

# Meitei Folklore as a Mirror of Ecological Consciousness: Exploring ‘There Came Tapta’, ‘Keibu Keioiba’, and ‘The Bird Langmeiton’

**Wairokpm Yaiphaba Chenglei**

## ABSTRACT

Manipur, a state in northeastern India, is home to the Meitei people, who belong to the Tibeto Burman race. Before the emergence of Gaudiya Vaisnavism in the 1470s (during King Kiyamba's reign), the community's religion was Sanamahism. They worshipped *Lainingthou* Sanamahi (mankind's protector and guardian God), Kuru (Creator of the Universe), *Pakhangba* (ruler of the universe and destroyer of evil), *Leimarel Sidabi* (earth Goddess), *Imoinu* (Goddess of Wealth), and the *Umang Lai* (a group of forest deities believed to protect specific areas). The society and culture of the Meitei people are reflected in their folklores, which have been orally transmitted since ancient times. Meitei folklore has been preserved in the form of “*phunga wari*” which translates as “story of kitchen fireplace”. “*Phunga wari*” is usually narrated near a fireplace in the kitchen of a Meitei household by an elderly person in the family to the younger ones, imparting moral lessons. The stories reflect the Meiteis' deep-seated connection with nature, values of sustainability, environmental ethics, and respect for the natural world. This paper examines Meitei folklore from an ecocritical perspective, exploring ecological consciousness in selected folklores: “There Came Tapta”, “Keibu Keioiba” and “The Bird *Langmeiton*” translated into English by Dr. Kh. Kunjo Singh.

**Keywords:** Meitei, folklore, nature, sustainability, ecological consciousness.

## INTRODUCTION

Ecological consciousness or environmental consciousness is a term in Ecocriticism which can be explained as the cognizance of the complex interrelationship between nature and humans as it is expressed in philosophy, literature, and culture. It places a strong emphasis on sustainability, environmental responsibility, and treating nature with respect. As an interdisciplinary approach, ecocriticism examines how cultural narratives and literature influence and mirror this ecological consciousness, promoting a closer bond between the natural world and human life. Victor I. Panov in his article “Ecological Thinking, Consciousness, Responsibility” comments:

In general terms the ecological consciousness is understood as a reflection of the psyche of a variety of man’s relationship with nature, which mediate its behavior in the “natural world”, and express axiological position of the subject of consciousness in relation to the natural world. And studies show that environmental consciousness is a complex mental education, which includes cognitive, regulatory, emotional, ethical, and other aspects. (380)

Panov’s approach of equating ecological consciousness to ‘mental education’ convinces us that ecological consciousness is a methodical accumulation of knowledge through study, experience, or being taught. The critic’s statement draws our attention to the fact that indigenous people’s culture of worshipping nature and their ecological consciousness are not indicative of having a primordial culture. Rather it is an indication of having an intelligence regarding sustainability and coexistence.

## ECOGOTHICAL ELEMENTS IN MEITEI FOLKLORE

Eco-Gothic is a critical concept in ecocriticism that investigates how literature and culture describe nature as dreadful and majestic, conveying humanity’s fears and anxieties. It is usually found in folklores around the world that to foster respect and a sense of caution toward the natural world, it includes a trepidation of nature, portraying it as a strong, unpredictable entity that has a potential to cause destruction or death.

Meitei Folklore is entrenched with ecogothical elements which reflect the veneration the people have for nature. “There Came Tapta” is an anecdote which is about a non-existent imaginary character named

“*Tapta*”. It is an imaginary creation of a mother who does so to stop her infant from crying incessantly. The term *Tapta* is composed of two words: “*tap*” (sound of water drops falling from the roof on the ground) and “*ta*” (meaning “to fall”). The tale begins in a stormy night, as heavy rain poured down, a thief sneaked in to steal a horse from the child’s home, while a tiger also arrived, intending to hunt one of the horses. Both the thief and the tiger hid in the dark corners of the stable, waiting for the right moment to act. Meanwhile, the child’s mother tried to soothe the crying child by mentioning various fearsome creatures—an elephant, a horse, a lion, and a tiger—but the child’s wailing continued. The helpless mother finally uttered “*tapta*” inspired by the sound of the raindrops falling from their “*sajin*” (roof eave). The child suddenly stopped crying. The thief and the tiger, both convinced that “*Tapta*” was a formidable entity, remained wary in the darkness. As the thief groped around the stable in search of a horse, he unknowingly grabbed the legs of the hiding tiger, mistaking it for his target. The tiger, just as frightened, assumed the thief was the feared “*Tapta*” and obediently submitted. Oblivious to the misunderstanding, the thief saddled the tiger and rode off into the forest. At daybreak, the thief realized his mistake—he had taken a tiger instead of a horse—and attempted to flee. Noticing a tree branch along the way, he swiftly leaped onto it, leaving the tiger to continue running. When the tiger sensed that “*Tapta*” was no longer on his back, he assumed that the mysterious being could fly. Later, he shared his strange encounter with other animals, which were sceptical but agreed to accompany him to the location. In the meantime, the thief hid inside a hollow tree. As the animals searched for “*Tapta*,” they experienced a series of unfortunate incidents—such as the bear having its tail yanked and the elephant suffering a painful blow to its trunk—further convincing them of “*Tapta’s*” terrifying power. Finally, the lion, the king of the forest, decided to investigate. By then, the thief had already escaped, yet the animals remained firm in their belief that the mighty and fearsome “*Tapta*” truly existed.

*Tapta* can be seen as an allegory for nature’s strength, mystery, and effect on human and animal life. In the story, the mere utterance of “*Tapta*” instils fear and submission in not only the crying child, but also the thief and the tiger, shaping their behaviour and reactions. When viewed through an ecocritical lens, *Tapta* portrays nature’s enigmatic

and uncontrollable force, emphasizing humanity's profound reverence and horror of the natural world. Nature often exerts silent control over living beings, much as *Tapta*, whose existence is never clearly revealed yet governs the conduct of the characters. The tiger, a symbol of wild nature, is subdued by the fear of *Tapta*, demonstrating how even the most formidable creatures can be subdued by a greater natural force, just as storms, earthquakes, and wild animals instil fear and demand respect. The thief and the tiger's belief in *Tapta* reflects the age-old human tendency to attribute unexplained natural phenomena to mystical or divine forces. The narrative of "There Came *Tapta*" follows the Eco-Gothic tradition, which depicts nature as both awe-inspiring and horrifying, combining ecological issues with Gothic terror. In the story, the mysterious and unknown force of "Tapta" instils fear in both humans and animals, similar to the dark, untamed aspects of nature that Gothic literature frequently examines. *Tapta*'s combination of superstition, fear of the unknown, and nature's supremacy makes it an engaging example of Eco-Gothic storytelling. *Tapta* is never seen but is deeply feared, giving the story a spooky, almost otherworldly quality. The fear of *Tapta* can be classified as 'ecophobia'. Ecophobia is another name for eco-depression or eco-anxiety. It is a term coined by Simon C. Estok. Estok explains in his book *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* that "The ecophobic condition exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment. *Tapta*'s mystery heightens the anxiety, demonstrating how the unknown qualities of nature cause fear and surrender. The story reflects humanity's long-held fear of the outdoors, where unknown perils lurk in forests, mountains, and dark landscapes. The thief's plight reflects traditional Gothic themes of punishment and the repercussions of transgression. He tries to influence nature (by stealing a horse), but is outwitted and eventually plagued by his blunder. Nature (represented by the tiger's dread and belief in *Tapta*) maintains a supernatural order, and those who violate it suffer. It reminds us of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, in which Victor Frankenstein's attempt to control life leads to his demise, much as the thief's attempt to control nature results in unexpected horror. The story is set in a gothic style as well. The eerie, spectral effect is heightened by the darkness of the forest and the stable. The burglar discovers his terrible error in the

forest, which turns into a place of terror and metamorphosis akin to Gothic castles or haunted mansions. The animals' continued faith in Tapta's abilities after the thief vanishes is a reflection of the unsolved mysteries and lingering fear that Gothic stories frequently leave behind. The idea that nature is alive and has magical power is explored in several Eco-Gothic tales. In the story, Tapta assumes the role of a spectral being, a natural force that both people and animals fear. An innate fear of the unpredictable character of nature is reflected in the phobia of *Tapta*. The narrative of *Tapta* exemplifies essential Eco-Gothic themes, portraying nature as a dark, mysterious, and malevolent entity. The hidden spirit of *Tapta*, the anxiety it inflicts, and the strange misinterpretations of the thief and tiger all reflect Gothic horror's themes of the supernatural, the unknown, and nature's overwhelming power.

“*Keibu Keioiba*” is another story that can be observed from an eco-gothish perspective. The story is about a “*maiba*” (a Meitei priest who is authorised to perform the sacred rites and rituals of Sanamahism) named Kabui Salang Maiba who turns into a tiger while experimenting with his wisdom on necromancy. The *maiba* who finally turns into a “*Keibu Keioiba*” (half human half tiger beasts) gets his befitting punishment for trespassing to the unknown wilderness while crossing the boundary of the human world. After being rejected by his wife, *Keibu Keioiba* wandered in forests for food and shelter. Describing the character of *Keibu Keioiba*, Kh. Kunjo Singh in his book *Folk Tales of Hills and Plains of Manipur* comments:

His body was very much the same with that of man. Only the head looked like that of a tiger. Like tiger he also had two four toes. But Keibu Keioiba has five fingers and five toes like human beings. As he was man-turned tiger he was wiser than the other real tigers ... “He was a man who new magic and black art” (69)

*Keibu Keioiba* is unable to return to the human society though he dreams of having a family by kidnapping “Thabaton,” a young and beautiful girl. His fate is the consequence of his overambitious attempt to control nature and dominate it through his knowledge. The story imparts the message that nature cannot be tamed or understood fully. He tried to acquire the power to change into a tiger, he engaged in witchcraft. He becomes permanently trapped in a hybrid form as a result of his attempt to manipulate nature by fusing human intellect with animal strength. *Keibu*

*Keioiba* lived forever in exile, who could not be accepted into either of the worlds: the human world and the animal world. His dual life as a human during the day and a tiger at night implies an internal battle in which he is permanently stuck between civilization and the wilderness—a punishment for attempting to control both.

Gothic literature emphasizes the sense of dread and the unknown through the use of settings such as haunted houses, dark woodlands, and scary vistas. Thabaton is imprisoned in the woodland in *Keibu Keioiba*, which serves as a Gothic setting of peril and captivity. In keeping with the Eco-Gothic notion of nature as both a haven and a terrifying place, it symbolizes the untamed, wild world outside of human civilization. Similar to Gothic stories where nature is alive with supernatural presence, the forest actively shapes the plot rather than just serving as a backdrop. The Eco-Gothic idea that nature administers its own justice is strengthened by *Keibu Keioiba*'s demise. His conceit in utilizing magic to change into a tiger ultimately brings him to ruin, signifying the peril of upsetting the natural order. The narrative functions as an environmental allegory, stressing the importance of natural law over human ambition and cautioning against the abuse of nature. *Keibu Keioiba*'s story exemplifies Eco-Gothicism by presenting nature as a terrifying and amazing power. The hybrid form of *Keibu Keioiba* exemplifies the ambiguous line between man and beast, civilization and wildness. The gloomy forest and the punishment for breaching nature's law all add to the Gothic atmosphere. Finally, the story warns against human arrogance in influencing nature, reaffirming the Eco-Gothic belief that nature is an overwhelming, uncontrollable force that must be valued.

### ECOFEMINISM IN MEITEI FOLKLORE

Ecofeminism investigates the complex relationship between women's oppression and environmental exploitation, contending that both are victims of patriarchal and capitalist forces. Ecofeminist themes frequently appear in folktales through the image of women as nature's caregivers, their suffering under repressive regimes, and their eventual emancipation through a return to the natural environment. Women in folktales are frequently related with nature, either by their involvement with nature through their activities or their metamorphosis into natural beings.

The tale of “*Uchek Langmeiton*” tells the story of Hayainu, a young girl who transforms into a hornbill to escape the cruelty of her stepmother. After her mother’s death, Hayainu’s father remarries and later leaves to earn a living, leaving her in the care of her stepmother. The stepmother mistreats Hayainu, forcing her to do all the household chores, beating her, and even locking her up without food. One night, Hayainu dreams of her deceased mother, who advises her to seek refuge with a flock of hornbills. Following the dream, she gathers their feathers, stitches them to her body, and flies away with them. When Hayainu’s father returns and learns of her fate, he is devastated and punishes his wife. He repeatedly calls out to Hayainu, hoping she will return. Eventually, she appears with the hornbills but refuses to return, saying she now belongs to the bird world. She bids farewell and flies away, never to return. The tale reflects themes of suffering, transformation, and liberation, portraying Hayainu’s escape into nature to reclaim freedom from oppression.

The folktale of *Uchek Langmeiton* (also known as *Chekla Langmeiton*) is profoundly steeped in ecofeminist concepts, emphasizing the relationship between gender oppression and nature. Hayainu, the principal female character, endures systemic abuse from her stepmother before finding liberation through her metamorphosis into a bird. The narrative echoes ecofeminist themes about how patriarchal structures oppress both women and nature, while simultaneously portraying nature as a place of sanctuary, resistance, and regeneration. Ecofeminism criticizes patriarchal institutions that oppress both women and nature. In *Uchek Langmeiton*, Hayainu signifies women’s suffering in a male-dominated society. She is treated as a servant, compelled to perform all household and survival activities, exemplifying how women’s labor is frequently mistreated and underpaid. Her stepmother’s harshness exemplifies how women can become enforcers of patriarchal oppression, perpetuating systems that dehumanize and dominate other women. Her father, despite loving her, is absent and impotent, demonstrating how male figures frequently fail to protect. Hayainu’s sufferings can also be observed as a consequence of polygamy. Her father’s remarriage creates a hierarchical family system in which the stepmother, as the new wife, imposes power over Hayainu. This leads to extreme neglect and abuse, as the stepmother sees Hayainu as a burden rather than a daughter.

Hayainu's plight exposes the emotional and psychological effects of polygamous unions, particularly when co-wives show preference and animosity against their offspring. Furthermore, the father's absence, caused by the necessity to maintain multiple family members, exposes Hayainu to her stepmother's harshness. His inability to safeguard his daughter exemplifies how badly managed polygamous institutions can result in the marginalization of particular family members.

Ecofeminism frequently presents nature as a place where downtrodden women can escape from human injustices and achieve empowerment. Hayainu rejects social norms and finds comfort in dreams, birds, and the wilderness rather than in interpersonal connections. The folktale predominantly highlights the special bond women have with nature. Hayainu can communicate with Uchek Langmeiton (hornbills) asking them to shed their feathers so that she could transform herself into Uchek Langmeiton. She shares her agony with the birds: "Mother advised me to join you birds instead of spending desperate life with my stepmother and for which I should request you to drop down some quills" (107)

Hayainu's metamorphosis into a hornbill signals a bold break from oppression—choosing nature over patriarchy. Her metamorphosis is self-selected rather than imposed, signifying how nature offers an alternative to constrictive human structures. Ecofeminists contend that women's relationship with nature is not only one of oppression but also of resistance, with women regaining their agency by embracing nature's strength in the same way that nature resists it. Although Hayainu's stepmother expects her to submit, she chooses a new life that is uncontrollable by humans. Her assimilation into the bird kingdom challenges the fundamental ecofeminist tenet that nature is distinct from humans. She accepts a non-hierarchical way of being by merging with nature, free from gendered expectations and human harshness. The patriarchal desire to control women is reflected in her father's demands for her return, but Hayainu rejects them and asserts her new identity as a free being in nature. Sydee and Beder in their article "Ecofeminism and Globalisation: a critical appraisal" rightly points out that "Ecofeminism insists on breaking apart these dualisms (hierarchies) to re(create) a society of reciprocity and mutuality without hierarchy or domination." (3)

In the compelling narrative of Uchek Langmeiton, nature is a source of strength. Hayainu's metamorphosis into a hornbill represents women's defiance of oppression and demonstrates how nature provides a haven from patriarchal systems. Tragically, though, the story also depicts the fact that women who pursue freedom in nature frequently do so at the expense of never re-entering human society. Ecofeminist concerns about how women and environment suffer under patriarchal rule but also can fight and reinvent their existence are in line with the story's themes of oppression, metamorphosis, and defiance. By choosing to remain with the hornbills, Hayainu rejects human society's rigid gender roles and finds freedom in nature.

## CONCLUSION

Meitei folklore exhibits a strong sense of environmental consciousness, depicting the harmonious yet complex interplay between humans, animals, and nature. The stories of "There Came Tapta," "Keibu Keioiba," and "The Bird Langmeiton" accentuate the perils of distressing the law of nature. "There Came Tapta" depicts the human-nature link, highlighting the supremacy of nature over all entities. "Keibu Keioiba" serves as a cautioning narrative which warns human beings from exploiting and dominating nature, demonstrating how such involvement can result in disastrous outcomes. "The Bird Langmeiton" portrays nature as a haven for the oppressed (Hayainu), confirming the notion that nature is a space of healing and freedom outside the human world. When taken as a whole, these folktales offer an Eco ethical perspective in which nature is viewed as a living being with agency rather than merely a resource. Meitei folklore is filled with indigenous wisdom, which encourages people to live in harmony with nature rather than subjugate it. By examining these tales from an ecocritical perspective, we may see their applicability in the modern world, where environmental damage is still occurring as a result of human exploitation. Thus, Meitei folklore teaches us the importance of ecological balance, sustainable living, and a profound respect for nature.

## Reference:

Estok, Simon. "Introduction". *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*. Routledge, 2018, pp. 1-19

Singh, Kh. Kunjo. *Folk Tales of Hills and Plains of Manipur*. Borasa Publication, 2018.

Sydee, Jasmine, and Beder, Sharon. "Ecofeminism and Globalisation: a critical appraisal." *Democracy and Nature*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2001, pp.1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10855660120064600>

Victor, I. Panov. "Ecological Thinking, Consciousness, Responsibility" *Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences*, vol 86, 2013, pp.379-383.