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## Thoreauvian Imagination in Dhruba Hazarika's *The Shoot*

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### Abstract

Ecocriticism has emerged as an important medium through which environmental concerns can be examined and negotiated. Often regarded as one of the foundational texts of ecocritical scholarship, Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) uses Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as a touchstone to explore ecological ideas in literature. Drawing on Thoreau's close observations of nature and his affinity for everything wild, Buell composes a framework that has largely been applied to Western literary traditions. This paper explores the applicability of Buell's concept of an environmental text to an analysis of Dhruba Hazarika's representation of the environment in his collection *The Shoot* (2025). Despite coming from different geographical and cultural contexts, Hazarika and Thoreau share several convergences, particularly in their attentiveness to the natural world and their ability to find the extraordinary within seemingly mundane experiences. Through a qualitative analysis of selected short stories from the collection, the study examines themes such as kinship, human-animal encounters, animal abuse, and the sense of wonder and awe that emerges from encounters with and within nature. The paper argues that several of the environmental values presented through the analysis of Thoreau's work by Buell can also be seen in the writings of Hazarika, thus confirming the general applicability of Buell's approach, and the universality of ecological thought.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, northeast literature, american literature, the shoot, thoreauvian imagination.

The urgency of our current ecological crisis has lent wings to various sectors of society, as we attempt to undo the damage that has already been done. In order to tackle what world renowned natural historian David Attenborough calls the "biggest threat to security that modern humans have ever faced" (Attenborough), action is required from all approaches. In the realm of literature, authors worldwide have undertaken the task of exploring our current epoch through fiction and nonfiction. For instance, the genre of climate fiction, or "cli-fi," for short, has emerged as an avenue that contends with climate change. J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) imagines a future where intense solar radiation has melted polar ice caps and transformed most of earth's land into flooded tropical regions. Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) depicts a proximate future where the United States has been decimated by climate change, disparity in wealth, and capitalist exploitation.

Within the context of Indian authors, works of nonfiction such as *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021) by historian Dipesh Chakrabarty reframes human history in light of the climate crisis. He develops the idea that humans have become a "geological agent" (3) as evidenced by the Anthropocene. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh goes further and adds that the "Anthropocene presents a

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challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our common-sense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general.” He argues that climate change is not just an environmental crisis but also a crisis of literature, history, politics, and “a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (4).

In literary theory, recent scholarship such as Ecocriticism has been deconstructing the culture-nature binary. Instead of division, scholars emphasize the entanglement of human and nonhuman worlds. Published in 1995, Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* is regarded as one of the foundational texts of the field. In it, he uses Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) as a vehicle to explore the ways in which nature and literature interact. By analyzing Thoreau as his primary touchstone, he advances the argument that “we must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle for civilization” (qtd. in Buell 2).

While writers have been dabbling with critical environmental writing for years, it only became a formal field in the 1990s—culminating in the seminal work *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. The term “ecocriticism,” however, was coined by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (1978), where he attempted to use and apply ecological terms and concepts in the study of literature. To put it simply, ecocriticism is defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (xviii). Lawrence Buell defines the same as the “study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (430). The field was influenced by the rise of late 20th century environmental movements. It was also heavily influenced by works of nonfiction such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), which protested against the use of synthetic pesticides and documented their dangerous effects. It also has its roots in British Romanticism, and the works of American Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller.

India is a land of diverse cultures and environments. Its rich biodiversity has featured in stories for centuries. More recently, writers such as Ruskin Bond and Amitav Ghosh have brought fresh attention to the perilous condition of the natural environment. When asked about why he shifted his focus to climate change, Ghosh replied,

I would say that really, you know, it's not me changing, it's the planet changing... that has made this happen to me... I was going along just fine but now as you can see, all these things are just

happening around the world and they force themselves on your attention; you can't escape them, y'know (Ghosh "Interview: The Planet Has Changed").

Writers from the Northeast have also played a part in this conversation. Although it would be a "misnomer" (Sarma 37) to categorise them into a single category, one characteristic that these writers share is the element of rootedness. This includes a sense of rootedness to their land, their people, and their culture. Hence, a lot of their works feature the rich tapestry of environmental and spiritual depth present in their respective states. One such prominent writer from the region is Dhruba Hazarika. Possessing an impressive resume on account of a career in the state civil services, Hazarika is also a novelist, short story writer, and a columnist. He has published works such as *A Bowstring Winter* (2006) and *Sons of Brahma* (2024). His short story collection *Luck* (2009) is prescribed in the M.A English syllabus of North-Eastern Hill University as a part of the Northeast Studies course. Notably, his short story "Elephant Country," from his latest work *The Shoot* (2025), features in the second volume of the anthology *Lapbah* (2025) edited by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Rimi Nath.

Hazarika's *The Shoot* features 17 short stories largely set in the state of Assam. The stories are spread out across themes such as self-discovery, animal abuse, animal-human conflict, and many others. The common denominator amongst all of them is the presence of the natural world. Whether it be descriptions of the forested area on the way from Diphu to Dimapur (85) or descriptions of the various animal sounds that remain a constant presence in all the stories, it is apparent that the collection meets the criteria for an environmental text. As expressed by scholar Ramesh Singh, "in [Hazarika's] stories, animals aren't just in the background—they are like main characters, closely connected to the human characters" (52).

According to Lawrence Buell, an environmental text is a work where "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history," where "the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest," where "human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation," and where "some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text" (7-8). Thus, this paper seeks to use Buell's concept of an environmental text, as articulated in his analysis of *Walden*, to explore how Hazarika presents the environment in selected stories from *The Shoot*.

Henry David Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts, and is regarded as the "patron saint of American environmental writing" (Buell 115). He was one of the leading Transcendentalists of his time along with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller. Emerging in the 1850s, Transcendentalism was a philosophical and literary movement

characterized by individualism, self-reliance, intuition, and the belief in the inherent goodness of both people and nature. The practitioners also believed in the interconnectedness of all things through a single universal soul. Within their paradigm, nature was imbued with a divine essence, which meant that spending time in the natural world was a pathway to spiritual awakening and self-understanding (Andrews 4).

According to Buell, Thoreau's pursuit of nature can be understood as "a fitful, irregular, experimental, although increasingly purposeful self-education in reading landscape and pondering what he found there" (116). The composition of *Walden*, extending over nearly a decade (1845-1854), spans the critical stage. Thoreau began by using nature mainly to understand himself. Over time, however, he increasingly tried to understand nature itself. Although he never stopped seeing nature symbolically, he gradually learned to respect it as a real, independent world, rather than merely a mirror of human thoughts and feelings. Critics often bring up the dangers of excessive romanticism as this can reduce nature to a symbolic construct, taking the focus away from real-world problems. Therefore, Buell holds that environmental texts must undertake this balancing act between symbolic and material reality (116).

In *Walden*, these shifts of attention from symbolism to observable facts are evident. The first chapter, titled "Economy," features Thoreau's description of a solitary goose lost in the fog. At first, this creature functions mainly as a token of uncertainty and the speaker's inner state: "they seem to participate in a logic of natural symbols: geese returning equals spring, which equals (we soon find, unsurprisingly) spiritual renewal" (Buell 123). Later, in the chapter titled "Spring," Thoreau expands this into a detailed examination of actual flocks of geese—their movements, behaviour, and number—showing his transition from using nature primarily as a symbol to respecting it as a real, independent world, that deserves careful attention in its own right (124).

Although it is a work of fiction, Dhruba Hazarika's *The Shoot* contains many elements that tie the stories to real-world environmental problems. Following Buell's criteria as delineated earlier, the text's ethical direction is clearly pointing towards human accountability for ecological degradation. For instance, the short story "The Monkey," follows a "monkey-man" (Hazarika 24) who travels with a monkey and her offspring and makes them perform tricks to entertain people for money. One day, a boy named Pawkolin hits the mother monkey on the head with a pebble and the mother monkey faints. Her offspring, on seeing this, "brought its palms together and looked skywards, the eyes half-closed in a seeming prayer" (27). Shortly after, the mother monkey wakes up and it is inferred that the baby monkey's prayer was the catalyst that brought the mother back to life. Although personification is used in the

story, its direction does not stray from the very real problem of people exploiting animals for personal gain. The mother monkey is described as having a leather collar tied to the man's belt and the spectacle is outlined as "the antics of both man and animal, the latter helpless against the former's designs" (24). However, Hazarika does something very poignant. He also portrays the monkey-man as caring very deeply for the animals. After the mother monkey faints, he gives her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and is later seen "caressing the two animals that were a part of his existence, his life" (28). Therefore, although the animal's welfare is of utmost importance, Hazarika also shows the complex relationship between man and animal and how, perhaps, the blame should not be placed solely on the monkey-man but on the long tradition of animal exploitation that has persisted for centuries.

While this type of exploitation involves a direct form of animal abuse, rural development can contribute to animal-human conflicts through indirect means. In "Elephant Country," elephants are shown to have entered and blocked a village road. The conflict in the story arises when that road needs to be traversed in order to get to a village where a pregnant woman is in need of a doctor. Later, it is revealed that the elephants were blocking it because two of them were giving birth there. Thus, Hazarika juxtaposes and equates the importance of human and non-human life, thereby highlighting the nuance of the situation. He presents the multifaceted nature of the blockade, taking into account the fact that the elephants were just looking out for themselves. The humans, too, were doing the same. As a result, the human-wildlife encounter cannot be classified as a black and white case of encroachment by the people, or intrusion by the elephants.

Likewise, Hazarika does something similar in the collection's eponymous story. Although the situation has improved drastically compared to the previous decades, poaching still remains a perennial problem in Northeast India. The narrative follows three men as they trek through a dense jungle inside Kaziranga to reach a small hillock. There, they settle down at a vantage point overlooking a waterhole frequented by rhinos. Jokai, one of the men, is hesitant to go through with the operation after he sees a small church-like hut that was not there the last time they came. Phesa, another one of the men, accuses Jokai of having gone soft after becoming a father to a daughter. As their eyes catch hold of a mother rhino and its calf, Phesa readies his rifle to shoot. But, before that can happen, a bell from the church rings, and in that same instant, Jokai flings himself against Phesa shifting the gun away from the mother rhino's line of sight. When the bullet fires and misses, Jokai suggests that someone must have rung the bell—his voice "less of fear and more of wonder" (74). Shortly thereafter, when Phesa maintains that they can come back another day, Jokai asserts "No... there won't be another day" (74) as he walks off alone into the night. Here, the very real reality of rhino poaching is incorporated with the text's ethical orientation towards environmental

conservation. Hazarika presents characters who are not perfect and who indulge in illegal activities, but are willing to change when confronted by a catalyst for moral awakening. In addition, Jokai's feeling of wonder relates to a larger discussion of the different types of affective responses produced by immense experiences in nature. According to Louise Economides, wonder is "an experience wherein one's belief system is profoundly suspended in the face of what is extraordinary, what confounds past experience or our habitual knowledge of things" (21). This produces a feeling of kinship between the person and the instrument of wonder, as "accepting the wonder of a groundless existence entails loving the other as other, not seeking to use the other as a foundation for transcendental 'truth' or reducing the other to a reliable means whereby subjectivity defines itself in opposition to what it is not" (24). As such, Jokai's change of heart can be attributed to the story's setting. In certain parts leading up to the reversal, the environment is described in ethereal terms: In that split second that separates life from death the waterhole began to glow. Silvery. Luminous. It was as if the moon had stopped its journey across the sky, now positioning itself directly over the waterhole, the rays as splendid as a mother's happiness at her first sight of her newborn child (73). Moreover, the sight of the mother rhino and her calf softens Jokai's heart when he starts to see them as living beings just like his family and himself. Although his concern for the rhinos is negotiated through human experience, his proclamation that "there won't be another day" (74) suggests a broader awakening, one in which he starts to recognise nonhumans for their intrinsic worth.

Throughout his life, even as his journals became increasingly secular and scientific, Thoreau's observations remained charged with a sense of reverence and wonder towards nature. His environmental perception continued to be energized by a feeling of natural piety. In the chapter "Solitude," after singing nature's praises as a source of sustenance and companionship, Thoreau asks: "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (119), thereby decentering the human and implying that we are cogs in a larger ecological machine. According to Buell, Thoreau's "metaphysics of correspondence" (129) allowed him to comprehend spiritual truths even in seemingly ordinary natural objects. This is evident in the chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," where he hears the hum of a mosquito and elevates it beyond the earthly. Instead of dismissing it as a general nuisance, he listens and describes it as "cosmical" and "a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world" (Thoreau 79-80), transforming the seemingly mundane into a medium through which the cosmos, history, and the otherworldly can be accessed.

In *The Shoot*, the story "Ants" involves the speaker experiencing a similar heightened awareness of the ordinary. One night, the speaker steps out into their veranda to take in the



“night when the stillness means life” (Hazarika 14). Initially, they witness a few ants and make nothing of them. But, suddenly, their numbers grow and the speaker is put in a trance as the ants cross a stretch to reach a rock island half a kilometre away. These tiny creatures are elevated to an abominable force “greater than the moon’s gravitational pull that could sweep aside the kahua that stood in their way” (16). The speaker’s eyes are fixed on this sight, as if being held by a feverish dream. Next, this black mass of ants is likened to something cosmic: “This, I absently think, is what it must be like in space, the dark nothingness between galaxies, the dark of blind infinity.” The speaker connects this notion to a feeling of overwhelming awe: “That thought is a kind of terror. A numbing terror on my tongue and in my blood” (17). This culminates into an instance of the sublime in nature. Edmund Burke defines such a sensation as: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (33). When one is confronted by something beyond the limits of comprehension, this version of the sublime is associated with “an attitude of respect for that which transcends the merely human” (Rigby 13). The vitality of this event leaves such a lasting impact on their psyche that the speaker proclaims: “I know that I will never be the same again. Never” (Hazarika 21), thus highlighting the natural world’s ability to transform someone from a mere observer to one who is both transformed and interpreted by nature.

Similarly, in “The Night of the Civets,” the narrative revolves around the cathartic emotional renewal following a close encounter with wildlife. In the story, the speaker is in bed at night when they hear footsteps on the roof above them. While initially “fascinated by the sounds” (77), this fascination quickly turns into discomfort as it continues. The speaker’s mind begins “lurking in recesses known to human as the fear of the unknown” (79). However, after finding out that the sounds were made by a family of civets, the speaker feels no more fear. Instead, after that close encounter, the speaker has a favourable dream: “I smiled unconsciously, a dream framing my sleep. It was a gentle dream, of good friends who loved you for what you were, despite all your scars, and of rice being ladled out from a pan onto the plates on the table” (83). This echoes Thoreau’s sentiments about how a close communion with nature can continually revive a spirit that needs constant nourishment:

At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. (Thoreau 266)

Thoreau calls for the wilderness to be wild, suggesting that nature must be left as it is. He presents the natural world as a spring of spiritual renewal that can be activated through close communion. By presenting nature as possessing qualities that are unknowable to human thought, he consequently destabilizes the binary between man and the environment that validates man's superiority over everything nonhuman. In *Walden*, Thoreau foregrounds the importance of even the most minute and seemingly mundane creatures. In the chapter called "Spring," the Merlin's (Thoreau capitalizes the bird's name) movements are described as "the most ethereal flight" (265) he has ever seen. Moreover, in the chapter "The Bean-Field," a pair of hen-hawks in the sky are described "as if they were the embodiment of [his] own thoughts" (136). Such observations promote kinship and the idea of interconnectedness between all beings on the earth.

The idea of kinship is also a major theme in Hazarika's stories. The title of his previous collection, *Luck*, is a reference to the titular story about a pigeon that forms a close bond with the speaker and brings them good luck. In *The Shoot*, the story "Soul Egret" involves a District Magistrate's clerk who would spend hours bird watching from their veranda. The narrator contrasts the hullabaloo of the trucks, motorboats, and people—modern life's "sick hurry [and] divided aims," (261) to quote Matthew Arnold—with the egrets' gracefulness. Their flight is described as effortless: "the egrets glide silently over the grey expanse of the river" (200). Seeking closeness and maybe companionship, the speaker wonders why these birds never land in their veranda. Even though the speaker would patiently wait by the river, the egrets would never pick up food from there. "With so secret a diet," they tell themselves, "it is no wonder they look so beautiful" (201).

One night, the speaker manages to get close enough to an egret to pick it up. After the bird beats its wings on their neck and shoulders, they dip their head to kiss the egret's neck. Initially, they consider keeping it captive but throws that thought away almost immediately—reaffirming Thoreau's idea that nature must be "infinitely wild" (Thoreau 266). The next morning, when they see a flock of egrets, the speaker is reminded of the previous day's incident: "I remembered the brief flutter of wings against the bare skin on my neck" (205). Although they could not keep the egret permanently, that memory remains as a reminder of the encounter. Like an invisible fishing line, the event has seemingly left a mark on the speaker's soul that connects the both of them forever. Thus, the story's message fosters feelings of kinship and aligns with the understanding that humans are a part of nature and not separate from it.

Despite being a modest sized collection, Dhruba Hazarika's *The Shoot* manages to showcase the extraordinary residing in the commonplace. The characters are not larger-than-life



figures but ordinary people going about their lives and making new discoveries as they proceed along. In this regard, Hazarika walks a similar path to Thoreau as both *The Shoot* and *Walden* are engaged in the idea that the wild does not have to be sought after in far away places. Instead, they can be found inside, or just outside, our concrete walls. In some cases, we can meet the wild when we look closely; at other times, nature and its creatures make themselves known by coming to us. When it comes to the scope of future research, Karen Thornber, a critic, advocates for a "transnational and trans-genre approach" to ecocriticism. She highlights the connection between environmental degradation and socio-cultural values across geopolitical borders (Thornber). Therefore, critical dialogue from different parts of the world can provide valuable observations into the divergences and convergences of ecocritical thought. Although Hazarika and Thoreau belong to different literary traditions, their environmental intersections highlight the universality of ecocritical thought—offering a sense of solidarity amidst our planetary crisis.

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