



SHIELDING THE EARTH THROUGH THE FOLKLORES AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF THE NAGAS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF EASTERINE KIRE: A DEEP ECOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract:

The phrase 'control of nature' considers nature to be existing for the convenience of man and this has, since time immemorial, anguished the peaceful coexistence of nature and man. We tend to forget that man is just a constituent in the web of life. A non-anthropocentric theory of value is needed that will let one perceive that the non-human forms of life have inherent values. Ecocriticism as a literary theory studies the relation that exists between literature and environment in accordance to human and non-human interactions. An essential part of ecocriticism, Deep Ecology investigates the egalitarian and holistic environment where all biota has intrinsic value, and each share an interconnectedness and respect for one another. The diverse life forms, with the inclusion of culture, can only flourish when the excessive selfish human impact is reduced because this adversely brings unprecedented damage to the earth which in the growing years has been seen in the hill-land of Nagaland. A biocentric connectedness can only witness man/ human as coequal partners of the external nature thereby shielding the earth. This human non-human connectedness has been an integral part of the Naga culture which has no doubt faced challenges. The paper will try to focus on the reverence that is inherent in the inhabitants owing to the tales of appreciation since centuries to mark in Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*, *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man*, *Songry* and *Spirit Nights*. A study of the Naga-lore and the cultural practices, as furnished in her works, will be dealt upon based on Deep Ecology of Arne Naess bringing forth the biocentric egalitarianism practiced in Naga Culture.

Index Terms - Ecocriticism, Deep Ecology, Biocentric Egalitarianism, Taboos, Rituals.

INTRODUCTION

There is one thing that journeys with us from the time we open our eyes in the dawn of the day till the time dusk turns to nightfall, Environment. Our living and our sustenance are all guided by this space that covers us making us protected of being in the ecosphere. This ecospace is our shield making us comfortable by its ability to provide to all our minor to major demands. But the question here looms hard is- just the way we are shielded by this blanket of the entities for our survival, are we also shielding it in return? This, however, has a saddening reply as environment is more devastated by our selfish occupations of it rather than protecting it for our today and our tomorrow. Considering this damage meted to nature, environment has been incorporated in most of the disciplines.

Literature is the realistic presentation of the issues happening in the social sphere. Nature being one of it, Literature and Nature now share a close connection with the different genres of literature emphasizing on the natural environment in space and time. This has brought into prominence an effective literary theory, Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a critical theory which, through literature, analyses the relationship that exists between the human and the non-human world. With the changing decades, a lot of damage has been done that has led to the growth of the environmental consciousness in man. The first of this consciousness started in the year 1962 with the publishing of the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. The birth of the word “ecocriticism” is attributed to William Rueckert, who in a 1978 essay titled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” wrote that ecocriticism entailed “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Glotfelty and Fromm xx) which is included in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. In the same book, Glotfelty defined it as:

Ecocriticism is 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 its texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii)

Ecocriticism in literature is the ecological interpretation of text where human world is not different from the non-human world and have deep relationship. Ecocriticism in literature focuses on the study of mankind’s place on earth. This study of man on earth, however, needs to be seen from the understanding of how can this man-earth relation be analyzed. Ecocritic Selvamony et al (2007) forwarded:

First, ecology is the scientific study of the relationship between the organism and the environment. The second is the deep ecological definition which adopts a philosophical and metaphysical approach in the study of the relationship between the organism and the environment. The third defines ecology as the study of Oikos, Oikology (p xi).

Taking the second forward into consideration, mankind’s place on earth needs a deep ecological understanding which postulates the reversal of anthropocene to non-anthropocene face of mutual relationship. Selvamony et al (2007) further stressed that

“Ecocriticism could be understood as the systematic application of (deep) ecological concepts to the cultural texts” (p xix).

So here lies the question of what is Deep Ecology? It was in 1933’s English language article, “The shallow and the Deep, Long- Range Ecology Movement: A Summary” that Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist, Arne Dekke Eide Naess invented the term Deep Ecology. Naess faulted the European and North Americans because of the instrumentation of the non-human nature by the human-centric approach. By shallow ecology Naess pointed upon the anthropocentric ideas which aimed at the conservation of wilderness only for the welfare of human life and the importance showered to non-human nature was only because it had value. Contrasting the shallow, Naess came up with his philosophy of Deep ecology which strictly focused on the non-anthropocentric view of the ecology which represented a “psychologization of environmental philosophy” (Keller). Keller’s writing titled “Deep Ecology” in the *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy* described

“Deep Ecology in this sense refers to an egalitarian and holistic environmental philosophy founded on phenomenological methodology. By way of direct experience of nonhuman nature, one recognizes the equal intrinsic worth of all biota as well as one’s own ecological interconnectedness with the lifeworld in all its plenitude” (Keller).

Arne Naess was of the belief that Deep Ecology favored an approach that treated nature from a deeper-spiritual view through a sensitive understanding of the non- humans enveloping us. In *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings* by Arne Naess editors Alan Drengson and Bill Devall brought to understanding Naess and his Deep Ecology as,

“Naess sees the deep ecology movement as one of many international grassroots liberation movements of the twentieth century for social justice, peace, and ecological responsibility (i.e., freedom from tyranny and inequity, from war and violence, from pollution of our bodies, and from destruction of our home place” (Naess).

Firstly, Self- realization whereby every human being must identify themselves with the living as well as the non- living things of nature and secondly, keeping mutual predation in mind, every specie has its own intrinsic value forwarding biocentric equality in the ecosystem are the two norms of deep ecological consciousness. A biocentric/ecocentric perspective is adopted that proposes for a “biospherical egalitarianism” (Naess 95) in which the interest of the biosphere overrides the interests of individual species, including the human. Deep ecology challenges the anthropocentrism at the heart of modern society and the kind of ‘shallow ecological’ standpoints that sees the natural world as only a resource for humanity and that presumes that human needs and demands override other considerations.

Deep Ecology doesn’t separate humans from the natural world nor does it separate anything else from it. All the phenomena on the earth are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. In the web of life, humans are just a strand and every single entity has its own intrinsic value. Just as ecocriticism, the literary theory, presents an ecocritical study of literary genres, in the similar way deep ecology tries to find the interconnection

between the human and the non-human world where one is inseparable with the other and live an egalitarian way of life by respecting the inherent/ intrinsic value of each biota or the entity. Deep ecology has its heart which stand on the eight platforms.

2011 Hindu Prize winner for the novel *Bitter Wormwood* and the 2015 Hindu Literary Prize winner for the novel *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire was born on 29th March 1959 to an Angami family and has authored around thirty-one books which includes her poems, novels, children's book, short story, non-fictional works, folktales and she is also a Jazz poet performing with her band Jazzpoesi. Her writing career began as a translator translating over two hundred oral poems of Tenyidie into English. Her writings are mainly based on the lived realities of people of Nagaland. Her books deal with varied strains of life experienced by the inhabitants of Nagaland starting from the historical pre and post war situations to man's attachment with their land to woman voice. Nagas have always have had a very cordial relationship with the ecology of their land. There is a sincere reverence with the entities placing them to the level of the divine manifestation. However, situations, with technological development and urbanization have not been so cordial of late with destruction taking a face. Environment has been suffering a toll due to human attitude of being the master. The anthropocentric attitude is in play. Easterine Kire has always tried to show the embracing and providing quality of nature and also man's understanding of taking this 'oikos' as their own mother. This paper thus tries to study the congeniality in the human and non-human relationship prevalent in Nagaland through the standpoint of Deep Ecology thereby spreading the awareness of respecting the inherent value living in each and every entity of the environment. For the understanding of the intrinsic qualities of the entities which in their own way supports the human-existence and also the realization of human that preservation of nature alone will be a boon to survival, this paper will delve into four areas of biocentric egalitarianism:

i. ECORESTORE

Over the years it has been noticed that man has for his varied selfish gains destroyed the non-human sphere to the great extent. The entities have been used up as though they were being formed only to be subordinates to the human species. This killing of the ecology can be termed ecocide whereby human beings are labelled the killers. The word "Ecocide" is the combination of Greek word "Oikos" (eco) and "cide" form Latin word (Caedere) which means to strike down, cut, destroy, and assassinate. Human ecocide omits all the living and non-living entities that disturb human survival. This ill practice gets highly out of control once one gets the taste of it. Man is identified by the place he belongs to or is an inhabitant of. It is this place that moulds him physically, spiritually, emotionally. The biocentric interconnectedness between the human and non-human world has a strong grounding on the respect and love one has for his ecosphere and the inherent qualities of the entities living there. Nature has to be valued. A mutual interdependence between environment and man is the solution to healthy existence. Considering this from the stand point of Deep Ecology, Arne Naess forwarded that "self-realization implies broadening and deepening of self" (Naess, 82). This self-realization helps an individual to forget his ego of being the dominant force of environment and fight against the destroyers of his sphere thereby proving himself to be an equal partner, same self with the environment. Our milieu is the source of our identity and anything that provides us our name is of value to us. Destruction from external forces for

social, economic, political selfish gains have seen a common ground. Literature plays a key role in picturing the destruction to nature caused.

“In the village area, there were practically no houses left standing. The ruins of Kohima village were a result of the regular bombing by the allied forces. They said it was the only way to get rid of the Japanese who were very firmly entrenched in the village” (Kire 11).

Easterine Kire in her novel *A Respectable Woman* provide a picture of the post-war period when the Battle of Kohima was a destruction won by the allied forces against the Japanese invasion in 1944. Japanese had invaded the hills of Nagaland with the intention of the expansion of their hegemonic occupation. Khonuo was ten then and exactly at forty-five years she orally documents the devastation in the form of loss of life and property to her daughter Kevinuo. The bombing which was a show of the dominant human spoke of the shallow ecological belief of nature being subservient. Houses were gone, thatch, bamboo, wood and stocks of grains were burnt down. Ego took charge of devastating the oikos forgetting the inherent value intact in it. However, the earth is our home and the self-realization is the key that one draws for the interconnectedness. Our actions are to be ecocentric because this is only going to lead to our survival. Realization is to come sooner or later.

“It is amazing how, after a war, people scramble to get their lives back to normal. We all did this too, rebuilding homes and beginning the cycle of school and field- going as soon as we could” (Kire 12).

Soon after the war was over, with the help of the British, Kohima started to rebuild itself. People now started to rebuild their houses bringing in thatch and the tin roof supplies. Cultivation of land started with the supplies of paddy seeds by DC Pawsey and tilling of the land started. This tilling, in the Naga custom, starts with prayers and reverence because the tribals know the intrinsic value attached with the land for if the land is destroyed, survival is impossible. Naga’s see the land from the eco-centric eyes. Even a little piece of land is valued because they provide with the food needs where every food item has its own way of sustaining human. Just as Kevinuo saw her Azuo cooking food mention in *A Respectable Woman*:

“...serve us the warm rice and galho made of dried mustard leaves, garlic, strips of meat, and red sorrel leaves. It was spiced with chili and red chili flakes floated up on my plate. Winter food. The chili kept you warm and protected against cold” (Kire 16).

ii. ECODIVINITY

Nagas have the ancestral practice of worshipping nature. This continued till the advent of Christianity. But Christianity could, however, not stop the inhabitants from continuing with showing their reverence to the entities of nature. In *Naga Cultural Milieu: An Adaptation to Mountain Ecosystem*, V. Nienu proclaims:

“The mountains and rivers of their land, combined with the indigenous flora and fauna, shaped the Naga life, culture to a great extent. Consequently, for the Naga people, the mountains are more than just a habitat; rather, the mountains are a scared vicinage- a scared landscape and heritage that helped forge Naga society, beliefs and identity” (Nienu 34).

Naga ecological setting is the environment that includes the land and the forest. Man, nature, culture, and spirit are all inclusive and no entities dominate the one or the other and remain outside the balanced ecosystem. Naga's look into every of the non-human entity as divine leading to the tagging of the religion to be featured as animistic. To them divinity rest in natural elements just like the same thought process of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In *Naga Village: A Sociological Study*, Kewepfuzu Lohe emphasizes "There is no written dogma about the idea of God and faith . . . places like thick forest, rocks mountains, springs, lakes, rivers and the other natural objects are believed to be the abodes of these spirits!" (26). The primordial Nagas worshipped and believed in two types of spirits- Benevolent and Malevolent. It is said that to render favor from both the spirits, the Nagas usually offered sacrifices. The rituals and the ceremonies performed by them enriched their religious and moral life. Even though their religious and spiritual sentiments are interwoven into the secular rites and rituals, they believe in the existence of a supreme being.

Ecological awareness as spiritual is the forward of deep ecology because our faith makes us acknowledge our reverence to the divine, just the way one limits himself from committing any sin because of the thought that it might incur curse from the divine. Similarly, only when we see the divine manifestation in each of the entity of nature, we limit ourself from destroying it. We understand the inherent value. Nagas through their various traditional practice respect the spiritual image seen in the elements. Respecting the spirits is a source of blessing to the Nagas and rituals are practiced for that. In Easterine Kire's *Spirits Night*, she brings the deep ecological concern of intrinsic value where rituals and taboos are followed:

"She and Namu had brought in their harvest, finished the rituals for the protection of the harvest, and prayed their grain would be long lasting and feed them throughout the next agricultural year. Young Namu followed her around the house as she sprinkled rice brew on the house posts and on the woven grain containers, propitiating the spirit of the houses and the spirit of the granary" (Kire 50).

The spiritual element resided in all the entities be it the house and the granary and it was mandatory to please them for a blessed harvest. This greatly furnish of the value attached to the entities of nature where even a rock had value. The rituals were practiced because people were aware of the value each entity held. To ensure that the harvest would be long-lasting and safe from rodents a ritual was practiced where the women had to eat only lentils, beans and root vegetables for two days after harvest as the women chanted and worshipped the "creator-diety" (51).

Trees, rock, river, stone, etc. all had their own qualities and were seen with reverence. In the Naga culture, log-drum is the most important symbol in every village. Naga's consider the log-drum to be their father because log drum protected the villagers from wild animals that would pounce in to the village or the neighboring enemies. The log-drum had different beatings to signal different dangers. Young boys, after they reached an appropriate age were to get themselves trained. The log drum was thus a spiritual being that saved the people like the way divine saves. Whenever the log drum used to start rotting, they had to replace it with another which meant ecocide of the tree. But "a tree was a living entity and it would not hesitate to show its anger at any act of disrespect towards it" (57). This was the reason the seer would see a dream and only that tree would be cut

but before cutting it good words would be spoken mentioning their objective to appease the spirit of the tree.

They would respect its intrinsic value and say:

“Venerable one, we ask you to come with us and be our father. Come and protect our families from our enemies and those who want to see us destroyed. Come and lend us your wisdom. When we use the axe on you, please do not cause harm to the man...our only intent is to give you a more noble purpose than that you are fulfilling in the forest...permit us to use your protection” (57).

Fritjof Capra in his “Deep Ecology: A New Paradigm” discusses that ecological awareness relates to spiritual awareness because when the concept of human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels connected to the cosmos as a whole it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence and that the new ecological ethic is grounded in spirituality. Kire thus deftly pictures the divine manifestation in nature as well as the intrinsic value in the entities whereby an interconnection develops between the human and the non-human elements of the ecological sphere.

iii. ECOMUSIC

The earth we are living has a number of sounds. ‘Soundscape’ has always put serenity in the human mind be it the chirping of the bird’s early dawn or the shrill sound of the cicada warning of a sunny day. Traveling through the mountain-cut roads in the hills, innumerable sounds create music to the ears. It is so evident that nature’s abundance in sounds can be witnessed only while living in close affinity to nature than living in the industrial urbanized societies. Each of the human culture has music. Music is the binding element of the human and the non-human worlds because music is produced for emotive, social, cultural, intellectual purposes. Nagaland has a long standing of oral tradition where stories have passed from one generation to other through the word of mouth which when told by our elders has a musical note to it. The Naga culture and traditions are distinct and vibrant consisting of folk songs, folk dances, accentuated by traditional music. The theme of music and songs glorify and praise important events of the past. They worship nature by performing folk songs and dances. But how is the scenario when song comes out from the entities of nature and human are left with no option but to be drawn towards the entity. Song or music has a calm healing in it and human, being of the highest order of the species, have been given the quality of drawing the weary ears towards the songs. Nagas believe in the residing of spirit as an entity of nature and these spirits are being revered and gone back to, again and again, for meeting with the solution of varied personal issues or the problems of the community at large.

“The songs also draw them into the forest, deeper and deeper into the heart of the dark woods, until they grow so loud that the singing seems to be inside their heads, sung up close into their ears, their harmonies swaying back and forth and sending them into a deep slumber” (Kire 10).

Easterine Kire in her *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear- Man* tell of the myth of the forest song which is an “inexplicable phenomenon of people going missing from the village, only to be found three or four days later, or, like Nito, ten days later” (9). Zevino went missing for twelve days and after twelve days her father and the clansman left their search for Zeno who was the lost girl. She was caught by the forest song. Her father had gone to collect firewood. On the third day her mother packed freshly cooked food and rice brew for him. Zeno

started her journey in the dark only to be terrified being chased by Bise's father. She ran northward to the place where the forest cover was thick. She was in the depth when she dashed to the old lady and thereafter was found no more. She was taken away by the spirit of the forest through the song that filled the forest.

Kire's *Songry*, the title itself talks of the songs that are in nature making us believe of the qualities inherent in the forest entities. Kire wishes to let all realize that the music in environment 'Ecomusic' is about the lesson non-human entities teach the otherwise destructive human world. In this *Songry* the Barkmen, the trees which are personified as human being, are full of music that talk of kindness embedded in nature.

"Sometimes old bark peeled off from the Barkmen and fell to the forest floor. Hunters who found old bark would take it carefully home and keep it by their beds, because the bark held songs that would begin to play when the breeze from the open doorway breathed upon them. Snatches of songs, coming and going, and beginning anew whenever the wind floated in through the door" (Kire 7).

The Barkman, who had a heart filled with kindness and love for all was killed because of the selfish greed of the warriors of the gorge. Somewhat relates to tell the human world to listen to the 'ecomusicality' of nature. This 'ecomusic' is the inherent value of nature that sings of the goodness that is in each of the entity. One has to listen to the music and act accordingly. This supports the Deep Ecological claim of Biocentric egalitarianism putting forward the soothing nature. One has to listen to the music embedded in each and every entity of nature. This nonverbal form of communication, helps one to understand our development and growth in the biodiverse earth.

iv. ECOHEALING

Nagas have been animistic in their way of attaching themselves with nature. Nature has always been a shield of protection to the life in this region. Education in all disciplines saw its dawn in this region very late. There hardly was someone who could treat the wounds and diseases of the people. At that juncture the close affinity the Nagas shared with nature was not just a baton in sustenance of livelihood but also was a balm of cure and hope. Easterine Kire very clearly portrays, through her folklores and the practices of the people how nature saved the inhabitants, how people searched for the balm in nature. This balm that nature provided to man was only because of the tenets of deep ecological belief of the inherent value. Had people not realized that every little thing has value of its own they would not have preserved those herbs or entities that healed. She titled the novel *Bitter Wormwood* because Bitter Wormwood means 'a type of bitter herb was traditionally believed to keep the bad spirits away' (Vasuhi 65).

Nagas believe that every entity has healing property inherent in it. In the novel *Spirit Nights*, Namu the protagonist got a cut in his leg that he had received while he was sharpening his spear.

'I used some Crofton weed on it, and every morning I covered it with rock bee honey until the cut closed. Look it's completely healed now' (Kire 152).

This directly speaks of the medicinal value Crofton weeds and rock bee honey house that could heal physical wounds. Frogs, river-crabs and snails are the seasonal food for the farmers. Usually, they are caught in the rainy season with the surplus being dried to be used when needed. She wrote in *Spirit Nights*,

“Frog meat was considered medicinal in many tribes, and highly recommended for wounds and injuries, fever and infections; people had such great faith in its healing properties” (Kire 7).

Even now, the inhabitants believe in the healing property of the non-human entity. Today, as soon as a young mother gives birth, she is given frog soup believing it to heal the stitch wounds in no time. Tola and Topong Nyakba, Namu’s parents, had been married for some time but she, Tola, wasn’t conceiving. She was prescribed different herbs to eat in different seasons. The healing value is inherent in the non-human entity when Kire writes that Tola had to sleep for several nights with the ‘grain stone’ tied with a cloth to her abdomen,

“The grain stones were black in color and kept by the granary or inside the grain containers because they made the grain multiply. Some people believed that they were potent enough to cure infertility in human” (Kire 10).

Nature therefore has healing in it with every entity having its own potent value to heal the varied pains and bruises. This term ‘Ecohealing’, thereby, provides the deep ecological stand of interconnection that is prevalent between the human and the non-human world.

CONCLUSION

Our attitude towards illness, health, relationship with nature will be affected greatly and in a better way by our deep ecological thinking. It is deep ecology that tells that all natural systems aren’t separate entities but constitute the whole. Now this becoming of one unit is only due to the individual units’ interconnection and mutual interdependence. One has to see that not a single part of this whole has to be destroyed but rather they are to be coherent. Although we can discern individual parts in any system, the nature of the whole is always different from the mere sum of its parts. Considering the warmth and protection the environment provides to man it becomes essential that human world has to have all the respect and concern for even the minutest of the entity of nature because we never know what great protection the little entity has to offer. Being dictatorial has never been the strongest force of gaining recognition. One has to understand that existence is not an individual thing. One can exist only with the support of the other and the key behind this coexistence is in the hands of biological egalitarianism where one respects the intrinsic value of the other.

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