

Exploring the Relationship between Man and Nature in Dhruba Hazarika's *Luck*

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Literature from North-East India is popular mostly in the representation of the various political problems and violence that are typical to the north-east situation. However, many contemporary writers are breaking free from the shackles of these stereotypical and over-represented issues and are bringing to light other remarkable features of the region. Dhruba Hazarika is one such writer who consciously moves away from the portrayal of the typical problems of the region and instead creates a deep impact in the minds of the readers by his representation of man's essential connection to the world of nature. His collection of short stories titled *Luck* portrays, as Ruskin Bond says, his "empathy with all creatures great and small" and is like a breath of fresh air in the body of North-East literature.

The focus of this paper is on Hazarika's portrayal of the complex relationship that man shares with the world of nature. Set amidst the backdrop of various places in the North-East, these stories present man's destructive nature, similar qualities that he shares with the animal world, and the solace that he ultimately receives in the unconditional company of other species.

Literature from North-East India abounds in tales of the troubled political climate, violence, backwardness, underdevelopment and poverty. The unique geographical positioning of the seven states and their equally different political, economic and social situations from the rest of the country, have resulted in the rise of a body of writing that is considered to be different from mainstream Indian English Literature. However, many contemporary writers of the North-Eastern states like, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai and Harekrishna Deka, have expressed their discomfort with the terms 'North-East literature' and 'North-East writers' as they relate those with the colonial legacy. Senior Editor of *Zubaan*, Preeti Gill rightly states "To say that the Northeastern states are different from the rest of India in almost every way is to state the obvious, but it is important to recognise that these 'differences' have created rifts, giving rise to insurgencies, demands for secession from the Indian state and years of internal conflict and discontent. To the people of the Northeast their world is central to themselves; to 'mainland India' it is a borderland." (*Tehelka* 2009) There is a growing tendency among the writers of these states to break themselves free from the shackles of stereotypical writing. The strong political awareness, issues related to identity and ethnicity, violence in different forms, and above all the shadow of the gun are some of the common realities of North-East India which hardly any writer of that region can ignore in their works. Many writers of the modern day period, however, have shown a desire to move away from the over-stereotyped and typical 'North-East' issues and have brought to light other under-represented remarkable features of the region. It has been pointed out correctly: "It is tragic that the long-running unrest, violence and terrorism in the North-East has remained a mere digression in the mainstream of the Indian nation-state....The poems by Uddipana Goswami....stories by Mitra Phukan, Srutimala Duara and Aruni Kashyap, serve as a reminder that the "North-East" is not a geographical, political unit, but a place of many languages and cultures." (*Pratilipi* 2010) It is in this context that (re)viewing the works of many

writers of the North-East region becomes important to discover the rich legacy of the place, its people, their cultures and traditions.

Dhruba Hazarika is one such writer of today's time who focuses on issues which have remained under-represented but are close to the hearts of every man living in the North-East. Nature and its relationship to man has always remained one of the recurrent themes in the works of the North-East writers. The beautiful landscape of the region has time and again formed the most desired backdrop to the works of many North-East writers. Writers like Mitra Phukan, Easterine Iralu, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Anjum Hasan, Jahnvi Baruah, Siddhartha Deb and many more have brought alive the traditions, cultures, and popular beliefs of the region by highlighting the all-encompassing presence of nature in the lives of the people of the North-East. Mamang Dai, like many North-East writers, gives much prominence to nature and holds it as a common link that binds all those in the otherwise heterogeneous entity of the North-East together on a common platform. She says, "...we also have the land...the whole geographical continuity...the forests, the mountains, it's all the Eastern Himalayas belt...the big rivers link us...with the landscape comes a common shared culture and a relationship to the land..." (*The Hindu* 2010) Hazarika in his collection of short stories titled *Luck* carries on Dai's feelings further and presents man's relationship with nature from the perspective of someone who is familiar to the natural world of the North-East region. In many of the stories included in *Luck*, Hazarika gives the background of common everyday problems of the region, but his focus is more on man in relation to the world of nature. Considered to be an elegant and moving collection of short stories, Hazarika's book is about unlikely encounters between human beings and animals. He presents an intangible, almost mystical connection between humans and the other species. The narratives present people with whom readers can identify as they are common representatives of today's world – self-absorbed people, caught up in day to day worldly matters. Hazarika presents the flickering moments when human beings amidst their daily hustle and bustle realize the deep relationship that they share with the other denizens of the natural world.

In almost all the stories included in *Luck*, Hazarika explores the comfort and soothing effect that man draws from the relationship he shares with nature. In a sense, these are all coming-of-age tales. The title story is about a solitary man learning a thing or two about patience and caring in the company of a pigeon. Man's loneliness in this vast world is brought to light in the narrator's urge to have pets right from his childhood days. But somehow, his house turned unlucky for the umpteen numbers of parrots, chicken, ducks, rabbits and dogs that they got. The pets either flew away or ran off and the narrator was led to feel that they were like "...guests who had been forced into being guests, or people who had strayed into camps that cut off their freedom, they stayed awhile, enlivening the compound, and then, when the spell came, they were gone and there was nothing you could do about it." (*Luck* 6) Even the roadside mongrel that he had tried to care for found peace only when they let him loose and allowed him to seek his own home, wherever it was. These repeated experiences makes the narrator to believe that their "...house was taboo for animals and birds" and maybe even "for humans, since no man or woman lasted very long, either." (*Luck* 6) Hazarika touches upon the issues of man's loneliness, urge for company and the feeling of incompleteness in this story. The narrator, a loner, seeks company in the form of a pigeon whom he calls Luck, as he believes that bird to have turned his destiny in the right direction. In Luck's "sparkle and confidence – his proud gait, the chest always thrust out, as he came to pick the gram from my hand; the way his eyes darted around without fear or suspicion; the graceful fall of his wings as he settled like an owl over the box for the night" (*Luck* 14-15), the narrator tries to draw comfort as he admires the bird for qualities

that he has always desired for. In the narrator's admiration for the pigeon, the reader gets reminded of the narrator in D.H. Lawrence's poem 'Snake' who is awestruck at the beauty and dignified appearance of the snake who comes to drink water from his water-trough: "...must I confess how I liked him,/ How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough/ And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,/ Into the burning bowels of this earth?" (Lawrence 1923) Luck, the pigeon, not only gives comfort to the narrator, he is also able to provide company, a feeling of completeness and above all, changes the nature of the narrator. In the company of the bird, the man does something which he had never done before – inviting his neighbour and his wife for lunch. His communication to his colleagues in the office, which had always been minimal, also changes for the better. The narrator is not only able to derive mental comfort, but is also in a position to learn important values of life through his association with the bird. As with the narrator in "Luck", the young, melancholy magistrate portrayed in "Chicken Fever" relates to the hens which he gave all his "time and attention....much as army men polish their shoes and iron their uniforms at sunrise." (*Luck* 34) Rattan Deb Barman is a man who is always awkward at home, with his newly wedded wife and is overly conscious of his shortcomings. The hens in the hen-coop that Barman has built himself, provides him with much solace to combat the emotional insecurities that trouble him. On a police raid, supposed to be risky, his mood is altered by the sight of a fat black hen in a haystack and this affects a crucial choice he makes in saving the life of a young girl. The hen, guarding her brood of chicks, takes away the fear from his mind. He regains hope and feels less afraid and desolate, and when time comes, is able to act immediately to save the girl. In the character of Rattan Deb Barman, Hazarika portrays man's essential bonding with fellow creatures. He not only saves the girl from the destructive eyes of his own people, but also "prayed the girl wouldn't move, would hold her breath and still her wildly beating heart" (*Luck* 54) as the policemen ransacked the huts. Even though probably laughed at by his subordinates at his eccentricities in saving the hen and her brood, Barman is finally able to feel proud for having done a good deed. Peaceful within himself, at last, he is able to understand his wife better and the story ends with the possibility of a better relationship between the husband and the wife. Hazarika in these narratives portrays people who are able to discover something familiar in other creatures while they discover something unfamiliar in themselves. This close bonding of man with nature leads to self-satisfaction and a rewarding experience for him in other facets of his life.

However, Hazarika does not portray only the positive aspect of man's relationship with nature. Man, in his selfish interests, does not care for the lives around him. "The Hunt" portrays man's destructive qualities as a party of four men kills an innocent, beautiful doe in the jungles of Karbi Anglong. Considered to be an illegal activity, they slit the animal open as they "couldn't carry the doe in one piece to Diphu. The guards at the checkpoint at the 6th mile would nail you for less." (*Luck* 3) The doctor, who had shot the bullet and killed the doe, on slitting open the stomach of the dead animal, discovers to his dismay, three "tiny spindly-green, almost transparent bodies roll out of the mother's womb..." (*Luck* 3). The men start feeling uncomfortable at the sight, but the doctor is the bereaved of all as he relates that to the personal tragedy of losing his wife at childbirth just a year back. Many traditional beliefs of the people in the North-East regions are also portrayed by the author in the offerings made by the hunters to the forest gods and seeking forgiveness from the gods for having killed the doe. Temsula Ao represents similar beliefs while describing her grandmother who similar to many others of that region had "clung to the core of her native faith about the human soul turning into birds or insects..." (*Harmony Magazine* 2007) The doctor and the other hunters in Hazarika's story also

share similar beliefs about the essential oneness in the existence of man in relation to other living creatures. The author, however, moves a step beyond and shows the complexity in human psychology as presented in the character of the doctor. No doubt he laments the death of the doe and on discovering the unborn fawns in her womb is found “lying on top of the slain doe, holding her neck” (*Luck* 4) in his moment of profound grief, but nevertheless he is the one responsible for killing the innocent animal. Chief Seattle, the chief of the Suquamish Indians, allegedly wrote to the American Government in the 1800s regarding modern man’s tendency to destroy the natural world in his selfish interests. His letter stated that – “Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many men and the view of the ripe hills is blotted with talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone! Where will the eagle be? Gone! And what is to say goodbye to the swift pony and then hunt? The end of living and the beginning of survival.” (*Prologue Magazine* 1985) True to what Chief Seattle had predicted, man does not hesitate to destroy the world of nature for his own selfish interests, and the doctor chooses to hunt innocent animals in order to forget his own personal grief. A similar picture is presented by Hazarika in “Ghostie”, where an unusual, ghostlike dog becomes a test of the limits of human cruelty, and perhaps, a catalyst to understand what growing up really means. Whereas in “The Hunt” Hazarika has portrayed adults indulging in cruelty towards innocent animals, in “Ghostie” it is young boys who derive fun and excitement by torturing a dog. It is also the coming-of-age story of the narrator, a ten-year-old boy, who has indulged in hurting the dog without any reasons, but undergoes a complete change towards the end. The narrator and his friends make it a point to torture the dog every now and then by “occasionally being cruel as only children can be.” (*Luck* 69) Their cruelties, however, knew no bounds, which ranged from hitting the dog, hurling balls, splashing hot water and at last to shoot bullets at the dog. Their aggressiveness and desire to hurt increased evermore as a result of the silent presence of the dog who never gave them the pleasure by reacting to their cruelties. This nature of the dog slowly gained him admiration from the boys who realized that ghostie with his “aloof and confident look, the shine of his coat, the broken ear, the undulating muscular body delineating what each of us hoped to be one day: tough both inside and outside. Though even as boys we knew he was everything that we would never be.” (*Luck* 76) Ghostie succumbs at last to the bullet shot at him by one of the boys and disappears forever but nevertheless, becomes instrumental in the changes in the narrator from being a callous boy to a more responsible human being. Hazarika seems to be really concerned with this irresponsible nature of young boys and explores it further in “Soul Egret”, a first-person narrative by a clerk whose troubled mind is soothed by a brief physical contact with an egret late one night. The egrets who live in the branches of the fig trees in front of the narrator’s room, offers him much solace in his lonely existence in the staff hostel, away from family and friends. The beautiful birds are however not free from the cruel eyes of the children who reside in nearby quarters. The narrator finds this cruelty most disturbing and often scolds the children. He becomes very vigilant when once on asking the children why they want to disturb the birds, “they grinned and mumbled something about the taste of birds’ flesh” (*Luck* 125) and thereafter, he starts protecting the egrets as though they were his possessions. However, he is not able to protect them for a long time and the egrets are eaten and sold off by the boys when the nest falls down after a storm. The narrator derives comfort as he is able to save one lone bird and puts it back on the branch of a neem tree. Hazarika presents man’s essential bonding with nature in the portrayal of the narrator’s drawing comfort in the company of the egret and consciously subduing his momentary urge to keep the bird captive. Hazarika’s

characters respond in different ways to the knowledge that they gain in the company of the other creatures. They might be humbled, or enlightened, or comforted but they do change for the better in their association with the creatures that they come across.

Hazarika's collection of stories do not merely portray man's positive relationship with other creatures and his destructive attitude, he goes a step further in exploring the world of man and nature – the inherent similar qualities shared by both. In "The Leopard" the author presents three boys in search of a missing cow, probably pregnant, who fleetingly come face to face with a predatory leopard. The boys are shocked at discovering the leopard coming "out of the cow's stomach, teeth bared in a defensive snarl, its sleek body caked in blood." (*Luck* 32) But more than the shock, it is the sense of justice which attracts the attention of the narrator when he gets to know the same leopard being killed by the villagers and the discovery of the two starving cubs beyond the mountains. As most of the stories in this collection are about the knowledge and experience gained by men in their association with the world of nature, the narrator here gets to understand the conflicts in the animal kingdom which are quite similar to our situation as well the concept of the survival of the fittest. In recounting his experiences with nature, the narrator grows wise by learning certain truths of man's existence in this world. Hazarika's portrayal of the negative qualities in the world of animals, similar to the world of man, is again portrayed in the story "Vultures". The narrator cannot identify the vultures feasting on the dead bodies as birds as for him birds were the "pigeons and sparrows and mynahs and parrots" which "lived on gram and green grass and the occasional earthworm. Birds were crows, despite their never-ending cawing, and birds were owls, eternal in their dignity and wisdom. I could not think of vultures as birds." (*Luck* 115) Hazarika probably includes a story on vultures to highlight similar characteristics in human beings. The way the author presents their physical description as "huge and ominous....black and grey and hunched, their necks old and crooked" (*Luck* 120) the reader can get a clear picture of similar characteristics in the world of human beings. Hazarika portrays these similar qualities in the world of human beings and the world of nature; positive aspects like motherhood as well as negative ones like destruction and the feral nature of both man and animals.

Hazarika, however, is at his best as a narrator in the slightly different stories titled "Asylum" and "The Gunrunner of Jorabat" which are unique in their tone and effect. "Asylum" is a nicely playful story about a vet-cum-psychiatrist who might be experiencing some very odd hallucinations. The author portrays a man with his animal-like qualities in the representation of the vet, Hargovind. Even though he nurtures a close bonding with the various animals in his possession – a cat, a dog, pigs, pigeons and hens – he does not hesitate to show his cruelty in turning a sane man mad and putting him in the asylum. He further carries on an illicit relationship with the man's wife and goes on injecting him periodically to keep him insane. The author portrays such inhuman qualities in men in various other characters in the stories in the book. "The Gunrunner of Jorabat" is the only story in which Hazarika makes no mention of animals and yet it is as powerful as the other stories in representing the distinctly animal-like qualities of men. Written in the informal, rustic voice of a partly drunken narrator, the story unfolds men who are worse than animals. These are men who derive pleasure in torturing others, molesting girls, and killing innocent lives. Hazarika's narration comes full circle with this story as he is ultimately able to create the maximum emotional impact on his readers with his poignant description of human nature and the everlasting bond which exists between man and the world of nature.

Dhruba Hazarika's *Luck* brings alive many remarkable features of the North-East, usually kept in the periphery and is able to prove wrong the "assumption that literature from North-East should capture the blood, violence and terror that ravages this part of India." (Kashyap) Hazarika's book, instead, captures the traditions, culture and beliefs, and lifestyle of the people in the North-East. He devotes much of his attention in portraying the loneliness of man, be it in the backdrop of the jungles of Karbi Anglong, the hills of Shillong, or the staff quarters in Tezpur - Hazarika's narrators share the feeling of being loners, and so seek solace in the company of other creatures. No doubt, the narratives abound in tales of people who are cruel and selfish to innocent creatures, but in most of the cases, realization dawns soon and they change for the better. Ultimately, *Luck* is a celebration of the bonding between man and the world of nature – a bonding which is essential from the perspective of every man's existence in this world.

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