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Dissolving Boundaries: A Study of Nitoo Das's Poem *Mawphlang*

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Abstract:

Vera Norwood notes that men's and women's experiences with nature are different. According to her, women write wilderness differently, unlike men, whose experience is patterned after the traditional hero's journey, which involves a series of challenges, a display of virility, and the eventual dominance of men over the environment. Women's experiences, on the other hand, according to her, involve an immersion in nature rather than confrontation. This paper aims to explore this organic relationship between women and nature, thereby debunking the male/female nature/culture binaries through the theoretical framework of Cyborg. This paper particularly focuses on the poem '*Mawphlang*' by Nitoo Das, where nature and women are not seen as separate entities but as Cyborgs or hybrid beings creating new identities, beings, and emotional geographies. Cyborg is an emancipatory model of identity because it brings in the concept of fluidity, and the disappearance of body, and situates itself outside the power structures and hierarchies of patriarchal discourse.

Keywords: women, nature, cyborg, identity, emotional geographies.

Introduction:

The traditional concept of women and nature as separate and passive entities has long been problematic, as it only perpetuates gender biasedness and environmental degradation. Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg' is a powerful theoretical framework that challenges these boundaries and creates new identities and entities. It addresses fluidity, hybridity, and the postmodern nature of Cyborgs and encourages the emergence of new identities and beings, especially in the realm of

feminism. It provides a fluid and transformative framework for opening up a world unmarked by binaries, providing us with new alternatives and possibilities for redefining nature, feminine identity, its relation with nature, and its embodiment in the postmodern era.

While ecofeminism seeks to strengthen the bonds between women and nature by critiquing their parallel oppressions and encouraging an ethic of caring and a politics of solidarity, Haraway seeks to destabilize the nature/culture dualism that grounds the oppression of both women and nature. Ecofeminism, like other cultural feminisms, advances female values, but much of Haraway's work engages nature from a postmodern feminist perspective exemplified by the figure of the cyborg. Although ecofeminism espouses a 'pronature' stance, Haraway's theories of 'artificialism' and the 'cyborg break down the divisions between nature and culture, nature and technology', thereby destabilizing the entire concept of 'nature'. Stacy Alaimo is of the view that ecofeminist glorifications of nature and women play into the pockets of both patriarchy and capitalism. Cyborgs, on the other hand, forsake alliances between women and nature, creating new identities and opening up new emotional geographies.

In her article, *Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions: Challenges for an Environmental Feminism*, Stacy Alaimo states:

"The ecofeminist strategy of glorifying nature promotes a more respectful attitude and encourages a less exploitive relationship with the earth; however, it often falls into mysticism, widening the great divide between nature and culture."

The attempts of the ecofeminists to valorize women and nature via glorification and mystification may only bind them more securely to narratives of phallic domination. The dangers of ecofeminism seem to result from a positive alliance that depends upon the very associations that are detrimental to both women and the earth—woman, and nature as victims, women as maternal, and nature as mystified and pure. Haraway disrupts this narrative by casting nature as an active agent and not an ahistorical, passive resource for human domination. By refiguring nature as an agent, Donna Haraway's *Cyborg* destabilizes the categories of active and passive, resource and user, casting nature as an actor on the historical stage. Instead of grounding ecofeminist politics in affinities of victimization or motherhood, *Cyborg* emphasizes and focuses on women and nature by stressing nature as an actor. By articulating both women and nature as

agents in a mutual struggle instead of passive victims, Cyborg destabilizes, deconstructs, and disrupts all these associations, boundaries, and structures between them, showing that all identities are lived and experienced and is unstable and fluid.

In Donna Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism* in the 1980s, she states that the 'utopian cyborg' allows us to think of ourselves in ways that subvert the dualisms of domination.

“Certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals—in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man.”

Since cyborgs complicate these binaries, therefore it does not play into misogynist discourse the way that blurring between women and nature does. Haraway's theory of cyborgs shows nature as something made, not something existing 'out there' in some pure form. According to her, nature is made *'but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans.'*

The North East of India is home to several ethnic tribal societies that are deeply concerned with ecological concerns and environmental degradation. For the indigenous communities of north-east India, preservation of nature/ecology is not just a way of life; it is their identity. The female poets of this region, like Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Nitoo Das, in their writings portray nature as an extension of themselves, and their bodies. This paper reflects on Nitoo Das's poem *'Mawphlang'* which takes the reader on a journey that begins in a physical locale but transports them to an inward one. In most of her poems, the female persona connects to nature/the cosmos through her body, with which she experiences her 'self', thereby articulating a new idiom, a new language by, for, and about women. Most of her poems re-invoke deep connections between women and nature, where the female self, the 'body, and the 'desires' are celebrated. The female persona in her poems symbolizes the Cyborgian being. She is a hybrid being—one who hovers around the fringes. She participates, through her

body, in celebrating the smells, sights, and sounds of nature and speaks of a relationship with nature that is intimate, built on trust, reciprocity, solidarity, respect, and care.

The present paper focuses on reading Nitoo Das's poem *Mawphlang* through the cyborg framework, where she describes this organic relationship between women and nature. The sacred grove of Mawphlang (in Meghalaya) is described by her in the beginning as an '*old woman opening her mouth. She has nothing to reveal.*' Thus, the representation of the forest as an old woman in the opening lines of the poem creates an aura of mystery and intrigue. The complexity and enigmatic nature of the forest is further emphasized in the words 'she has nothing to reveal', where the forest is shown as concealing its mysteries and secrets that it keeps only to itself. The forest, she says, '*resides between twig and soil*', through which she wants to imply that the forest is a complex web of interconnected elements of humans and non-humans co-existing together. It is a reflection of how nature is beyond human comprehension, and many aspects of it remain unexplained and are shrouded in mystery.

These sacred groves are timeless, and they defy trespassers who pluck or take anything from the forests. They have lived for an eternity. The ageless trees of the forests have silently witnessed the rush of human speed and changes to the environment. Hence, any invasion of humans into their territory will not be permitted. The phrase '*Your stealth will bring death*' highlights how the intrusion of human beings only leads to the destruction of the natural environment. Human beings destroy the sanctity and intrinsic value of nature. The phrase 'bring death' suggests the severity of the impact of human interference, and hence they are forbidden to be a part of the sacred groves of Mawphlang. This destruction is represented by Nitoo Das through the powerful imagery of '*a moth torn apart with frequent hands*'. The 'moth' represents the delicate balance of nature, and the 'frequent hands' symbolizes the careless and reckless behavior of humans towards the environment. This line is a reminder that every little thing in the cosmos counts, every insect; and every animal has its purpose and role in the ecosystem. By killing even the smallest of creatures, humans disrupt the balance of nature.

The Khasi people of Meghalaya are known for their deep connection with nature and their ability to live in harmony with the natural environment around them. They see nature as a nurturing mother who nourishes them. A famous Khasi proverb states, '*U Khasi u im bad ka mariang, bad ka mariang ka imbad u*', which means a Khasi lives with nature and nature lives

with Khasi. They believe that there was a golden age, an age of purity where man and animals lived in perfect harmony with each other, and they still retain these ancient beliefs and practices. The existence of the sacred groves, the caves, the mountains, and the rivers all establish their belief. They believe that every living being, including trees, plants, animals, and humans, possesses a spirit and must be respected.

Sajal Nag, in his research article, '*Ethnography of a Wilderness: The Eco-Politics of Sacred Groves of the Khasi Jaintia People*,' gives anthropological details of the sacred groves and how they were a part of nature worship. He writes The Khasis believe their guardian spirits of U Ryngkew U Basa reside in the groves. For them, the sacred groves are a sort of divine sanctuary, a paradise of the pristine glory of creation. Here, man lives in harmony with nature—the flora and fauna and with the spirits themselves. According to the Khasi indigenous faith, in these patches of wilderness known as the sacred groves, the spirits of Ryngkew and Basa were sent to dwell on earth by God for a purpose. It was believed that when the earth was young, there grew a gigantic tree with its branches spreading in all directions. As it continued growing, the branches started reaching across larger and larger areas, and soon the sun was almost eclipsed and the entire earth was covered in total darkness. Both humans and animals were seized with fear as the entire earth was covered in total darkness, and it was finally decided that the tree had to be cut down. Soon humans flocked in great numbers and went to the mountain range of Diengiei with their axes to chop down the tree. But as the tree trunk was massive, they couldn't cut it down in one day. They left the place with the plan to return and resume the task, only to find the tree, completely restored the next day. The people determined to bring the tree down once again started cutting and swearing to finish the work the following day. On returning the next day, they discovered to their dismay that the tree was whole again. Phreit, a bird perched on a nearby bush, warned them that it knew the secret of the tree's regeneration and said that it would reveal the secret only if it was permitted to feast from ripened paddy fields for generations to come. The phreit disclosed that when the people go back home, a tiger used to come and lick the wounded portions of the tree trunk, and thus, the Diengiei would heal itself. The bird then advised the people to tie their axes and machetes to the tree trunk all around so that when the tiger came to lick the wounds and notches, it would cut its tongue and abandon its mission. As predicted, the tiger, after hurting itself, ran away in the darkness of night, and the following day, the tree fell. God was offended by the actions of the humans, as the tree was supposed to

symbolize a close relationship between God and man, and this destructive action severed all connections between the creator and creature. The felling of the Diengiei tree brought in a long period of calamity and deprivation. There was discord between animals and humans and turbulence on the earth. The earth, including all its inhabitants, asked for God's mercy and, as signs of atonement, forswore the use of axes and machetes on trees and plants unless necessary. God looked on kindly at this gesture and resolved to send the Ryngkew and the Basa, his representatives, to live in the law kyntang, or sacred forests. Such myths and popular beliefs not only showcase their ecological and rich sociological significance but also reflect the deep ideological moorings of Khasi beliefs and values. Myths not only shed light on the past but are also repositories of indigenous wisdom and values. For the Khasis, their lifestyle, livelihood, beliefs, and identity as a tribe bear the imprints of their landscape.

In her book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler re-examines our prehistoric societal cultural origins and shows that for the longest part of our prehistory, cultures were based on a partnership model, where the relationship between the sexes was an egalitarian one. However, these cultures were matrix, focusing on life-giving and nurturing relationships. She writes:

“Prehistoric societies worshipped the Goddess of nature and spirituality, our great mother, the giver of life and creator of us all. But even more fascinating is that these ancient societies were structured very much like the more peaceful and just society we are now trying to construct. In short, they were societies that had what we today call an ecological consciousness: the awareness that the earth must be treated with reverence and respect. And this reverence for the life-giving and life-sustaining power of the earth was rooted in a social structure where women and 'feminine' values such as caring, compassion, and non-violence were not subordinate to men and the so-called masculine values of conquest and dominance. Rather, the life-giving powers incarnated in women's bodies were given the highest social value.”

Charlene Spretnak states that women's experiences of their bodies endow them with a 'consciousness of a larger reality' that bestows upon them the potential to reveal 'nature's mysteries'. The female self, thus perceived, clearly embodies a different relation with nature, one that is not characterized by rigid division and fear of loss of boundaries but rather by a connectedness that induces a sense of harmony. She further states that the experiences inherent to women's sexuality express the “essential holistic nature of life on earth; they are 'body

parables' of the profound oneness and interconnectedness of all matter/energy." Such a bond and attachment of women with nature not only leads to achieving gender equality but also environmental preservation, leading to the creation of new emotional geographies.

In the poem *Mawphlang*, Nitoo Das foregrounds the experiences of both women and nature. By describing the sacred groves as an old woman, a cyborg, Nitoo Das creates a fluid being, a cyborg body, which is empowering for both women and nature, residing in a world that celebrates fluidity and multiplicity. Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge argues that bodies are not neutral entities but are rather inscribed with meaning through societal norms and power relations. Bodies are not only subject to disciplinary practices but also actively participate in the construction of discourse. Both Susan Bordo and Foucault consider the '*body as not only a text of culture but as a practical, direct locus of social control*'. Bordo examines the cultural metaphors, norms, and values that have been imposed on the female body by patriarchy and Western culture that mark and constitute the female body. Bodies, whether they are of women or nature, are like texts, inscribed with meaning through structures of language and signification by patriarchy. Haraway states that our understanding of nature or the way we conceive of nature has far-reaching implications for our relationship with nature. According to her, the time has come to envision and articulate a different relationship with nature, one that is not based on Western philosophical thought. Western philosophical thought seeks to essentialize and dualize nature. Nature is reduced to the status of an object, an instrument in the realization of man's self-obsessed desire to have nature under complete control.

Helene Cixous, in her groundbreaking essay '*The Laugh of the Medusa*', claims that a woman should write from her body: "*Writing is for you; you are for you; your body is yours; take it.*" She advocates a form of writing grounded in a woman's experience and body that is not mediated by men and patriarchy. Female sexuality is multiple, diverse, and plural, and it cannot be reduced to a male-centric model. She emphasizes the importance of recognizing the importance of female bodies in their sexuality and the need for women to reclaim their bodies outside patriarchal norms and expectations. The figure of the 'cyborg' creates an empowering space for both women and nature that is emancipating and empowering. Nitoo Das seeks to embrace this intimate bond between women and nature through a new language, a new narrative that seeks to translate the emotions of both nature and woman—one that is not burdened with

Western meanings and connotations. By employing the female body in her writing, she redefines and rediscovers the identity and relationship of both women and nature that is equally powerful, emancipating, and empowering. Instead of creating women and nature as passive entities, Nitoo Das uses the motif of the body, through which both women and nature create an intimate space, a bond dissolving all barriers and boundaries through which they participate, articulate, and celebrate their fluid/new identities and bodies.

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