

The Forest is My Wife: Ecocritical Perspective in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

Tialila

Asst.Professor

Peren Government College

Peren: Nagaland

Abstract

Ecocriticism has become one of the most engaging subjects of study since the last three decades of 20th century till the present times. Keeping in view the large scale population explosion, massive deforestation, desertification, various forms of environmental pollution following the rapid rise in industrialization as well as global warming, Ecocriticism and studies in Ecology and Environment have, of late, become decidedly significant. In this respect, writers round the globe have a great role to play, and by the same logic, literary representations in the form of poetry, fiction, drama and short stories have been playing a significant role to make the whole world sensitive and aware of the interconnectedness of the human and the nonhuman worlds. This paper is an attempt to explore how Easterine Kire interweaves environment with cultural, spiritual, social and historical analyses to bring out the ecological consciousness of the Naga people. That the people of Nagaland have always been closely and spiritually associated with the natural world has been effortlessly vindicated in the novel and hence calls for an ecocritical analysis.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Interconnectedness, Nagaland, Environment, Nature

Ecocriticism has become one of the most engaging subjects of study and research since the last three decades of 20th century till the present times. Keeping in view the large scale population explosion, massive deforestation, desertification, various forms of environmental pollution following the rapid rise in industrialization and also global warming, Ecocriticism and studies in Ecology and Environment have, of late, become decidedly significant. In this respect, writers round the globe have a great role to play, and by the same logic, literary representations in the form of poetry, fiction, drama and short stories have been playing a significant role to make the whole world sensitive and aware of the interconnectedness of the human and the nonhuman worlds. Ecocriticism is usually defined as the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature in relation to environment. It entails a holistic approach to texts that examine the perceived relationship between man and nature, and more significantly between man and environment, between man and the ecosystem consisting of biotic and abiotic elements. Significantly, the onus lies in the bond between the human and nonhuman worlds which usually form the ecocritical basis of a text. This is obvious from the very etymological meaning of the word Ecocriticism.

Derived from the Greek word ‘*oikos*’ meaning ‘household’ and ‘*kritis*’ meaning ‘to judge’ and ‘keep the house in good order’(Howarth 1988, 163), the term obviously points to the negotiation of man with nature and environment. William Rueckert’s seminal essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (1978) is considered to be the beginning of ecocritical discourse, even though eco-consciousness has been inseparable from literature since time immemorial. Rueckert maintains that ecocriticism is “the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature”(107). Rueckert’s definition being too precise, scholars search for a broader and more convincing opinion/definition of ecocriticism in Cheryll Glotfelty’s introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xvii). She emphasizes the fact that ecocriticism should take an earth-centric approach to the study of literature and that ecological theory criticism during 60’s and 70’s

lacked a systematic study of man in relation to environment and eco-system. Eco-consciousness became decidedly popular only after the formation of the *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* (1992), and the publication of two seminal works, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. Glotfelty has been unanimously acclaimed as the founder of Ecocriticism in the United States of America.

While emphasizing ecocentric world view and environmental purity, ecocritics focus on the cordial relationship between the human and non-human worlds, between man and animals, birds and insects. In this respect, Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* (2004) defines ecocriticism as a literary discourse that encompasses protection of birds, animals and the environment that rears them up. Here, Garrard comes closer to Lawrence Buell. Buell emphasizes time and again the fact that non-human elements should not be taken as a 'framing device' in any literary text, but more predominantly as a 'living presence' so as to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. At the same time, in an ecoconscious text, Buell argues, 'human interest' cannot be considered to be the legitimate interest. Instead, one has to inevitably realize the fact that 'human accountability' to the environment is a part of the text's ethical orientation (1995:7).

Different thinkers and critics have used various approaches and modes to define the term ecocriticism. However, the basic concern of all their approaches is the relationship between man and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and work towards possible correction of the contemporary environmental situation. An ecological approach to literature should assess how a text elucidates the relationships between organisms and their environments and in doing so, the emphasis of scientific ecology on systems and relationships must not be ignored. Just as scientific ecology includes human ecology, this approach is inclusive of both human or non-human organisms, and works whether the environment concerned is pristine 'wilderness' or not and the analysis of the texts in this thesis will encompass, as far as possible, an assessment of how the various interests of the author, both human and non-human work together to form a whole and as Rueckert states, the need to see even

the smallest, most remote part in relation to a very large whole is the central intellectual action required by ecology and of an ecological vision (108).

Easterine Kire, novelist, poet and children's story writer has once again proved her mettle in the art of effortless narrative in her award winning novel, *When the River Sleeps*. Kire's first novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* published in 2003 by the Ura Academy is the first Naga novel in English. Several of her books, poetry and short stories has been translated to German, Croatian, Uzbek, Norwegian and Nepali. She is based in Northern Norway but her love for home has never ceased. In all aspects, she continues to write about Nagaland and her people and brings out the hopes and aspirations of the Naga people, the breathtaking landscape, hills, mountains, cloud-covered villages, rivers, stories and the rich oral tradition in her writings. The physical world and the spiritual world occupy a huge part of the Naga psyche and they appear naturally in her writings because she is very much a part of that consciousness.

When the River Sleeps takes the reader on a physical as well as a spiritual journey along with Vilie, the protagonist who sets out in search of a heart-stone. The forest has been Vilie's home for twenty-five of his forty-eight years now. He was the guardian of the *gwi*, the great mithun (*Bos frontalis*) as well as the forest department's official protector of the rare tragopan which nested in his part of the forest. "The forest is my wife" (Kire 7). Vilie utters this phrase quite often which is suggestive of how important the forest is for the Naga people. Thus, protecting and ensuring a mutual relationship with the forest and all its inhabitants come naturally to them. Nature, in this novel is presented as an empowered vital force rather than oppressed and powerless. Kire's celebration of nature's purity and power in this novel vindicates her ecological leanings. Nature has the power and generosity to provide, endow blessings, grant wishes, heal and lead one to spiritual enlightenment:

If you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you. It could be cattle, women, prowess in war, or success in the hunt...The retrieved stone is a powerful charm called a "heart-stone" (Kire 3).

The opening of the novel also suggests the presence of mystical elements which is an inevitable part of the human as well as the nonhuman world according to Naga belief. Vilie is haunted by dreams about the sleeping river and the magical stone it cradled:

Sweat drenched his face and neck. He threw off the covers and lay back trying to catch his breath. He had had the same dream every month for the past two years, ever since he had first heard the story of the sleeping river. He was restless in a way that he had never been before (Kire 2).

Nonetheless, to wrest a stone which possess untold powers from the sleeping river is a dangerous quest. He has to encounter silent spirits that hover around the forest and must fight demons both within and without. He has to face the wrath of vengeful malignant widows and weretigers as well as evil armed men on his trail. The remote mountains of Nagaland which is full of natural wonder and supernatural enchantment is at once laid bare to us.

Vilie felt light-headed once he decided to respond to the river's call. He made preparations for his quest which was filled with uncertainty. Yet, there was no doubt in his mind because he believed he was destined to find the river. Four and a half hours of walk in the forest led him to his nearest neighbors, the woodcutter Krishna and his wife where he spent the night amidst the noises of the forest. Kire reveals several significant and mysterious ecological elements present in Naga folklore. For instance, the existence of tiger spirits strongly indicates the interconnection between men and animals since time immemorial and even to this day, there are people who possess different animal spirits. Vilie encounters a weretiger while resting at a Zeliang man's field. A tiger came upon him fearlessly. A shot from his gun drove the tiger away into the night. However, the tiger appeared again and Vilie was certain that this tiger was not an ordinary tiger.

Vilie has always been a very practical man when it comes to adjusting his life in the forest. At the same time, he believed in the superstitions and beliefs that have been passed down through the oral tales of the Naga people. He has heard of certain men transforming their spirits into tigers. To ward off the tiger he invokes his forebear's names: "Kuovi! Menuolhoulie! Wetsho!

Is this the way to treat your clansmen? I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman” (Kire 26). Further, Vilie passes through the nettle forest and comes across the barkweavers. Barkweaving is an old Naga art of weaving by using yarn made of stripped fibre from nettle plants. Another important ecological element, that is, the Naga herbal lore also finds place in the novel. Kire presents various native herbs used to cure disease, heal wounds and ward off evil spirits which vindicates Naga people’s belief in the coexistence of physical environment, the natural and the supernatural, the human and the nonhuman. The Naga elders in the villages have always taught the youngsters to be aware of the different worlds that coexisted and there are several stories, beliefs and taboos which aims at showing respect to all the inhabitants of these worlds.

Besides Vilie’s physical journey, his spiritual quest is of great significance in the novel. He believes that he can achieve his quest by being a faithful lover of the forest and certainly proves it. After his brief encounter with the barkweavers, Vilie unwittingly entangles himself in a crime. His inability to stop the crime haunts him psychologically and for no fault of his, he becomes the hunted. He began a mad run with the evil men trailing him till he enters the rainforest. The rainforest was shunned by both villagers and local hunters as well because of the belief associated to it as the unclean forest, known to the people as *Rarhuria*. However, Vilie trusted the forest and it was a safe haven for him. The forest was indeed his wife. The forest provided him sanctuary and food when he needed it the most. Moreover, the forest protected him from the evil in the heart of man. He felt truly wedded to her (Kire 51). He is saved from being lynched only because he is the guardian of the forest where rare animals and birds dwell (Kire 72). Hence, we see that jungle justice has been delivered to him which also points out that caring for nature consequently results in our own good.

After recouping health in the unclean forest, Vilie began his journey and reaches the border village. The headman of the village and his wife welcomed Vilie into their house and he experiences the warmth of natural Naga hospitality which can be aligned to the generosity of nature. While listening to the headman’s discourse about the river, he experiences a certain change in him and felt closer to the spiritual world. Unconsciously, he was on a spiritual journey. The past few days in the deep forest has made him aware of the extensive human and nonhuman nature

which worked for and against him simultaneously. His near-lynching experience at the hands of the men from Dichu village and his encounter with the different forms of spirits made him more knowledgeable. He came to know about the darker side of the human heart as well as the goodness that still lived within the hearts of man. The quest for the heart-stone had in fact, enlightened him and brought him closer to pristine nature and wilderness which still remain untouched by the evils of the modern world.

The landscape and vegetation gradually change as Vilie kept walking towards the river. The ferns appeared to grow lush and green without any effort. He began to hear the sound of water over rocks up ahead. He had reached the river of his dreams and realized that the river is in fact a spirit (Kire 108). His steps become more patient and cautious lest he disturb the sanctity and serenity of the river. A magical silence eventuate in the narrative as soon as he reaches the territory of the sleeping river. When the right moment came, Vilie entered the gushing water to wrest the heart-stone from the river. The river struggled to push him down and under and nearly strangled him. However, Vilie's courage and purity of heart makes him an endearing embodiment of the 'greater spirit' which consists of both the sky and earth spirits (Kire 103). And thus, by virtue of his goodness and respect for nature, he is able to claim the much envied heart-stone. Consequently, we learn that the spirit of nature protects the one who revere and protect her. Barry Commoner's first law of ecology states that "everything is connected to everything else" (*The Closing Circle* 1971: 8). Correspondingly in this novel, Kire has sincerely portrayed the interconnectedness of the human, nonhuman, the physical environment and the spiritual which encourages an ecocritical analysis.

Works Cited:

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination : Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1995. Print.
- Commoner, Barry. *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology*. New York: Knopf, 1971. Print.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Glotfelty, Cheryl and Harold Fromm. Eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader : Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Georgia : Georgia UP, 1996. Print.

Howarth, William. "Country Books, City Writers: America's Rural Literature. *National Rural Studies Committee: A Proceedings*." Hood River, Ore., 24- 25 May 1988: 11-21.

Kire, Easterine. *When the River Sleeps*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2014. Print.