

## **A River's Journey: Some Ecocritical Thoughts in H. Elias' poem *Ka Wah Umkhrach***

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### **Abstract:**

The Umkhrach River is a river that passes through Shillong town, and it has been associated with the life and culture of the Khasi people since time immemorial. The river has been a source of inspiration to many poets and writers who have adored its glorious past and voiced their environmental concerns about the present deplorable state of the river. The Umkhrach River is mentioned in several writings which have been echoed in prose and poetry by different writers both in English and Khasi at different levels. This paper seeks to analyse the representation of the Umkhrach River in the poem 'Ka Wah Umkhrach' by H. Elias, a renowned Khasi poet, in the light of ecocriticism. An ecocritical reading of the poem explores the environmental vision of the poet as he delineates the river's journey in all its significant features. At the same time, it seeks to highlight the poetic strategies and specific methods the poet employs as he describes the river's journey from the source to where it joins the other tributaries. This study also attempts to examine the relationship and interdependence between humans and nature by comparing the past condition of the river with the present.

**Key Words:** ecocriticism, environment, interdependence, nature, Umkhrach River.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

To highlight the ecocritical thoughts present in H. Elias' poem, *Ka Wah Umkhrach*, it is important to understand first the fundamental issues relating to ecocriticism. The term 'ecocriticism' was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in an essay entitled 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'. Ecocriticism deals with the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996). Kerridge offers a broad definition of ecocriticism which 'seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis' (cited in Garrard 2007). It is closely related to the science of ecology. The concept of ecology is most basic in the understanding of the environment. Ecology is a science that 'is defined as the scientific study of the relationships between organisms and their environment'. Ecology means the scientific study of the environment. It also clearly 'denotes the investigation of the interrelationships between plants, animals and their inorganic environment'. Ecology is also directly related to society since it deals with the dynamic balance of nature and humanity's role in the natural world especially the character, form and structure of humanity's relationship with other species and with the inorganic substrate of the biotic environment (Bookchin 1996).

This paper seeks to consider the present ecological problems associated with the *Umkhrach* River through the inspiration drawn from the poem *Ka Wah Umkhrach* by H. Elias, a noted Khasi poet. Fr. H. Elias, a clergyman, was born in Shillong on the 23rd of May 1907. He is a renowned Khasi writer who has many poems and prose pieces in his literary collections, although he is famous more as a poet than a prose writer. The themes of his poetry are varied, and his nature lyrics have greatly enriched Khasi poetry. As a versifier, his position is undisputed (Bareh Ngapkynta 2003). Bareh (2003) compares him to the Irish poet Thomas Moore in his delineation of the analogous ethical lessons from different images like the sunrise and sunset, the invigorating autumn and springtime, orchids, cascades, and hills. In his poetry, the description of his country with its wealth of rolling mountains fosters a living patriotism. He died in 1966, and his contribution through his literary career has greatly enriched Khasi literature with more than 34 books, including translations (Shangpliang 2007).

### **II. AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF H. ELIAS' KA WAH UMKHRAH**

Fr. H. Elias' poem, *Ka Wah Umkhrach* which is written in the Khasi language appeared in his greatest and classical work *Ka Pansngiat Ksiar Ki Saw Aiom*, a collection of poems published in 1937. The poem brings out the significance of the river as a vital ecocritical concern while highlighting a very intimate relationship shared between humans and nature. The poem beautifully portrays the river in its pristine natural beauty, where it flows unobstructed and undefiled, in mutual harmony with man and nature. It echoes the sensory appreciation of the

poet to the existence of the river where he splendidly traces the *Umkhrach* River as it meanders from its source. At the same time, it explores the specific methods the poet employs to express his environmental vision. H. Elias explores the relationship between nature and humans where the river acts as an integral companion to man. The *Umkhrach* River plays the role of the narrator as it narrates its winding course to the readers. The poem also exhibits H. Elias' superb versification where he employs poetic techniques like personification, metaphor, and onomatopoeia. H. Elias' unique style of using simple words to create music out of the ordinary qualifies him as one of the greatest Khasi poets. H. Elias personifies the *Umkhrach* River as a figure of beauty and gracefulness in its journey to join other tributaries.

The poet traces the source of the river from a fountain which is the Spread Eagle Falls at *Nohkaliar*, located at Mawshbuit, a village in the outskirts of Shillong, in East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. As he embarks on the journey, the poet emphasises the beauty of the river in all its magnificence. He captivates the imagination of the readers through the use of figurative language. Since the Khasi language is very rich in adverbs, and many belong to the untranslatable language, it is well-rendered through onomatopoeic expression (Roberts 1891). H. Elias' careful use of adverbial phrases through onomatopoeia lends a charming appeal to the poem. As the river begins its journey from the source, the poet expresses that it falls *phum-phum*, an onomatopoeic expression echoing the soft heavy sound of the waterfall on the *thwei bajngum* or the deep blue pools, and as it leaps, it splashes and splatters *thir-thir*, swiftly flowing downhill through the slopes. The rumbling noise *ur-ur* echoing the sound that the river makes on its journey may sometimes sound intimidating to the passersby.

H. Elias further personifies the river by saying,

*Nga mastieh, ryngkoh ka riat-ka-ram,  
Nga shad nga kmen ba poi ha rkhiang;  
Ha them nga iaiaid suki hin hin,  
Harud jongnga ban ih soh-thiang.*

which may be translated as:

I dance, and jump through cliffs and precipices,  
Passing through dry lands I leap with joy;  
While slowly flowing through the valley  
I ripen the fruits that grow along the riverside.

The river which is the natural environment is personified as singing with joy all day and night, jumping and running through cliffs and precipices *ka riat-ka ram* and passing through drylands. The slow-flowing river is personified as walking *hin-hin* through the valley echoing its slow and graceful movement as it ripens the fruits on its banks. Here the poet explores the metaphorical significance of nature as the river provides a source of nourishment to humans.

Nature is very well exemplified in the poet's understanding of the seasons as the river moves steadily and continuously without any obstruction. During summer, the river inundates the *Kyrkit* ground which is a playground at Pynthor Umkhrach, a locality in Shillong where the river flows through, and carrying with it *bak-bak*, that is., in a hurry, the different kinds of fish like *Khasaw- Kharoin* which are the common varieties of fish found on the river. During the monsoon, it cascades gracefully *bum-bum* and crumbles down *khram-khram* through the cliffs, precipices and steep incline passing through the deep blue rocks while the whole earth simmers. The poet's mention of humans and animals including cows and goats exhibit the relation that the river shares with the former as it leads them to a safe environment whenever there is a sudden gushing of the flood called *Umsaw* in the Khasi language. The sudden flood would uproot everything that stands on its way or cause obstruction to its course, be it the big trees that grow on the river banks or the houses with the ladders. The river narrates that even the stumps that remain on the ground would float like small boats as they are swept away in the sudden flood. The river also carries with it the *mawramsang*, i.e., the limestone rocks that stand on its way, and as they collide with one another, they fall *tain-tain*, an onomatopoeic expression resonating a loud and violent sound, and dashing *phrak-phrak* as they rush straightforwardly.

The poet H. Elias explores the significance of coexistence between nature and humans. The relationship that nature shares with humans may be well understood in the poet's expression of the people's activities at the *Umkhrach* River. During a bright and sunny day, when the weather is *kdiar-kdiar*, that is, clear, and when the cool breeze from the river blows *hir-hir*, that is, eagerly and longingly, the people descends into the river in the early morn as they begin their household chores of washing clothes.

*Haba ka sngi ka rang kdiar-kdiar  
Ki er pynggad ki beh hir-hir  
Hangta ki khun bynriew ki hiar,  
La jain ban sait dang step ngir-ngir.*

which may be translated as:

When the day is clear and bright  
And the cool breeze blows longingly

Thereupon man descends at dawn,  
To the river to wash clothes

And while drying their clothes in the grass along the riverside, the children would beat the heat of the sun by swimming on her lap. Here the poet personifies the river as a source of comfort and joy. The poet further expresses that the *nongrep* or farmers who cross the river on their way to work would dip their *star* or headstrap in the clear waters to soften it, and the *nongthohdieng* or the woodcutters would sharpen their axes and knives in the river. This exhibit an intimate and close relationship shared between humans and nature.

When the river reaches Mawlai, another locality in the Shillong town, it pours *rymphum* into the waterfall and spills silvery waters that spread *rymphai*. Then it descends *jram-jram* echoing its crashing sound as it falls cascadingly into the three-tiered steps of the waterfall before meandering *ngai-ngai*, that is, soundly and inwardly under the sweet-smelling ferns. Under the ravines of the Sunapani waterfall at Mawlai, betwixt the cliffs and precipices surrounding it, the river meets and joins another tributary which is the Umshyrpi River, thereafter fulfilling a promise to flow together endlessly. The poet further states that along the river, the Khasi boys and girls may be compared to the does and deers as they jump *thir-thir* over the big rocks collecting small fish that are found in plenty under the rocks. The river narrates its never-ending course as it flows endlessly during summer and winter carrying with it the sweet fragrance of the *tiew-tyrkhang* or the sweet-smelling fern as far as the river Brahmaputra. The poet metaphorically compares the *Umkhras* River to diamonds and precious stones as it illuminates the whole of Shillong town at night with its star-studded waters.

The river is presented as man's closest companion who serves the necessities of his life. However, the graceful natural flow of the river as expressed by the poet H. Elias has been brutally interrupted and obstructed in the present day. In observing the present condition of the river, it evokes a sense of sorrow as this once beautiful and mesmerising river has now been transformed into a storehouse of garbage and rubbish emanating unhealthy odours. The *Umkhras* River that we see today is unlike the one envisioned by the poet. It has now been completely transformed into a drain thereby putting a halt to the mutual harmony that was once shared between nature and man as sung by the poet. In the present day generation, we are left with a question that may have plausible answers but will it suffice? If the poet H. Elias had to witness the *Umkhras* River in the present, he would not only be saddened by the deplorable state that the river is in but it may be agreed upon that he would bemoan with his poetic skills, like many poets and writers of today, the ugliness and dirt of the river as a result of man's ignorance and negligence. Despite several steps and measures taken by individuals, environmentalists, the government, the pressure groups, to clean the river and to create awareness about the environment, it is still not sufficient. The time has come that as individuals, we should realise the impending potential threat that is causing danger to our survival. The environmental vision of the poet about the river, through this poem, may inspire and encourage us to seek fundamental changes in our attitude and behaviour and that along with the social institutions, we should effortlessly try and restore the *Wah Umkhras* to its natural and original form. It is hoped that an ecocritical understanding of the environment relating to the river may eventually bring about a change in the way we behave towards nature.

### III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, let us recall the words of Fr. H. Elias who once hailed the *Umkhras River* as

*Ko wah rupa baieid ki blei*  
*Ko rngai dienjat u longshuwa*

which may be translated as:

'Oh, silvery river beloved of the gods,  
Oh, shadowy footprints of our ancestors.'

It is hoped that H. Elias' environmental vision and his representation of the river through literature may serve as a source of ecological inspiration to create a sense of urgency and a desire to remedy the current environmental problems associated with the *Umkhras* River. It may be concluded that H. Elias' poem *Ka Wah Umkhras* assumes greater value and significance today in emphasising the importance to maintain an ecological balance. It is a call to conserve nature and to understand the inter-dependence between humans and nature for survival.

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