems, U Khun U Adam, Ka Pyrem, Ka Dak Ha U Maw, and Ki Kshaid Ba Rymphum, his works as a whole celebrates the beauty of nature while also warning his readers against the exploitation and ecological degradation of the environment. In his poetic meditations on agrarian existence,

seasonal rhythms, and environmental transformation, Tham offers a Khasi vision of ecological responsibility that is still relevant today.

In an age susceptible to many climate issues and emergencies with the regular encounter with ecological devastation, that are mostly considered as the result of modernity and the downside of development since the colonial period, Sharma states “The increase in population, and the advent of colonial modernity and its attending forces like urbanization, transportation, mining, plantation (colonial forestry), bureaucratic corruption, technology, quick mobility etc have driven man to exploit nature for their expanding needs and lavish living.” (Sharma 18), It is here where one can say that Tham's poetry can be viewed as both a cultural witness and an appeal to action. His poetry calls for an approach to a more ethical and sustainable relationship with the natural world, recalling the wisdom of indigenous cultures and the crucial need for ecological responsibility.

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