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ECO-CRITICISM IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *WHEN THE RIVER SLEEPS*

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Abstract: Eco-criticism is the literary genre that gained its prominence in the early 20th century. These subjects study the relationship of literature with nature and the environment. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* is an excellent book that shows the cordial relationship between nature and human beings in the most spectacular way. This paper is an attempt of exploring Kire's touch of eco-criticism in the place of Nagaland. His life under nature healed him very much both his inner and outer self, besides it also provokes him to realize his true potential to conquer the fear of spirit.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Wilderness, Self-realization.

Eco-criticism is the theme that occupies the dominant position in this contemporary literary arena, due to various climatic crises that the world is facing. Indian literature also handles the subject swiftly in recent years; however, this kind of literary writing is quite enormous in North East literature since they are very keen on representing their bond towards nature in every medium possible. They always treat nature as their inseparable component in their work of art and nature is a theme that plays an indispensable element in their literary canon. Writers from their region want to celebrate the ecological glory through their works of art and they are playing a significant position in representing the Indian English language and Literature to the global audience. Easterine Kire is also one of the renowned writers who make India pride in the literary horizon.

Kire is a Poet and author from Nagaland. She is contributing enormous creative works in every form like poems, novels, and children's books. Additionally, she also has been translating many of her native language works into many other languages including English. Her maiden work "A Naga's Village" brought her instant international fame and popularity for her exceptional creativity. Her work "Bitter Wormwood" won Hindu Literary Prize in 2011 for its spell bounded craft work. The list "*When the River Sleeps*" also got the Hindu Literary Prize 2015 for the authors' magnificent handling of themes like eco-criticism and magic realism in the most interesting way.

This work portrays the life of lonely hunter Villie and his metaphorical journey in the deep forest. He considers the forest as his home and he mentioned that statement several times in the book to reiterate his close-knit connection. "The Forest is my wife"[WRS 10] further he also thought that leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife. In the beginning of the story, he was constantly haunted by the dream which was about the river which many people believed would bring eternal materialistic pleasure to the conqueror. Though he was intimidated in the beginning, later he prepared his mind to follow and chase the dream. He embarked this sole journey with nothing but a courageous mind. As he expected, he encountered several dangerous and superstitious elements like weretigers and demons. However, these deadly triggers could not stop his hungry mind instead it accelerates him to achieve that iconic passion that was associated with several unexpected outcomes. He made this journey barefoot and met many villagers, some of them were kind and others were cruel. Finally, he triumphed over his tedious journey, while he returned, he met a kind-hearted woman named Ate and built a new father-daughter relationship with her. In the ending part of the story, he was murdered by a man who coveted the stone to attain materialistic pleasure.

Eco criticism is the subject that delineates the cordial relationship between nature and humans and this book has potentially utilized the theme. The author didn't hint any modern sophisticated kind of life whereas she portrays her story that revolves around the isolated hunter and his life in the remote village of Nagaland, however, the author's brilliant narration could easily enable the reader to accept the story to travel with the hero without expecting any modern notions. Villie's close connection with nature has been emphasized numerous times in the story to highlight the fact that his life without nature is something unimaginable to think of. Throughout the story, the passage about his bond with nature is more abundant than sharing his personal life, in such a way his life has circumscribed with nature. As a son of nature, he wanted to utilize its bounty wholly in every circumstance like when he found a big tree and started to build the roof. "He quickly gathered branches to make a leafy roof for the night. He piled leaves a top mass to make a bed and gathered twigs to make a fire" (WRS 79)

This story also highlighted the importance of humanism in many utterances. During the traveling, he met different villagers and most of them are kind, humble, and lovable despite the fact it was their first-time meeting. When he interrogated a lady about the path, she guided him and also invited him to her small home to attend the feast. His visit to Subale's home paved him insight learning about their simple life and their deep veneration for nature. Her husband also extended his help for Villie by accompanying him on this dreadful tumultuous journey in order to conquer the river stone. Lifestyle and people friendly nature taught him the lesson that happiness is not something about what they saved but how they lived. It reflected When Villie achieved his journey, the whole village celebrated his success as theirs in the name of "Genna Day" in which villagers paid their reverence to the nature by not going to the work. "Every time a person catches the sleeping river, we who live here observe a Genna day a no-work day"(WRS 104).

It is also important to highlight Kire's enormous respect for nature that led even her to choose the title *When the River Sleeps* to reassure that Villie's pure success could be possible only when it is aligned with the call of nature. She also reemphasized that nature is the protector of Villie and vice versa. When he was stung by the nettle plants, he relieved from that traumatic pain by rubbing simple and native wormwood and it instantly alleviated his pain. This small brief passage explained nature's great healing power.

Throughout the story nature did not just act as background property, instead, it plays as a real character that constantly shapes and modifies the protagonist character in many crucial places. This was quite evident when he was accused as a murderer of killing his brother in the forest, his mind was completely perplexed and lost its rationality for some time, and also his heart was unmoving for a while, during that chaotic circumstance his mind and intuition keep insisting him to take refuge in the forest and he firmly believed that that tangled and wild environment could give him the strength to take a wise and timely decision. As he believed, he exactly found his sanity rushed back only to that wild forest and felt like he was rejuvenated once again. This part again marks nature's greatest contribution to Villie's life because it didn't support him externally when he got wounded but also internally to gain confidence and clarity about the situation that he was unaware of. In addition to that, he treated nature as his abode of safety and security and nature is something that helped him to conquer the fear of spirit and this courage provoked him to utter "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuofu fights for me, today is my day! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him, the greater spirit belongs the stone" (WRS 89)

This cordial relationship is thus maintained and interlinked in several places. He boasted that the forest was his home and in turn, he assumed that he is the guardian of the clan, and wanted to rectify all the dangerous and dreadful elements into ashes. It was quite transparent when he boldly tested the stone on Ate who believed that she was an evil nature and she lived with the notion that she could threaten anyone's life. Without minding its indomitable glory, he kept the stone on her head and it explicitly displayed that Ate is also the common human being filled with love, grace, and compassion. This revelation provoked exalted ecstasy in her, and that even made Villie take her to his ancestral village for her new beginning at the new place. "Ate it is not true that your touch is malignant. I touched your hand and yet you did nothing to me. You must not continue to believe in a lie that was told to you about your past"(WRS 97) Unlike the common existing notion that people had it in their mind about the heart stone that (it was the lucky stone that elevate a man to attain the utmost physical pleasure and wealth to the finder) but he shifted that perspective to comprehend that the powerful heart stone can reveal one's true nature and self-identity.

Ultimately, he proved the fact that success in this journey was nothing but the journey itself which was his greatest gift and treasure ever in his mortal life. Like the mythical character Odysseus, he utilized this journey to understand his inner self better and he also comprehends his environment most profoundly. This tedious and grueling journey gave a wonderful opportunity to learn nature's bounty and also this journey renewed his human relationship in the best possible way with Ate. He built a home for Ate to settle her nicely in the new environment and became a fatherly figure to her. Subsequently, he even passed down that powerful stone to Ate fearing that it could mislead anyone to use it in the wrong. This notion was once again explained by his committed characteristic as a guardian of the forest he didn't want anyone to spoil the glory of nature by using it in a wrong way. He believed that preserving nature was his duty and responsibility, and while doing it so he lost his mortal self in the process.

In the final chapter of the story when Asakho (husband of Ate) inquired about the heart stone and she replied that "the stone is not an object of worship that is the mistake many people make with it. It is not for making a profit for oneself. Before his journey, Villie kept dreaming repeatedly that he was at the sleeping river plucking the stone from the river water. He felt sure he was destined to get the stone, and that was why he went on the journey, and he did find the river and the heart stone. The wisdom of the stone is more spiritual than physical. It helps us to discover the spiritual identity that is within us, so we can use it to combat the dark forces that are always trying to control and suppress us"(WRS 238). These words clearly represent that Villie like Odysseus made this adventurous journey to pursue his own true self more than for attaining any materialistic growth. This book is brilliantly explaining the inseparable bond between nature and humans in the most adoring way.

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