

Spiritual Relationship with Ecology and Humans in Easterine Kire's***Son of the Thundercloud*****Haobam Sushma Devi**

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Abstract

This paper examines the spiritual interconnectedness among humans and nature in Easterine Kire's novel, *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016). Traditional Naga belief systems have their roots in the spiritual dimension of ecology, which is portrayed in this novel. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the close-knit relationship between man, nature, and spirit through the metaphorical journey of Pelevetso. The author utilises folktales to craft a narrative that gives the message about the consequences of rejecting the essence of nature, resulting in the desolate condition of the earth. The redemptive birth of Rhaleituo becomes the thriving force that restores life and prosperity through the arrival of the rain. The paper concludes that a fulfilling life requires a pleasant relationship with the cosmos and reverence for the sacredness of the earth.

Keywords: Son of the Thundercloud, Easterine Kire, Naga Culture, Nagaland, Ecology.

Introduction

Northeast India is an area abundant in breathtaking landscapes, diverse topographical features, abundant flora, and rich fauna. From these seven wonderful states and a brother, a new dimension in literature comes up, known as Northeast literature. The seven sister states comprise Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, with the only brother being Sikkim. Each state is unique and rich with its own culture, traditions, language, literature, and environment. However, they have a rich oral literature and natural beauty, which functions as the backbone of many creative works infused with folk literature that has been handed down through generations. Initially, the mother tongue is used to write any form of literature. Yet, we have numerous writers who write in English nowadays. British colonisation had left this English language, but it has proved to be a profitable medium through which the identity and culture of the northeast could be acknowledged by the world. Some notable authors from the northeast who write in English are Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Robin S Ngangom, Easterine Kire, Dhruva Hazarika, Mitra Phukan, etc.

Easterine Kire (1959-) is an author from Nagaland, India, who currently resides in northern Norway. Most of her works are in English, but translations have been done in different languages like German, Croatian, Uzbek, Norwegian, and Nepali. She is one such author from the northeast to familiarise the world with the traditions and culture of Nagaland. She received the Governor's Medal for Excellence in Naga literature in 2011 and the Free Word by Catalen PEN, Barcelona in 2013. Some of her remarkable works include *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Bitter*

Wormwood (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), *Don't Run My Love* (2017) and *Spirit Nights* (2022). Of these opuses, *Son of the Thundercloud* is the main concern for this paper. This novel also bagged two prestigious awards: Book of the Year (Fiction), Tata Literature Live! Awards 2017 and Bal Sahitya Puraskar 2018.

Spirituality and Ecology in Naga Culture

Spirituality cannot be defined in one single concept, as it has evolved and reshaped itself over time. It is generally associated with the search for truth in the self or God, with a touch of mysticism and the unexplainable cosmos. *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines spirituality as “the quality of being concerned with religion or the human spirit” while ecology is defined as “the relation of plants and living creatures to each other and to their environment”. When spirituality and ecology become the driving force in a particular work, the concept of Ecospirituality births. Ecospirituality is the amalgamation of the spiritual and nature, which makes humans recognise the holiness and the uniqueness of our earth. Beginning somewhere around the 1960s, eco-spiritualism is one of the subfields of ecocriticism, as Chitra Sankaran points out:

Ecological criticism, plural and multiform in its evolution in the past few decades, has now come to embrace not just the science of ecology but all possible relations between literature and the non-human world, and hence has branched out into various subfields such as ecofeminism, eco-spiritualism, material ecocriticism, and postcolonial ecocriticism, to name a few, focussing on diverse areas that impact human-nature interactions. (Sankaran 4-5)

Nagaland has a rich and varied ecosystem and also an enormous amount of spiritual belief that goes along with it. Shimreichon Luithui in the *NAGA: A PEOPLE STRUGGLING FOR SELF-DETERMINATION* mentions that the Naga people believe in three categories of gods and spirits, which are (1) a high, creator God, which again have different forms, (2) the spirits existing in the sky, and (3) the earth spirits. (Luithui,10). The Nagas traced their ancestry to the three brothers of one single mother: man, spirit, and tiger. So, they believe in the existence of the spirit and consider the tiger as their brother. We can therefore observe that there is a cohesive relationship between man, nature, and god. The people of Nagaland follow the traditional form of religion, which is similar to animism. Animism is the belief that the components of nature have souls and that their existence in the universe is controlled by an unseen power. But, it is important to note that the Traditional Naga religion is different from other animistic religions, as they believe in the existence of gods. (Luithui,10)

Easterine Kire uses her personal experiences and folktales of Nagaland handed down orally from generations, along with fiction created and crafted out of her imagination. In her essay “Easterine Kire: Spirituality, Nature and Nagaland” for the Barbican Press, she mentions that her generation of Nagas agrees that they share their territories with spirit inhabitants and humans, with their cultural life revolving around teaching respect. They show respect to the human, animal and the spirit world. She also admits to having experienced encounters with spirits beginning from a young age. (Kire)

Analysis

Son of the Thundercloud (2016) reverberates with ecological spirituality or ecospirituality, about the mutual relationship between the cosmos and human beings.

Containing twenty-five chapters, this fictional novel beautifully narrates that nature is always associated with the mortal realm. The main protagonist, Pelevetso or Pele, would be wandering in his life for a higher purpose, for his name meant to be loyal to the end. He grew up understanding the taboos associated with their culture and learned to respect them as he was taught to. The taboos were related to reverence and empathy towards the elements of nature. Young children were taught to love the village, which gave them “many forests where the young men learned to hunt, and two small rivers where they fished and bathed” (Kire, 13), lest it be abandoned like the two taboo villages. Due to a famine predicted by an old seer long back, Pelevetso’s village lost everything. He went away and never looked back at his village, embarking on a spiritual journey after everyone died, including his family.

The second chapter, “Grey Earth”, is about the desolate condition of the earth. This further ascertains that the earth refuses to replenish and support any form of life. All this happened because of ignoring the advice given by the village elders to respect the nature. In the hamlet of Noune, Pelevetso saw only barrenness, stretching miles, and the earth looked like a sun-dried sponge with huge cracks and holes that any traveller passing by would remark as death-grey without the least hope to sustain any life. (Kire, 17). This image of the “grey-earth” presents a powerful narrative on the burning issues of globalisation happening because of man’s ignorance and refusal to acknowledge the teachings of our ancestors to cherish and respect nature.

The birth of the son of the thundercloud, who is called Rhaleituo, is seen as a redeemer who will end their “ancient misfortune” by bringing rainfall to soften the earth so that grasses and grains will sprout again, giving food and life. (Kire, 19) Here, the spiritual connectedness between the forces of nature and the two women who had a firm belief in their existence, only to witness this miracle happen, is observed. With the rain came the birth of Rhaleituo, bringing prosperity to his fellowmen, but the Village of Weavers revered the dark forces influenced by the spirit tiger, a symbol for their corrupted heart, nurturing hatred which led to the murder of Rhaleituo, who killed the spirit tiger with his special spear given by his aunts to free them from the spirit tiger’s influence. Mysteriously, the heavy rainfall destroyed everything with an extreme “rainstorm that ruined houses and fields and flooded the river so that all arable lands were swallowed by the deluge” (Kire, 140).

The spiritual life of the Nagas is also closely tied to the spirits of the sky. Kethonuo, the older woman, gave Pele a mystical explanation of the pull of the stars about the shifting of the earth when he lost his way towards the Village of Weavers. Pele personally encountered this spiritual phenomenon while resting in the women’s simple hut. Lying on the hard floor, he physically sensed that “the stars were moving eastward, and even as he lay there on the hard floor, he could feel them pull the earth with them” (Kire, 25). This mysterious experience revealed an unspoken yet powerful connection between the Earth spirit and the Sky spirit that made Pele realise that as millions of stars moved slowly eastward, the entire world obeyed their command. This sensory and spiritual moment encapsulates the intense ecological spirituality that binds humans and the cosmos in this novel. The phenomenon explains the understanding that, for cultures rooted in animism, the natural environment has souls, and inanimate objects engage with humans.

A deep chasm developed suddenly that had not existed before, with the sudden rolling of thunder over the hills and raining down with an excessively tough storm. The earth quenched its thirst for seven hundred years with the raindrops slamming on the hard ground, making “sucking sounds as the water ran into it, filling it up, running deep inside the soil,

getting into the countless cracks and fissures, threatening to flood.” (Kire, 30). This chasm saved the village from the flood. It seems as if it had appeared because it knew of the impending heavy rain, acknowledging them in their spiritual connection. Therefore, Christopher Manes' argument that “for animistic cultures”, the natural environment, with humans, flora and fauna, and even inanimate objects, are supposed to understand and engage with humans for better or worst (Manes, 15) in the essay, “Nature and Silence” justifies the analysis concerning the relationship between inanimate objects and human beings bound by spirituality.

The symbolic journey of Pele to the Village of Weavers, following the sisters to meet their youngest sister, Mesanuo is significant as he will be bound to stay faithful to Mesanuo and the child she is about to give birth. He was also shocked to know that this was the woman whom her villagers talked about. Miraculously, she had become pregnant with a drop of rain. When Mesanuo recounted this incident to her sisters, they seemed to have known and expected this to happen. Only one single drop of rain, and she felt a baby growing inside her (Kire, 37). The rainfall had not just replenished the cracked earth but given hope to the sisters and the villagers for avenging the death of Mesanuo's husband and her seven sons by the thundercloud's son born to Mesanuo from a single drop of rain. The most astonishing thing was the birth of the son, the very next day after Mesanuo became pregnant. The birthing of the child unbelievably brought life to the long-dead earth. Pele found the trees “were real. Young saplings that were not newly planted but had sprouted up overnight.....Their roots were already travelling into the earth, sucking up moisture and securing a place where they had sprung up.... saw rocks and stones were standing in places where there had been none before” (Kire, 40) and the river began to run.

Ayuk-Etang, E mentions in *Women and eco-spirituality in Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958): A symbiotic relationship with nature* that the priestess is a healer mediating between god and man, “rendering her spiritually strong. This spiritual connection that the woman shares with nature is a microcosm of the macro term ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a movement that has re-appraised the relationship between the woman and nature/environment”. Validating this concept, the three sisters- Kethonuo, Siedze, and Mesanuo became the link between the spirits of nature and humans, healing the dead earth, procreating life, and giving the source to live to the villagers. The village of the two sisters now felt no need to plough or work on the fields as they had plenty of food (Kire, 83). They said that the field came to their door, telling them to harvest and eat the crop so that it would grow again.

Nature is symbolised as a mother throughout the novel. The river, a constituent part of nature, is feminised as a mother from whom everything could be utilised to live. From medicine to food, the river gave everything to the villagers, for which they called it their mother, till it dried up, exposing only the sandy rocks. The ever-giving nature deteriorated, leading to the drought that happened “as a result of people rejecting the joyful stories and accepting the dark stories” (Kire, 64), killing their mother, to which they cried, “Who shall be our mother when our mother is dead?” (Kire, 55). When the rain came, the river became alive again, which the headman of the village confirmed must be because the prophecy related to the birth of the thundercloud's son was fulfilled. The beautification of the earth after the rain shows itself in the beautiful transformation of Mesanuo and her sisters. Misanuo “looked young and beautiful, like a skywoman” The ghostly sisters turned younger and more human, their features distinct which they claim to have been “one of the promises that the

latter rain will replenish the earth and all its creatures.” (Kire,33) and it was also a “sign for his birth- the Son of the Thundercloud” (Kire, 34). The purpose of Mesanuo “was to mother a son, not from the dust of the earth, but from rain, because water is the purest form of life you can find. It is a metaphor for true love.” (Kire, 141)

Dream is characteristic of the elements of spirituality in the Naga culture as Kire mentioned in her essay “Spirituality, Nature and Nagaland” in the Barbican Press, that they “received messages and warnings about impending tragedies in dreams”. Rhalietuo killed the tiger in his dream, the very night his mother, Mesanuo, told him the narrative of the tiger that killed his father and seven brothers. Likewise, Siedze also dreamt of something that made the sisters wait outside to welcome the travellers as Kethonuo said “Someone had a dream,... let her tell you herself. I am not the owner of the dream.” (Kire, 82) upon the arrival of Rhaleituo, his mother and Pele, significantly pointing that they knew of their coming in the dream. In her dream, Siedze saw warriors lifting spears to kill the tiger, but no one returned alive but then, a tiny boy killed the tiger by throwing his spear into the tiger’s mouth. Her dream is an indication of the future when Rhaleituo fulfils it by killing the spirit tiger. Rhaleituo could kill the tiger because his spirit was pure and his intention was sincere, as Kethonuo had explained the dream that “You cannot kill a spirit tiger with worldly weapons.....The boy, on the other hand, had no pride. He was not fighting to earn a name for himself as the others were doing. He wanted to kill the tiger to stop it from hurting any more people. The boy’s heart was pure” (Kire, 85).

The union of the two older sisters with the spirit of ecology started happening as much as the younger sister became “more of the earth...It was as though they had begun to transcend the mortal.” (Kire, 87). When the trio was about to depart from the abandoned village of the two sisters, Pele saw the lower part of Kethonuo transforming into a spirit, and they never came out of the house to wave them goodbye. This further proves that ecospirituality is about reconnecting oneself with nature, with the people around us and the natural world, and lastly with the universe as a whole as formulated by Aurelie Chone in her paper “Ecospirituality” with Pele finally understanding his purpose, why he crosses his way with the sisters and accepting that “life does not end here on earth. It actually begins with leaving the earth”. (Kire, 123).

According to Aurelie Chone, the notion of ecospirituality is the relationship between ecology and spirituality, which posits that there is a spiritual element to ecology and that spirituality is an integral part of ecological concerns. (Chone,1). This supports the narrative in the context of Rhalietuo’s death, when his mother told Pele that Rhalietuo’s birth was to teach people how to love and respect nature. Instead, the villagers nurtured hatred and killed Rhaleituo, which led the village to be destroyed by the heavy rain. Pele also saw “The three of them stood at the door, smiling at him, Kethonuo, Siedze and Rhalie” at the village of Noune (the abandoned village), which was renamed Nouzie in memory of Rhaleituo’s compassionate heart. He buried Mesanuo in this village, and “His spirit felt the sacredness of the place” (Kire, 148), and offered prayers to the spirits of the cosmos and earth to protect this holy place. True to his name, Pelevetso remained true to his purpose till the end of this spiritual journey, fulfilling his higher purpose in life as ordained by his paternal grandmother.

Conclusion

Finally, we can conclude from the discussion above that the components of nature have a soul of their own, which entwines the ups and downs of human life. A deep respect for the earth and ecology can foster a friendly relationship with human beings. This novel reminds us that “This earth is an awesome, magnificent, and wonderful place that should elicit our love, our thanks, our support, and our humility. We should cherish the earth, and have reverence for life on it”, as mentioned by Ned Hettinger in “Ecospirituality: First Thoughts”. Easterine Kire touchingly depicted that man cannot live separately from the blessings of the gods and nature. Only a harmonious relationship with the cosmos, reverence for the sacredness of the earth and its constituents, and an understanding of the purpose of life can lead to a fulfilling life.

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