



Echoes Across the Pass: A Geocritical and Ecofeminist Analysis of Guru T. Ladakhi's "A Himalayan Ballad"

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ABSTRACT

Guru T. Ladakhi's "A Himalayan Ballad" is a lyrical meditation on longing, displacement, and relational identity set within the culturally charged Himalayan trade corridor. The poem situates its emotional narrative within a landscape marked by mobility and border-crossing, beginning with the trader's voice as he travels "across the wind-filled pass of Nathu" and ending with the woman's intimate longing framed by domestic stagnation. This spatial contrast, movement versus waiting, creates a gendered dialectic that aligns with feminist and ecofeminist readings, where the male body participates in political and economic mobility, while the female voice remains embedded in place, care, and continuity. The poem's natural imagery, peach blossoms, white cranes, wind, and snow, functions not merely as scenery, but as emotional and cultural geography. Nature becomes the medium through which desire travels: cranes serve as messengers, fallen blossoms become symbols of passing time, and the harsh climate underscores vulnerability. From a postcolonial lens, space is not neutral; places like Lhasa, Shigatse, and Nathu La are historically burdened with trade, contested sovereignty, and cultural transformation, echoing Homi Bhabha's notion of the "unsettled in-between" (Bhabha 3). The speaker's identity, similarly, is suspended between home and commerce, belonging and itinerancy. Ultimately, the poem renders separation as both personal and structural, revealing how landscape, culture, and history shape emotional experience. Through intimate address and sensory detail, Ladakhi crafts a narrative where love is inseparable from geography, and memory becomes the bridge that binds bodies divided by mountains, trade routes, and time.

Keywords: Longing, Mobility, Ecofeminism, Cultural Geography, Separation

The Himalayan landscape has long served as more than a mere geological barrier separating the Indian subcontinent from the Tibetan plateau; it constitutes a fluid archive of cultural memory, a corridor of economic exchange, and a theater for human longing. In Guru T. Ladakhi's "A Himalayan Ballad", these mountains are not depicted as the desolate, uninhabitable zones of colonial imagination, but rather as a "contact zone", a term popularized by Mary Louise Pratt, where cultures, commodities, and genders meet, clash, and grapple with separation. Ladakhi, a poet rooted in the Sikkimese tradition, utilizes the ballad form to navigate the complex intersection of the personal and the political. By situating a domestic drama of separation against the backdrop of the historic Silk Route via Nathu La, the poem transcends a simple love story to become a meditation on the gendered nature of mobility, the economics of survival, and the ecological rhythms that govern mountain life. Through a convergence of postcolonial geocriticism, feminist theory, and ecocriticism, the poem reveals itself as a poignant critique of the socioeconomic constraints that define the Himalayan experience, where love is dictated by the opening of passes and the fairness of trade. To understand the emotional weight of Ladakhi's ballad, one must first contextualize its geography, which functions as a character in its own right. The poem is anchored by "the wind-filled pass of Nathu," a historically vital artery connecting Sikkim (the "valley of the orange country") to Tibet. Historically, this route facilitated the exchange of wool, yak tails, and salt for spices, textiles, and manufactured goods. By invoking "Nathu," "Shigatse," and "Lhasa," Ladakhi immediately places the poem within a specific socio-economic history, likely evoking the era prior to the border closure of 1962. Scholars like Tanka B. Subba have noted that the Himalayas have historically acted not as a barrier but as a bridge for such interactions, yet in Ladakhi's text, this bridge is fraught with emotional peril (Subba 179).

The male speaker identifies himself as a “rootless trader,” a designation that is deeply significant in the context of cultural geography. The trader represents the figure of the nomad or the transient subject who defies the fixity of the nation-state, existing in the “in-between.” Mary Louise Pratt defines “contact zones” as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 34). Nathu La functions as this contact zone. For the trader, the pass is a workspace, a site of peril defined by the wind, and a gateway to economic opportunity. The poem’s opening lines establish a vertical dichotomy between the high, harsh altitude of the pass and the fertile, settled valley where the “mother of my child-to-be” resides. This geographical separation mirrors the hierarchy of the relationship: the male exists in the high, dangerous, spiritual realm of Lhasa, the “Place of Gods,” while the female is grounded in the low, fruitful, domestic realm of the orange country. Consequently, the geography dictates that survival depends on the extraction of value from the high plateau to sustain life in the valley.

The Economics of Absence and the Fractured Voice

The trader’s promise of gifts “a turquoise ring” from Shigatse, is not merely a romantic gesture; it is an economic transaction that validates his absence. Shigatse, historically a hub for luxury goods, represents the commodification of his journey. The turquoise stone holds cultural significance in Himalayan societies as a talisman for protection and soul-vitality (*la*), serving here as a proxy for the trader’s physical presence; he cannot offer his self, so he offers a piece of the land he traverses. Furthermore, his promise to offer “butter lamps and silk scarves” in the “holy temple of Lhasa” suggests a triangulation of his identity: he is a husband, a businessman, and a devotee. However, his piety is transactional, praying for a safe journey and business success so that he may return. The specific mention of ‘Phakpay-yul’, the Tibetan term for India, meaning ‘Land of the Noble’, contextualizes the migration of the “White cranes.” These birds, flying south, act as metaphors for the trader himself: migratory, governed by seasons, and moving between the high plateau and the plains. Yet, unlike the cranes, the trader’s migration is driven by capital, not just instinct.

The choice of the “ballad” form is instrumental to the poem’s impact, aligning the work with the folk traditions of the Himalayas where stories of travel and separation are commonplace. However, Ladakhi subverts the traditional unitary voice of the ballad by splitting the narrative perspective, creating a polyphonic structure that reinforces the theme of distance. The first stanza is spoken by the male trader, whose language is declarative and future-oriented (“I’ve bought,” “I’ll offer,” “Tell her I’ll come”). He commands the cranes to “Bear these tidings,” acting as the active principle who projects his will across the landscape. In contrast, the female voice, which takes over in the subsequent stanzas, is reactive and anchored in the present or the immediate past. While the man speaks of cities and temples, the woman speaks of the bamboo gate and the crossroads. This shift in focalization structurally replicates the distance between the couple; they are not just separated by mountains, but by their very modes of existence—one kinetic, one static.

The gender dynamics in “A Himalayan Ballad” offer a stark illustration of the existential divide described by Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that historically, “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him” (Beauvoir 26). The male is the Subject, the Absolute; the female is the Other. In Ladakhi’s poem, the woman is defined almost exclusively by her relationship to the male figures in her life: she is the “mother of my child-to-be,” the wife of the “rootless trader,” and the mother of the son who utters the father’s name. The trader represents transcendence through his engagement in projects, travel, and economic conquest. Conversely, the woman represents immanence, confined to the repetitive, cyclical nature of domestic life and biological reproduction.

The tragedy of the poem lies in her cognizance of this confinement. Her admission, “I cannot think of chores, I only think of you,” reveals that the “chores”, representing the immanence of daily survival, become suffocating in his absence. Her existence is suspended in a state of “waiting” that renders her own life secondary to his return. The social pressure on the woman is equally palpable when she notes, “Every one click their tongues when they see me.” In close-knit Himalayan communities, a woman left alone for extended periods acts as a subject of scrutiny. The “clicking of tongues” implies a social surveillance that polices her behavior while her husband is away, suggesting she is waiting not just for a husband, but for the restoration of her social legitimacy. Furthermore, the child functions as a clock for the father’s absence. While the trader measures time in “business” and “year-end,” the mother measures time in developmental milestones like her son uttering his name or walking. This creates a temporal dissonance where the trader operates on *kairotic* time—the opportune moment for trade—while the mother operates on chronological and biological time, burdened by the anxiety of raising a child who knows his father only as a legend.

An ecofeminist reading of the poem illuminates the deep interconnection between the female experience and the natural environment. Ecofeminism, as elucidated by scholars like Vandana Shiva, critiques the parallel oppression of women and nature by patriarchal capitalism. In the poem, the woman is closely associated with the vegetative and seasonal world, while the man is associated with the abstract world of commerce. The woman marks the man’s departure not by a calendar date, but by an ecological event: “You left on the eve of the last peach blossom.” The peach blossom serves as a potent symbol of fragility and transience, blooming and falling indifferent to human affairs. The image of “fallen hues” collecting about the “bamboo gate” is a

masterstroke, representing the accumulation of time passed and the decay of hope. The bamboo gate marks the boundary between the domestic sphere and the wild; the fallen blossoms encroaching on this gate suggest that without the “husbanding” influence of the male, nature is reclaiming the boundary.

Vandana Shiva argues that in traditional cultures, women produced “sustenance” in partnership with nature, whereas modern patriarchal development focuses on the production of “profits” (Shiva 4). The trader is engaged in the latter, seeking profit in the turquoise and silk trade, while the woman is left with the “fallen hues”, residue of nature that holds no commercial value but immense emotional weight. Furthermore, the “white cranes” serve as an ecological bridge. In the first stanza, the trader attempts to instrumentalize nature, turning the birds into couriers for his message, reflecting an anthropocentric view where nature is a tool for human use. For the woman, however, nature is a trigger for memory. The “tinkle of caravans” draws her to the crossroads, showing she is hyper-attuned to the environment, reading the wind and the road for signs of his return. Her connection to the valley suggests she is grounded in the earth, while he floats above it in the wind-filled pass.

The poem’s concluding couplet delivers its most devastating critique of the gendered economics of the region: “Maybe when you return you can take me along too. / But alas, I do not have warm shoes to follow you.” This ending necessitates a materialist reading. On the surface, the lack of “warm shoes” could be interpreted metaphorically, suggesting she lacks the constitution or destiny to travel. However, in the context of the harsh Himalayan trade routes, it is a literal statement of economic deprivation. The trader returns with turquoise, a luxury item and silk, a commodity, but the wife lacks the basic equipment to navigate the frozen terrain of the Nathu La pass. This disparity highlights the unequal distribution of resources within the family unit, where capital acts are reserved for the male who is equipped for the high-altitude journey, while the female is equipped only for the valley.

Her immobility is not natural; it is constructed by a lack of material access. The “warm shoes” become a symbol of agency. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, discusses the dialectics of “outside” and “inside,” writing that “outside and inside form a dialectic of division... it has the sharpness of the yes and no” (Bachelard 211). The trader lives in the “outside”, the vast, expansive Yes of the world. The woman is trapped in the “inside”, the domestic No. Her desire to “follow you” is a desire to break the binary, to step into the contact zone herself. But the material reality of her condition enforces the border more effectively than any political checkpoint. Ultimately, Ladakhi’s poem is a tragedy of immobility. The woman’s final lament serves as a powerful metonym for all the structural barriers, economic, cultural, and geographic, that keep the “mother of the child-to-be” tethered to the valley while the “wind-filled pass” calls from above. Ladakhi has not just written a ballad about love; he has written a ballad about the distances, both measured in miles and in agency, that love must sometimes fail to cross.

Guru T. Ladakhi’s “A Himalayan Ballad” ultimately serves as a deceptive text, masking a rigorous materialist and feminist critique behind the lyrical veneer of a traditional love song. By mapping the emotional topography of the Sikkim-Tibet frontier, Ladakhi reveals that the “wind-filled pass” is not merely a geographical obstacle but a stark demarcation line between two distinct modes of existence. The analysis has demonstrated that the poem functions as a geocritical document where the verticality of the landscape dictates social hierarchy: the male trader claims the expansive, spiritual horizon of Lhasa, representing a transcendence fueled by capital and movement, while the female subject is tethered to the biological and domestic cycles of the valley.

Through the lens of ecofeminism, the poem exposes the gendered disparity of time; the woman’s paralysis is not a passive state but an active endurance of “immanence,” marked by the accumulation of “fallen hues” and the agonizing slow time of nature, which stands in sharp contrast to the man’s linear, profit-driven timeline. The poem’s polyphonic structure—splitting the narrative voice between the mobile agent and the static observer—formally enacts the very tragedy it describes, ensuring that the two lovers never occupy the same stanza, just as they cannot occupy the same space. The final image of the “warm shoes” remains the poem’s most potent symbol, stripping away the romanticism to reveal the economic skeletal structure of the relationship. It serves as a permanent reminder that in the harsh reality of the high Himalayas, agency is a commodity that must be purchased, and mobility is a privilege, not a right.

Ultimately, Ladakhi elevates the specific historical context of the Nathu La trade route into a universal meditation on the costs of survival. The poem stands as an archival testament to the “waiting women” of Silk Route history, giving voice to those whose lives were measured not in miles traveled or profits gained, but in the quiet, devastating accumulation of peach blossoms at the gate. In doing so, “A Himalayan Ballad” reclaims the silence of the valley, insisting that the story of the trade route is incomplete without the story of those who could not follow.

Note

¹ All references to GuruT Ladakhi’s poem “A Himalayan Ballad” are to page 158-159 of the book *Dancing Earth*

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