

## **Ecopsychological Reflections in Khasi Folk Narratives: A Study of Selected Folktales from K. U. Rify's *Tales of the Khasis***

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### **Abstract**

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Ecopsychology is a relatively recent social and intellectual movement which strives to comprehend and reconcile humankind's relationship with the environment. Ecopsychology delves into the psychological interconnections between individuals and the natural environment, examining the influence of these connections on personal identities, health, and holistic well-being. Meghalaya, a state renowned for its extensive natural heritage, offers a distinctive cultural setting for investigating the profound relationships between people and nature. Khasi folktales from the past incorporated ecological themes into their stories, such as how humans are associated with nature, how the environment imparts wisdom, and how nature contributes to human well-being and spiritual development.

The study aims to explore how experiences with the natural world affect people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours in order to understand the psychological effects of nature. This has been clearly illustrated in Khasi Folktales and the book *Tales of the Khasis* by K. U. Rify reflects these intentions as manifested in Khasi tradition. It looks into how nature functions in folklore as a source of advice, inspiration, and healing. This research also contributes to a greater knowledge of the cultural values, ecological consciousness, and psychological views associated with the natural environment in Meghalaya by examining the ecopsychological themes within Khasi folktales.

**Keywords:** Ecopsychology, Meghalaya, Folk narratives, Khasi Folktales

## Introduction

During the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of folklore emerged in Europe. Initially, it comprises traditional customs and festivals that were transmitted across generations, alongside ancient melodies and enduring narratives. This encompassed mythical legends, fables, and tales that stood the test of time. However, due to their divergence from rationality and practicality, folklore also carried associations with irrationality. This involved beliefs in supernatural beings like ghosts, demons, fairies, goblins, sprites, and spirits. Additionally, it incorporated trust in omens, amulets, and talismans (Ben-Amos 1). “Throughout the ages, folklore has exerted a profound impact on human viewpoints, beliefs, and behaviour. Folklore as a mirror of culture provides unique raw material for those eager to better understand themselves and others” (Dundes viii).

The field of folktales garners the attention of diverse academic disciplines. In modern times, it has emerged as a central subject of exploration within the realms of folklore, anthropology or ethnology, psychology, and literature. Scholars specializing in folklore diligently investigate folktales as invaluable artefacts that mirror cultural and intellectual history, simultaneously analysing their societal implications. Psychologists, on the contrary, perceive these narratives as embodiments of internal cognitive processes, delving into their profound impact on recipients, regardless of whether they are conveyed orally or in written form (Luthi 107).

Defining the folktales, Dorson in his book titled *Folklore and Folk life: An Introduction* (1972) said that folktales encompass refined and artistically crafted narrative genres that possess a remarkably consistent and polished structure. However, their origins, objectives, and themes vary significantly. Similar to novels and short stories, which share a similar sophistication, folktales are primarily conveyed for the purpose of entertainment, although they may serve secondary functions as well. These tales are commonly regarded as fictional and are referred to as creations of human imagination by both storytellers and commentators, emphasizing their imaginative nature (2).

Moreover, the distinguished critic of folktale, Max Luthi underscores the essence of folktales by juxtaposing elements of fantasy with everyday occurrences. Essentially, folktales highlight aspects of society that are exceptional and bear cultural significance. In essence, folktales, and migratory legends in particular, are seen as enigmatic and powerful because they skilfully blend diverse elements to engage, surprise, and impart wisdom to their audience. According to Luthi, “Folktales strike us as enigmatic because they mix the miraculous with the natural, the near with the far, and the ordinary with the incomprehensible in a completely effortless way. Migratory legends draw attention to events that are extraordinary or remarkable; they are intended to shock or to teach a lesson” (2).

Through characters, settings, and plotlines, these tales convey messages about virtues such as honesty, bravery, kindness, and respect for authority figures

(Thompson 5). For example, a folktale may highlight the consequences of dishonesty or the rewards of generosity, thereby influencing individuals' moral outlook and behaviour. Through folktales, cultural knowledge is imparted to the younger generation, allowing them to become acquainted with the beliefs, customs, traditions, and ethical standards of a particular society (Rurangwa 11).

By presenting characters who face moral dilemmas and make choices, the narratives in folktales illustrate the consequences of good and bad actions. Reflecting upon the impact of folktales Jack Zipes in his seminal work *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (2006) opined that through stories of heroes, villains, and their struggles, folktales emphasize values such as justice, integrity, empathy, and hard work. Zipes also added that “educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of that time” (3).

Folk narratives play a significant role in shaping cultural identity and preserving traditional knowledge. The Khasi people, residing in the north-eastern state of Meghalaya, India, have a long history of oral storytelling that reflects their profound connection with the natural world. K. U. Rafy's *Tales of the Khasis* is a notable collection of Khasi folk narratives that offers insights into the ecological consciousness embedded in their culture. This research paper aims to explore the ecopsychological reflections found in selected Khasi folktales, thereby enhancing our understanding of the interdependent relationship between humans and the environment.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of this research paper are as follows:

- To analyze selected folktales from K. U. Rafy's *Tales of the Khasis* through an ecopsychological lens.
- To identify and examine the key themes, symbols, and ecological motifs that reflect the interdependence between humans and nature.
- To explore the traditional ecological knowledge embedded in Khasi folk narratives.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study holds several significant implications. Firstly, it contributes to the growing field of ecopsychology by offering insights into indigenous perspectives on the human-nature relationship. Secondly, it sheds light on the traditional ecological knowledge of the Khasi community, highlighting the relevance of preserving and revitalizing their folk narratives for ecological resilience. Finally, this research emphasizes the importance of integrating local cultural wisdom into environmental education programs to foster sustainable practices and promote ecological well-being.

## **Methodology**

### Selection of Folktales

To conduct this study, a selection of Khasi folktales from K. U. Ruffy's *Tales of the Khasis* was made, based on their relevance to the research objectives. The chosen folktales were analyzed for their ecological themes and representations of the human-nature relationship.

### Data Collection

The data for this research paper was collected primarily through a comprehensive review of K. U. Ruffy's *Tales of the Khasis* and other relevant literature on Khasi culture, storytelling, and ecopsychology. The selected folktales were examined for key themes, symbols, and ecological motifs.

### Data Analysis

The data collected from the selected folktales were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes related to ecological interdependence, the symbolism of natural elements, and human-nature relationships were identified. The analysis also focused on extracting traditional ecological knowledge embedded within the narratives.

## **Ecopsychology: Theoretical Framework**

Myriad ideas and concepts pertaining to ecology and ecoconsciousness have dominated literary and academic discourse in recent times. With the growing awareness of environmental issues, critical thinkers keep pondering ways to reconnect the relationship between man and nature. The physical manifestation of this dichotomy is evident in many layers; however, the psychological afflictions of ecological imbalance barely acquire insight. Under such circumstances, the emerging concept of ecopsychology acquires a primary position in delineating man-nature dynamics. Ecopsychology, as the term suggests, strives to explore and reconcile humankind's relationship with the environment. Although it seems radical, the concept of ecopsychology has much older evidence in terms of its approach. While tracing its history and origin, the imprints of the ecopsychological approach were found roughly in the 1990s. Ecopsychological reflections were conspicuously evident in the works of "Theodore Roszak, Mary Gomes, Allen Kanner, and Robert Greenway" (Davis 50). Their works primarily focused on ecological and psychological sensibilities. Ecopsychology underlines practices that involve nature-oriented sensitization and earth-sustaining initiatives with a focus on providing ecotherapy. One of the primary forms of expression in ecopsychology is ecotherapy. According to ecotherapy, dealing with one's sadness in order to stop environmental destruction can help one overcome anxiety and loss. Ecotherapy is hence more action-oriented, as it does not conceive of grief as merely psychological but uses the feelings to find expression and work accordingly.

Theodore Roszak, the eminent critic of Ecopsychology rightfully asserts:

Ecopsychology holds that there is a synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being. The term “synergy” is chosen deliberately for its traditional theological connotation, which once taught that the human and divine are cooperatively linked in the quest for salvation. The contemporary ecological translation of the term might be: the needs of the planet are the needs of the person, the rights of the person are the rights of the planet. (321)

Though Roszak’s definition of ecopsychology extended an understanding of the area, defining ecopsychology precisely poses a challenge due to its comprehensive nature, encompassing various components and domains. Furthermore, distinguishing ecopsychology from broader environmental or ecological ideologies is not easily delineated. A constructive approach to clarifying the field recognizes its integration of psychological and ecological perspectives, incorporating practices like eco-therapy, nature-oriented mindfulness, and sustainable engagement with the environment, philosophical inquiry, artistic expression, and ceremonial rituals. In the realm of ecopsychological investigation, a prevalent area of study involves exploring the multifaceted relationship between humans and the natural world, encompassing both harmonious and contentious aspects (Castrillón 1).

### **The Khasi People and Their Stance towards Nature**

North-east India is a cauldron of many ethnic groups, tribes, and communities. Meghalaya, one of the eight sisters of North-east India, is home to Khasis, Garos and Jaintias. The picturesque terrain that encircles this land of hills provides a panoramic view. Sacred Grooves, lakes, caves, and living root bridges are proofs of its unique and rich scenic landscape. The abode of the cloud houses several natural species, including a plethora of flora and fauna. Nevertheless, with the growing need for modernization and the advent of the tourism industry, several natural heritages have been compromised. The inclination towards modernization and technological advancement leads to an emotional or physical detachment from nature. This estrangement further gives way to several exploitations of nature. The reprehensible actions of humans, such as deforestation, depletion of forests, earth cutting, and exploitation of natural resources, ignite the upcoming calamities that testify to nature’s revenge. The endless demands of man force nature and its resources into servitude, resulting in environmental problems that have a significant negative impact on people. Devastations in the form of landslides, forest fires, climate change, soil erosion, and drought are some of the natural ways through which nature claims its vengeance due to human exploitation of natural resources.

In recent times, the relationship between man and nature has become somewhat delusional. Several critics lament the estrangement that caused indifference towards environmental devastation. The awareness and seriousness with which

people during ancient times strived to retain the bond between man and nature are nowhere to be found in the present world. Growing market mechanisms and globalization have detached humans from the realisation that nature will be the last resort for mankind. The contemporary scenario indicates that pinning the blame on the people alone is futile, as the lack of awareness among the masses is a big question. Though efforts to conserve nature and spread awareness are somewhat evident, silence on environmental issues is telling. Attempts to protect and preserve natural resources are evident from the way the local communities garner the sacred grooves. The sacred grooves are considered holy and sacred by the people. It is a hub of biodiversity. These grooves are basically community forests maintained and conserved by local residents. Commonly known as *Law niam* (for religious purposes), sacred grooves also hold ecological significance in maintaining balance in the ecosystem (Mishra 219). Passers-by and visitors are prohibited from violating the flora and fauna of the grooves, as these are widely regarded as natural treasures. The treatment of the sacred grooves as holy by the visitors and natives is one such instance that reflects their attitude towards protecting nature. No visitors are allowed to damage the flora and fauna of the forest. Many varieties of species thrive in such forests due to the sacred nature of the place. Mawphlang sacred forest, known as *Law Lyndoh*, is one such sacred forest in Meghalaya (Roy 145). A lot of sacred plants, including Rudraksha trees, could also be found in abundance. However, these natural treasures are under constant threat as they have been sites of timber extraction, and cattle grazing for the natives. The pathetic picture of the decline in the worship of nature evokes a sense of concern for eco-conscious groups. Along with freshness and vegetation, these grooves also become a source of livelihood for the local population. Therefore, upholding the preservation of nature must be a mandatory need for the masses.

### **Folk Narratives of Khasi People through K.U. Rafy's lens**

Many folktales uphold the cultural significance of the grooves and natural settings as they strive to create harmony and eco-consciousness in the region. K. U. Rafy's renowned compilation, *Tales of the Khasis*, is a highly esteemed anthology of Khasi folktales, possessing significant cultural and literary value. Rafy's work serves as a gateway to the captivating world of Khasi storytelling, presenting a rich tapestry of narratives that eloquently encapsulate the essence of Khasi customs and traditions. Within the pages of *Tales of the Khasis*, Rafy provides readers with a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in the depths of Khasi folklore and acquire profound insights into the ecological consciousness interwoven throughout these tales. The stories vividly depict the intricate bond between the Khasi people and their natural environment, showcasing their deep reverence and harmonious coexistence with the world around them.

## Discussion

The newly generated consciousness of ecopsychology can be categorically merged in terms of its reflections in Khasi folktales. It finds its expression in the folk heritage of the Khasis, as the nature-human dichotomy gets amply compounded in their folktales. The pristine beauty and lush greenery are exhibited through human relationships with ecological sensibility. Several critics express their thoughtful concerns about environmental preservation, which is often marked by a judicious combination of profound glory and conscious awakening to preserve and restore nature. The irreversible relationship between man and heaven is evident from the folktale of the divine origin of the Khasis. The folktale of *The Seven Huts* reflects on the origins of Khasis on Earth. It places humans at the centre of the universe, establishing their control over the earth and nature. According to Barnes L. Mawrie, there is an urge among the Khasis to consider themselves God's descendants who were sent from heaven to reside in the hills of Meghalaya. Mawrie throws light on the origin of the Khasis who travelled to reach their destination in the hills of Meghalaya (9). Simultaneously, the legend of *Lum Sohpetbneng Peak* extends the narrative about humans' access to heaven through a divine tree. These folk narratives strive to establish a human connection with the divine through nature. Therefore, nature serves as a manifestation of the divine, which keeps humans connected and grounded.

Khasi folk materials advance the regional essence with layers of instances related to the question of identity as well as space. It helps them reflect on their cultures and preserve their regional and social heritage from oblivion. This richness and abundance in the natural setting are amply reflected in the folktales, where the characters relate their authentic selves to nature's company. Ethnic Khasi food and practices are reflected in the tales. One such example is the tale *How the Dog Came to Live with Man* where readers get an insight into traditional food practices such as *ktungrymbai*, which is prepared from fermented Khasi beans, and carries a strong odour. It emphasises how dogs became closely connected to humans. This lore emphasizes how smartness can help one lead a life of comfort and contentment. The dog made a point to convince his master of his sham hard work by using his cunningness, and thereafter he became the favourite animal of men.

Numerous animals and birds are often personified in several well-known tales and fables. There are many examples of these personifications in nature from which a Khasi can learn moral lessons applicable to daily life (Mawrie 47). These stories share similarities with the well-known tales of *Aesop's Fables*. While *Aesop's Fables* unfold within a Greek backdrop, the thematic concern for environmental issues resonates deeply with Khasi folktales which are firmly rooted in the context of Khasi society. The thematic and structural connection between *Aesop's Fables* and the Khasi folktales can be drawn at a moral front as both strive to convey moral teachings through their stories. Khasi tales are also

charged with implicit or explicit moral teachings. The use of beast fables in Khasi folktales reminds us of *Aesop's Fables*. The oral traditions retained in both the folktales convey the history which is being passed down through ages.

The Khasi tribe is a conglomerate of clans, and each clan endorses a unique relationship with nature. It is a hub of various matrilineal customs where nature is held in high regard, epitomizing the relationship of women with Mother Nature. Even several Khasi folktales uphold the prominence of women in keeping the community united. The folktale of *The Goddess Who Came to Live with Mankind* embarks on how *Pah Syntiew*, the daughter of Mountain God U' Lei Shillong, came to live with the people of the village. She was not only assimilated into society but was also named the chosen head of the Khasi celebrations and dancing. She also handled community conflicts with great discretion, preserving peace in the area. It is because of her wise and bold nature that she came to be known as *Ka Siem* (the Chiefess, or the Queen).

Though the written history of the *Hynniew Trep* people, i.e., the Khasis, has fallen into oblivion, the presence of Khasi folktales has been a testimony to several cultural accounts of the land. The term "Khasi" (Nonglait 30) implies the people living in the hills of U Khyntiam, U Pnaror Jaintia, U Bhoi and U War. The people of this tribe find their existence in their extrinsic connection with hills, mountains, forests and rivers. The oral testimonies regarding the origins of the Khasis revolve around the narrative that establishes a divine bond between the Khasis and God. According to the oral lore of the Khasis, during the origin of mankind, there were sixteen families who resided with God in heaven. However, God sent seven families to Earth through the Golden Ladder, which connected Heaven with Earth. The seven families were detached from the connection of heaven and were left to acquire a living.

Khasi folktales strive to foster a sense of solidarity in the community. The folktale *What Makes the Eclipse* recounts how the whole community united to defend Ka Nam from the terrible Giant Tod's attack. What makes this tale unique is that it illustrates how cooperation and unity can conquer any adversity. Nature plays a vital role in uplifting an individual from his/her present woes and agony. It is the story of a young and pretty girl named Ka Nam. She became the subject of the gaze of many onlookers, such as the tiger U Khla, who abducted her with the intention to devour her in a feast. However, she was rescued by the magic tree, which expanded and directed her towards the Blue Realm, symbolising paradise. This folktale reflects that nature will change its behaviour to accommodate the aspirations of the needy and helpless. The Khasi folktales maintain that legends of this type display the empathetic side of nature. The urgency of nurturing nature to safeguard mankind is retained in Khasi lore.

Similarly, *The Legend of Mount Sophet Bneng* is based on folklore that embraces nature as the mediator between man and heaven. During those days, the earth was a place of abundance due to the limited interference of mankind. But due to



human pride and greed, the seven families from heaven were lured to descend to the earth due to the fertility of the land. They detached the connection between heaven and earth by cutting down the tree connecting paradise with earth. This microscopic instance of sabotaging nature led to the interference of humans in corrupting nature.

Furthermore, *The Tale of How the Peacock Got His Beautiful Feathers* reflects how greed leads to fall. The proud peacock, U Klew after attaining the love of the most beautiful lady, Ka Sngi was lured by the imitation of another beautiful lady. However, as Ka Sngi was forsaken by U Klew each drop of her tears painted the feathers of U Klew with various colours. This was to remind U Klew of the sorrow of Ka Sngi whom he deserted for another lady. However, after deserting her, he was left with no one to fall in love with again. This story provides a valuable lesson about how to curb greed and resist materialistic yearnings. By considering U Klew's experience, it is intended to serve as a reminder that one should be appreciative of people who support them during tough times.

*The Legend of the Iei Tree* is quite popular in ancient Khasi folklore. This tree was considered an idle shelter for fairies, nymphs, and foreign birds. No one dared to chop a twig or scratch the bark because it was blessed in a magical way. It was thought that anyone who messed with the tree would invite his/her own doom. When its magnanimous branches posed a threat to other species, a chirping tiny bird came to the rescue of the tree cutter, who informed them of the trick to get the tree struck down. This story demonstrates how a small bird can be a big assistance. Hence, it is these agents of nature that affect our minds and make us reflect on certain values. Many lessons about living in harmony and peace with one another can be learned from the coexistence of numerous creatures in the forest. The relationship between humans and nature becomes the subject of celebration in several Khasi folktales. This lore testifies to the harmony that prevailed when humans, animals, and nature co-existed in peace. The vivid portrayal of ecological concerns also reminds us of mainstream Indian fables such as the *Panchatantra* series. Several stories like “The Hunter and the Magical bird”, “The Elephant and the Hare” from the series are set in natural environment where nature itself serves as an independent character. The connection between the natural and human worlds highlights the importance of respecting and coexisting peacefully with the environment.

The psychological and emotional bond between humans and their surroundings is forged in a comparable manner in both *Panchatantra* and Khasi folktales. The inherent nature-human dynamics is also displayed in popular Assamese folktales. The renowned tale of “Tejimola” from Lakhminath Bezbaruah's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* embarks on nature as a primary source of solace for ailing Tejimola. The story illustrates how nature provides sustenance and nourishment to humanity. Amidst the cruelty inflicted by her stepmother, it was nature in its diverse forms that provided solace and shelter to her. Her transformation into a lotus after her

passing signifies her realization that nature serves as her ultimate abode, a place of eternal rest.

The Khasi folktales permeate the way of life of the people of Meghalaya. They lend access to the cultural and behavioural patterns of the Khasi lifestyle. The inherent bond with the natural environment is readily apparent in the lives of the indigenous or local population of Meghalaya, who predominantly reside amidst forests, mountains, lakes, and caves. Moreover, these natural landscapes serve as significant economic resources for the community, as many individuals derive their livelihood from these natural locales. Thus, it becomes obvious for them to uphold and preserve the natural assets accessible to them. For the Khasis, nature is elevated to the position of *Meiramew* which implies "Mother Nature" (Badlani). *Meiramew* caters to not merely a single object of nature but collective references to land, forests, rivers, lakes, and streams as they stand in a complete union. Among the Khasis, the urge to exercise ecological prudence is conspicuously evident. Another folk narrative that highlights nature as the supreme authority is the Jaintia folktale known as "Thlen Lawania and Blai Pynsum Kule" (Laloo 106). There is a belief that the serpent deity *U Thlen Lawania*, residing in the Lawania hill, and the Goddess *Ka Blai Pynsum Kule*, dwelling in the Pynsum Kule river, symbolized two potent forces: one malevolent and the other benevolent, respectively. Both of these deities embody the dual nature of the natural world, encompassing both a protector and a harbinger of destruction. Nonetheless, when humans recognized the potency of nature and began venerating it through various forms of sacrifices, harmony was reinstated in the region. This story underscores the importance of fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and nature to coexist peacefully.

### Conclusion

All these renowned folktales of the Khasis retain numerous cultural and ecopsychological significances. It carries an instructional role to hold the nature-human bond together by imparting wisdom and values that only nature is capable of showing. The depiction of mountains, rivers, and animals in Khasi folktales teaches ecological lessons and highlights the reverence and respect the Khasi people have for nature. The reading of the selected tales from K. U Ruffy's *Tales of the Khasis* enables an understanding that reveals the ecological wisdom and conventional ecological knowledge ingrained in Khasi storytelling. The stories, which are rich in cultural milieu, primarily focus on the interdependence between humans and nature. Emphasis on environmentally responsible behaviour and sustainable practices can redeem one from the precariousness posited by environmental hazards. Ecopsychology, as a recent discipline, shall offer psychological insights in addressing contemporary environmental challenges and tracing sustainable measures to meet the challenges. It encourages ecological awareness, promotes cultural preservation, and motivates sustainable actions. Ecopsychology primarily foregrounds the relationship between humans and nature, which affects the mind, attitude and behaviour of individuals. Khasi

folktales are ingrained with ecological consciousness to uphold the significance of nature, as nature nurtures values, wisdom, and knowledge in humans. Hence, identifying and preserving these narratives can contribute to a more comprehensive approach to environmental conservation and promote a positive coexistence between humans and the natural world.

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