



Ecocritical Reading Of Easterine Kire's 'When The River Sleeps

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Abstract :

This research paper seeks to explore the concepts of Eco criticism and the mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the environment in the novel "When the River Sleeps" by Easterine Kire. The storyline follows Vilie, a solitary hunter in the Nagaland hills, as he embarks on a quest motivated by dreams and a deep connection with the natural world. The study examines the ecological perspectives embedded in the novel , analyzing how nature is portrayed as a guardian, provider, and source of healing. Furthermore, it assesses the depiction of the rich cultural heritage and harmonious coexistence with nature prevalent in the rural life of the Naga people. Through a comprehensive analysis of the literary work, this research aims to make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing discussion surrounding ecocriticism and environmental themes in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Eco criticism, humans, environment, Naga people, harmony.

Introduction:

Eco criticism, a multidisciplinary field that incorporates insights from the natural sciences, literature, anthropology, and history, can be traced back to the 1960s, which coincided with the rise of the environmental movement and the publication of Rachel Carson's influential work "Silent Spring." The subsequent significant growth in the 1980s marked the emergence of two distinct phases as identified by Lawrence Buell . The initial phase of ecological criticism occurred during the 1980s, with a specific focus on the genres of "nature writing, nature poetry, and wilderness fiction" (Buell 138). Initially, the objective of eco criticism was centered around the preservation and care of the Earth. The second wave of eco-critics displayed a leaning towards matters of environmental justice and embraced a perspective known as 'social ecocriticism', which considers "the urban landscape as seriously as natural landscape" (Buell 22). This particular wave of ecocriticism is also identified

as revisionist ecocriticism, as it endeavors to identify the remnants of nature within cities and reveal the acts of eco-injustice perpetrated against the marginalized segments of society.

The term "ecocriticism" itself can be traced back to William Rueckert's essay "Literature and ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism" (1978), with M.H. Abrahams illuminating its etymology as a fusion of "criticism" with a shortened form of "ecology," the scientific discipline that explores the interconnectedness of diverse life forms and their relationships with their physical surroundings.

Since the inception of literary studies, the examination of literature and environmental studies has traditionally manifested in distinct forms. However, the formalization and establishment of ecocriticism as a discipline within literary studies occurred relatively recently. This transformation into a cohesive and organized field transpired in the final decade of the twentieth century. A pivotal moment in this development was marked by the publication of two seminal works in 1996: the "Ecocriticism Reader," meticulously curated by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and Lawrence Buell's groundbreaking contribution, "The Environmental Imagination." These publications served as foundational milestones, propelling ecocriticism into a recognized and structured domain within the broader landscape of literary studies.

Cheryll Glotfelty defines it in her introduction to 'The Ecocriticism Reader (1996)': What... is Ecocriticism? Simply, put, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and 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. (Glotfelty 1996 xix)

Easterine Kire, presently residing in northern Norway, is a distinguished poet and author of Nagaland, India. Renowned for her literary contributions, Kire has produced an extensive body of work, including novels, poetry, and children's books, with several of her creations finding translation into various languages. Notably, she is acknowledged for translating approximately 200 oral poems from her native language to English.

Among her notable literary achievements, Kire's inaugural novel, "A Naga Village Remembered" (2003), holds significance as the first Naga novel published in English. This work is situated against the backdrop of the British expedition in India. Following this debut, her second novel, "A Terrible Matriarchy" (2007), stands out as a coming-of-age narrative. Subsequent works, such as "Mari" (2010), delve into the life of a young girl set against the historical canvas of the Battle of Kohima.

"Bitter Wormwood" (2011), a recipient of the Hindu Prize in 2011, brings attention to the Naga struggle for independence from India. Her "When the River Sleeps," published in 2014 is recognized for its mythopoeic imagination and secured the Hindu Literary Prize in 2015. In acknowledgment of her contributions to Naga literature, Kire received the Governor's Medal for excellence in 2011, further solidifying her standing as a prominent figure in the literary landscape.

Objectives of the study:

- To explore the ecocritical dimensions in Easterine Kire's "When the River Sleeps" by examining the portrayal of nature and its significance in the narrative.
- To analyze the cultural representations of rural life and the symbiotic relationship between the Naga people and their natural surroundings.
- To investigate the role of nature as a protector, provider, and source of healing in the lives of the characters, particularly focusing on the protagonist, Vilie

Methodology of the study:

This research employs a qualitative literary analysis approach, focusing on an in-depth examination of the text "When the River Sleeps" to identify and interpret ecocritical themes. The methodology incorporates a comprehensive review of pertinent journals, scholarly articles, reference books, and e-journals to extract ecocritical theories and perspectives.

Discussion:

"When the River Sleeps" unfolds the narrative of Vilie, a solitary hunter who has established his abode within the confines of the forest. The statement "The forest is my wife, and perhaps this is what marriage is like; with periods when a chasm of loneliness separates the partners leaving each one alone with their own thoughts, groping for answers" (9) conveys a profound and intimate connection between the Vilie and the natural environment. Consistently haunted by dreams depicting a specific river foretold by a seer, Vilie learns of a stone within the river capable of granting any wish. Motivated by these visions, he embarks on a perilous journey to capture the river during its dormant state and extract the coveted heart-stone.

Vilie's odyssey through the hills of Nagaland assumes an almost surreal quality, steeped in supernatural encounters with weretigers, widow-spirits, and demons. Negotiating his path on foot, Vilie seeks refuge intermittently, engaging with both benevolent villagers and malevolent individuals who falsely accuse him of witnessing a murder. Undeterred, Vilie's resilience and determination ultimately culminate in the acquisition of the long-dreamt-of stone.

During his homeward journey, Vilie encounters Ate, a compassionate young woman residing in a village for outcasts. Despite the superstitions surrounding her magical abilities, Vilie, convinced of her harmlessness, brings Ate to his ancestral village. Recognizing the forest's inherent dangers for her, he places her under the care of his aunts and entrusts her with the heart-stone. Tragically, Vilie meets a brutal demise at the hands of an individual coveting the stone for material gain. Ate, now married, periodically visits Vilie's home, asserting a palpable sense of his lingering presence. This complex tale intricately weaves together themes of longing, courage, and supernatural elements against the backdrop of Nagaland's hills and forests.

The concept of Eco criticism as the scholarly discipline that interconnects the relationship between the natural environment and human beings is best employed in the narrative. Kire discarded the idea of modern and sophisticated lifestyles instead she opted the picturesque backdrop of the hills of Nagaland, offering readers a captivating journey through its beautiful and scenic landscapes. Vilie undertakes an epic journey through forest in search of the river of his dream. Through Vilie's journey and his taking shelter in various villages readers are afforded glimpses into the lives of the Naga people.

Easterine Kire adeptly portrays the simplicity of the Naga people in "When the River Sleeps." The narrative unfolds with the Naga community extending genuine hospitality to Vilie, a stranger and weary traveler. Notably, this hospitality is offered without any expectation of reciprocity. Vilie, interpreting the position of the sun on the horizon, discerns the time to be two in the afternoon. The depiction further captures women gathering nettle from the forest for bark weaving, a traditional art passed down through generations to create bark-cloth. Additionally, men engage in fishing from the nearby river, preparing a substantial meal for Vilie. The portrayal extends to communal work activities conducted "under the open skies," where individuals chant work songs in a 'call-and-response' manner. This immersive depiction illustrates the cultural richness and communal harmony embedded in the Naga people's everyday life. The evocative depiction of rural life in the narrative contributes profound depth, emphasizing the seamless coexistence of the Naga people with the natural environs.

In this literary work, the natural worldview assumes a position of utmost significance and is not subservient. It possesses the capacity to bestow blessings and fulfill desires, analogous to the titular river. Nature is perceived as a bestower of sustenance and refuge. Vilie articulates his conventional belief when he asserts, "if one is able to extract a stone from the core of the dormant river and bring it home, it will confer upon them whatever it is empowered to bestow; be it livestock, companionship, prowess in battle, or triumph in the pursuit of game" (3). Despite the perils inherent in the wilderness, Vilie elects to reside in the forest. Likewise, a Nepali couple embraces nature and upholds the notion that it imparts a comprehensive education. Abiding in harmonious coexistence with nature, the couple maintains that the forest furnishes a holistic education, obviating the necessity for conventional schooling. The narrative emphasizes the breadth of their comprehension pertaining to the forest, encompassing knowledge of edible flora, trapping methods for fauna and avian species, as well as remedies for venomous serpent bites. Manifest within this framework, nature embodies an abundance, equilibrium, aesthetics, liberation, and inherent consonance, thereby epitomizing an incontrovertible sense of wholeness.

The relationship between Vilie and nature in "When the River Sleeps" is depicted as a reciprocal and interlinked bond. Vilie is not only a resident of the forest but also assumes the role of its guardian, entrusted by both his clan and the Forest department. This designation, as the official protector of the rare tragopan and guardian of the gwi (great mithuns), grants him fame that transcends his solitary life. Nature is something that helped him to conquer the fear of spirit and this courage provoked him to utter said " Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuopfu [creator diety] fights for me, today is my day! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone!" (103). Vilie's identity as the forest guardian proves consequential, influencing events such as a murder trial where his reputation is

contrasted with the accused. Notably, Vilie's ultimate sacrifice in protecting the sacred heart-stone underscores the significance of this relationship.

Easterine Kire emphasizes the healing properties of nature throughout the narrative. When Vilie is stung by nettle plants, Idele, a woman skilled in weaving nettle cloths, employs bitter wormwood and rock bee honey as natural remedies, showcasing nature's efficacy in alleviating ailments. Vilie, too, relies on nature for treating injuries, using *ciena* for minor wounds and a combination of pungent *Japan nha* (crofton weed) and rock bee honey for more significant injuries. The broader community also leans heavily on nature for medicinal treatments. The seer in the village administers drinks made from ginseng and *tsohou* (nutgall tree) to those with fevers, "the seer would give them a drink made of ginseg and *tsohou* [nutgall tree], the wild sour seed that grew on trees" (54) illustrating the pervasive reliance on nature's healing touch. The novel emphasises the interdependence between Vilie and nature, where nature serves as both protector and healer in this symbiotic relationship.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that Easterine Kire's "When the River Sleeps" offers a rich tapestry of ecocritical themes, portraying nature as a dynamic force that shapes and influences the lives of the characters. The cultural representations of rural life underscore the harmonious coexistence between the Naga people and their natural environment. The narrative not only emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature but also highlights nature's role as a protector and healer. This research contributes to the broader understanding of ecocriticism in contemporary literature and sheds light on the nuanced ecological perspectives embedded in Kire's work.

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