



ANALYZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN AND NATURE IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *WHEN THE RIVER SLEEPS*

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Abstract

This study delves deeply into Easterine Kire's novel, "When the River Sleeps," focusing on the intricate portrayal of female characters and their profound connection with the natural world. Characters like Ate and Zote, who are shunned by their village due to perceived malevolent abilities, will be examined, shedding light on the unjust treatment they endure. The marginalized widow spirits, unjustly labelled as troublemakers and gossips, will also be analyzed, revealing the societal biases and prejudices that constrain their autonomy. Despite the adversity they face, the female characters in the novel exhibit resilience and inner strength, drawing empowerment, wisdom, and spiritual solace from their interactions with nature. Through their bond with the natural environment, these women find a source of liberation and sustenance, challenging existing power structures and reclaiming agency over their own narratives. The study will explore how nature serves as a transformative force, enabling these women to navigate oppression and cultivate a sense of empowerment and self-discovery.

Key words: ostracized, suppressed, empowerment, spiritual, nourishment.

Introduction

Easterine Kire, a prolific writer born on March 29, 1959, in Kohima, Nagaland, has made a significant impact on the literary world. Her celebrated novel, "When the River Sleeps," received the esteemed Hindu Prize for Best Fiction in 2015, solidifying her reputation as a talented storyteller. The narrative centres around Vilie, a skilled hunter on a quest to obtain the mystical Heart-stone from the sleeping river. However, the story transcends a mere quest for an enchanted object, delving deeply into the nuances of life in Nagaland and the profound interconnectedness among its people, nature, and women.

As Vilie ventures through the mysterious forest, readers are transported into the mystical realm of the Nagas. Here, an intricate web of spirits—whether female, male, benevolent, or deceitful—inhabit designated domains, creating a rich ecosystem where boundaries are upheld and respected. "When the River Sleeps" navigates through diverse thematic terrains, with Kire skilfully weaving together the themes of women and nature to illustrate their interdependent and harmonious relationship. Through her storytelling prowess, Kire seamlessly intertwines elements of mysticism, community, and the inherent bond between women and the natural world, engrossing readers in a captivating tale that transcends conventional storytelling boundaries.

Throughout the narrative, Kire portrays a cadre of resilient female characters who play pivotal roles in shaping the course of events. Women emerge as caretakers, defenders, healers, and indispensable elements of the natural order, underscoring their intrinsic connection to the world around them. Furthermore, Kire artfully integrates the breathtaking expanse of Nagaland's landscapes and mountains, seamlessly weaving them into the fabric of the story, thereby enriching the tapestry of themes explored in the novel.

Mukherjee in her journal titled "Eco-feminism: Role of Women in Environmental Governance and Management" writes, "Women have long been allied with nature; earth is surmised to be feminine in nature it has often been metaphorically termed as 'Mother earth' (Mukherjee 1)". Furthermore, Mukherjee explained that historically, women have had a minimum access in the outside world, usually they were not included in the developmental project, either their roles were seen as secondary to the potential economic gains. Women had been generally considered as submissive, so as has been nature. And hence, anthropological studies have put forward that the connectedness of women with nature and males with culture is both ancient and undeniable. Ecofeminists argue that women have a closer relationship with nature than men. This is evident in the social and physical realms, as women are often engaged in tasks such as domestic work, farming, childcare, and nurturing the environment. As a result, women are perceived to have a natural affinity with nature.

Ecofeminist View on Women and Nature: Analysis of Major Female Characters in the Novel

Within the enthralling tale of "When the River Sleeps," Easterine Kire skilfully crafts a narrative featuring a myriad of compelling female characters who enrich the cultural fabric of Nagaland. The Zeliang women, prominent figures in this tapestry, emerge as stalwarts of tradition and resilience, embodying values of hard work and cultural heritage preservation.

In Kire's novel, the Zeliang women shine as pillars of strength and commitment, labouring tirelessly to support their families amidst the changing seasons. Their dedication to upholding the ancient art of bark weaving reflects a profound connection to their natural surroundings and ancestral traditions. Engaging in the challenging task of harvesting nettles, these women deftly extract fibres despite the plant's stinging nature, weaving them into intricate nettle cloth. Vilie, the protagonist, observes their unwavering efforts with admiration, acknowledging the profound importance of their perseverance in safeguarding a dwindling art form. Through the portrayal of the Zeliang women, Kire highlights the enduring spirit and cultural significance embedded in the women of Nagaland.

The intricate art of bark weaving serves as a testament to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills within the Zeliang community. Elder women pass down their expertise to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of weaving traditions and cultural practices. This practice not only underscores the women's role as nurturers and preservers of heritage but also highlights the profound bond between the Zeliang women and their natural surroundings. As one of the Zeliang women proudly remarks to Vilie, "I learnt it from my grandmother, and I am trying to pass it to my nieces," exemplifying the enduring legacy of cultural craftsmanship entrusted to future generations.

Despite the encroachment of modernization and external influences, the Zeliang women, alongside Naga women in general, steadfastly uphold traditional craftsmanship and cultural identity. Their unwavering commitment to preserving Naga culture through practices like bark weaving exemplifies the vital role women play in safeguarding heritage amidst shifting societal landscapes.

In stark contrast to the revered Zeliang women, the outcast women of Kirhupfumia village bring forth a narrative of ostracization, prejudice, and personal turmoil. Vilified for perceived malevolent abilities, these women endure scorn, humiliation, and exile from their ancestral village due to societal fear and superstition. Ate and her sister Zote, both unjustly labelled as bearers of evil powers, face relentless persecution and isolation, their innate healing abilities overshadowed by unfounded accusations of witchcraft.

Zote, wielding a potent ability to cause harm with a mere gesture, emerges as a beacon of rebellion and retaliation against the injustices endured by her and her people. Motivated by a thirst for revenge, Zote's actions set off a chain of tragic events that sow chaos and devastation throughout her ancestral village. The intense prejudice and mistreatment faced by Zote and Ate

illuminate prevailing themes of societal exclusion and the far-reaching repercussions of unchecked bias within their community.

While Zote's defiance stems from a longing for retribution, it ultimately leads to her own untimely downfall, encapsulating the intricate interplay of power, authority, and gender dynamics interwoven throughout the narrative. Her transgression of entering the men's assembly hall, a space traditionally off-limits to women, poignantly mirrors societal norms and the ramifications of challenging deeply rooted patriarchal systems. Through Zote's narrative arc, the author underscores the complexities of resistance, the weight of societal expectations, and the consequences of daring to defy unjust structures. In the poignant tale of the outcast women of Kirhupfumia village, Easterine Kire delves into themes of oppression, resilience, and the enduring power of individual agency amidst adversity. Through the contrasting narratives of the Zeliang women and the ostracized women of Kirhupfumia village, the novel intricately explores the multifaceted roles of women in preserving heritage, challenging norms, and navigating the intricate tapestry of tradition and modernity in Nagaland.

Heavenly spirit name Alebu

In "When the River Sleeps," the portrayal of the heavenly spirit named Alebu adds a layer of mysticism and intrigue to the narrative. Alebu, a divine being embodying ethereal beauty and ancient wisdom, serves as a guiding force for the characters, offering spiritual solace and profound insights into the intricacies of the natural and supernatural realms. With her enigmatic presence and otherworldly aura, Alebu symbolizes the transcendence of mortal limitations and the eternal essence of the spiritual realm.

In stark contrast to the celestial grace of Alebu, the widows' spirits emerge as poignant figures burdened by societal stigma and spiritual condemnation. Castigated as malevolent entities responsible for sowing discord and chaos in the human realm, these spirits endure an existence of perpetual sorrow and estrangement from the divine. Through their ritualistic endeavours to seek redemption and liberation from the shackles of their cursed existence, the widows' spirits embody themes of regret, repentance, and the quest for spiritual emancipation.

Moreover, the presence of the widows' spirits in the novel underscores the pervasive themes of grief, self-denigration, and societal prejudice directed towards marginalized individuals, particularly women. Their portrayal as symbols of profound anguish and self-reproach reflects the harsh realities faced by women labelled as societal outcasts or bearers of misfortune.

Women and Nature as a healer and a sustainer of life

Furthermore, the thematic exploration of women's intrinsic connection with nature and their profound understanding of ecological balance and sustainability resonates throughout the narrative. As highlighted by eco-feminist scholar Vandana Shiva in "Staying Alive: Women Ecology and Survival in India," women have historically served as stewards of the environment, leveraging their intimate knowledge of nature to nurture life and preserve the delicate balance of ecosystems. She writes:

Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance. All ecological societies of forest-dwellers and peasants, whose life is organized on the principle of sustainability and the reproduction of life in all its richness also embody the feminine principle (Shiva 42).

Shiva continues to say, however, when those people who depends their lives on forest sustainability are taken over by the colonizer in the name of development and when their dependency is shifted on other things then usually men started to participate in life destroying activities or they have had to migrate, meanwhile women continued to be linked to life and nature through their role as a providers of sustenance, food and water. Thus, Shiva says, "the privileged access of women to the sustaining principle has a historical and cultural, and not merely biological basis".

In essence, the juxtaposition of celestial beings like Alebu and marginalized spirits like the widows' spirits, coupled with the profound relationship between women and nature, enriches the thematic depth of the novel, highlighting the complex interplay between spirituality, societal norms, and environmental stewardship in the tapestry of Nagaland's cultural landscape. As mentioned above women do not merely produce and reproduce biologically, Maria Mies has also called women's work as the "production of life" and views it "as a truly productive relationship to nature". She says that women not only collect and consume what is there in nature but "they (make) things grow" and this process of growth in which women and nature work in partnership with each other has created a special relationship of women and nature (Shiva 43).

One such influential female figure in the narrative is Alebu, a heavenly spirit featured in Easterine Kire's "Journey of the Stone." Alebu symbolizes a celestial presence bridging the realms of the divine and the earthly, playing a pivotal role in the spiritual healing and protection of the characters. Throughout the tale, Alebu embodies the essence of the divine feminine,

embodying qualities of nurturing, wisdom, and intuition as she guides and safeguards Vilie on his journey, imparting invaluable insights to navigate life's trials and tribulations.

The depiction of women's profound connection with nature as a source of healing and renewal resonates throughout the novel. Nature is portrayed as a bountiful provider of solace, peace, and sustenance for women, offering respite from emotional burdens and serving as a conduit for spiritual rejuvenation. Kire eloquently portrays the natural environment as a repository of life-sustaining resources, with forests, rivers, and lands supplying food, shelter, and medicinal plants to characters like Vilie and Krishna, enriching their lives and facilitating physical and spiritual healing.

Through the intertwining narratives of women as healers and nature as a nurturing force, the novel underscores the intrinsic bond between humanity and the natural world, emphasizing the therapeutic benefits of harmonizing with the environment. By honouring women's healing wisdom and celebrating nature's regenerative powers, the story encapsulates a profound reverence for the interconnectedness between individuals, communities, and the sacred essence of the natural world.

Nature provides an antidote and cure for all sickness and the people depends on the forest herbs for treatment of any kind. We see that when Vilie was stung by nettle plants, Idele, the oldest woman among them in the forest, plucks the leaves of a small bitten worm wood plant and kneads it to a pulp in her hand and paste into vilie's skin. She also gives him rock bee honey saying that "It's cure-all" (Kire 38). For injuries and open wounds, Vilie paster of cien plant. For bigger wounds, he uses pungent 'Japan nnha' (a kind of weed) and rock bee honey.

Krishna, the woodcutter, and his wife sustain themselves by foraging for food in the forest, trapping wild animals and gathering forest herbs. Their lives revolve around the forest, finding peace and contentment in its abundance. They are content with their existence, harmoniously coexisting with their natural surroundings and gratefully accepting the gifts that nature bestows upon them. When Krishna was asked by Vilie, "What are you going to do with his son, when he is old enough to go to school?", Krishna replied, "Saab, what do you mean? I am not a rich man. I don't have the means to send him to school. I will teach him my trade and he will grow up and earn an honest living. School is not for the likes of us, Saab"(Kire 15). Since, nature has been teaching them the way to survive and sustain themselves with what they have what possibly parents and teachers could not teach them. In some religions, trees are being worshipped as Therasamma says in his chapter *Sacred plants to Arouse Spiritual Consciousness and Sustain Eco-balance* "Trees being worshipped by people are helping man in maintaining the eco-

balance. They play a significant role in purifying the environment by taking in carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen” (Therasamma 83). Therasamma also conveys that trees-mindedness must get into the roots of human psyche as trees are bound by mutual relationship with water, creatures and animals, soil and atmosphere, fuel, industry, food and fodder, fertilizers and medicinal attributes. The nature providing us with all our needs should not be taken for granted. We must also protect and preserve nature to grow, to reproduce and sustain us till the end of time.

Kire, in her book *Walking the Roadless Road* also talks about the Naga people’s close bonding with the natural world. Nature has always been a source of survival for the people. The people practice jhum cultivation by clearing forest for farming. Fishing, hunting, foraging in the forests for food were the traditional food-gathering means for the Naga tribes (Kire 46). This dependence for sustenance on nature proves that Naga people and the rural livelihoods are directly tied to the natural world.

Nature as empowerment and strength for women

In the novel *When the River Sleeps*, women characters are depicted as nurturers, healers, providers, and comforters that are deeply connected with their knowledge and relationship with the natural world. The ability to sustain and heal the people reflects the strength and empowerment that come from nature. As mentioned earlier, women had been judged harshly by the ancestral village which represent the community and the society yet, the harsh judgement faced by the women in the novel often exhibit strength and resilience. When Ate was asked by Vilie “Don’t you want revenge on those who drove you out of your home?” Ate replied,

“This is my home. I feel at home here where there are none to judge me or to spy on me and accuse me of things, I am not guilty of. Here there is no one to say that I caused a bad harvest or that I brought hail and lightning to destroy the crops of my neighbors. I don’t hanker to go back. I was quite young when I left. I have no pleasant memories of my ancestral village that I should want to go back to it” (Kire 142-143).

Ate and her sister Zote were cast out at a tender age due to suspicions of possessing malevolent powers. While Zote struggled to adapt, Ate found solace in Kirhupfumia village, where the embrace of the natural world granted her the freedom to live without fear of judgment. Alongside other outcast women, Ate flourished in wisdom through their intimate bond with nature, acquiring insights inaccessible in their ancestral home. This unique communion with the environment empowered them in ways unattainable to others, fortifying their spirits.

Chong Kuai, in his article “An Ecofeminist Reading of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*” talks about the protagonist, Connie, a beautiful and well-educated woman, who lived a happy and easy life before marriage. But after marriage with a sick husband, she became a victimizer of patriarchal society as she was confined to the duty as a wife to her husband. Clifford, her husband would ask her to read for him all day long and most of the time, she will be allowed to be just a listener in the discussion. But later, she found out a beautiful forest near the Wragby hall, where she escapes to the woods and find peace and comfort in the nature. In the woods “She can enjoy solitude of staying alone, breathing the fresh air and appreciating the beauty of the flowers and trees, she finds her root nature in woods. It is the wood that quickens Connie’s awakening and leading to Connie’s coming back to life” (Chong 3.2.2.).

In the forested haven, the widow spirits, typically stigmatized as gossips and malevolent entities, found acceptance and purpose. These women, cursed with perpetual widowhood, tended to the heart-stone with reverence, unhindered by societal prejudice. Immersed in the forest's teachings, they gleaned fresh knowledge daily while gathering sustenance, fostering a deep understanding of the natural world. This profound connection endowed them with self-reliance and resilience, enabling them to confront adversity with unwavering confidence.

Suppression and Domination Faced by Women and nature

In Easterine Kire's novel, women characters are systematically subjected to shame, suppression, humiliation, and unwarranted labels of being dangerous and malicious, while their male counterparts remain blameless. This glaring discrepancy serves as a poignant commentary on the societal imbalance between men and women. The harsh judgments passed on women within the community underscore the pervasive influence of patriarchy, laying bare the stark realities of gender inequality interwoven into the narrative's themes.

The women, particularly the widow spirits, carry the weight of self-blame and internalized hatred inflicted upon them by their ancestral village, perpetuating a cycle of self-destructive behaviour that reverberates through their interactions. Despite grappling with the burden of societal scorn, these women strive to reclaim agency and redemption, maintaining a fragile semblance of normalcy while navigating the constraints imposed upon them.

Kire's portrayal echoes Vandana Shiva's insights in "Staying Alive," emphasizing the intrinsic connection between sustenance and nature's regenerative capabilities. Shiva elucidates how the stewardship of ecological cycles, particularly in forestry and agriculture, has historically been defined by women's expertise and knowledge. By managing and nurturing the integrity of natural resources, women have fostered life-sustaining cultures, embodying resilience and

adaptability in the face of environmental challenges. This interplay between women, nature, and sustenance illuminates a profound symbiosis that transcends societal constraints, underscoring the enduring impact of women's roles in nurturing and preserving life.

She writes,

Women transfer fertility from the forest to the field and to animals. They transfer animal waste as fertilizer for crops and crop by-products to animals as fodder. They work with the forest to bring water to their fields and families. This partnership between women's and nature's work ensures the sustainability of sustenance, and it is this critical partnership that is torn asunder when the project of 'development' becomes a patriarchal project, threatening both women and nature" (Shiva 45).

The intrinsic bond between women and nature, a symbiotic relationship that has perpetually sustained the balance of the universe, faced peril when overshadowed by patriarchal endeavours. As development projects unfurl under the guise of progress, they often herald a dual threat to both women and the natural world. Vandana Shiva astutely observes this discord, noting how patriarchal-driven ambitions fracture the harmonious unity between women and nature, fragmenting interconnected ecosystems into disjointed entities.

In Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps*, the profound alliance between women and nature emerges as a cornerstone of provision, sustenance, and solace for communities. The forest and waters, intertwined with the livelihoods of the people, yield sustenance in the form of vegetables, medicinal herbs, and nourishment procured through women's tireless foraging efforts. Amidst this interdependence, the marginalized figures of widow spirits and outcast women at Kirhupfumia occupy pivotal roles as stewards of natural wisdom and healing. Despite their indispensable contributions intending to essential needs and offering medicinal remedies, their significance is often overlooked or undervalued.

Kire's narrative underscores the undervalued yet critical partnership between women and nature, wherein both entities holistically sustain, nourish, and nurture communities. The marginalized women and the bountiful natural world serve as pillars of resilience and resourcefulness, embodying a shared ethos of care, sustenance, and interconnectedness that transcends societal neglect or exploitation. Ultimately, the narrative illuminates the intrinsic value of this symbiotic relationship, urging recognition and reverence for the enduring contributions of women and nature in fostering sustenance, healing, and communal well-being. Manisha Rao in her chapter "Environment, Ecology and Women: Ecofeminism" writes,

Therefore, the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to overcome this, one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualize the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one's culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organization to bring about new social forms.

In the novel, women play crucial roles as sustainers, protectors, caregivers, and healers within the community, despite facing harsh judgment and humiliation from their ancestral village. Despite the unfair treatment, these women exhibit remarkable strength and resilience in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

Easterine Kire's novel delicately and respectfully portrays women, effectively using their characters as vessels to embody the richness of Naga culture, women's spirituality, and the invaluable contributions made by women to their communities. Through the depiction of these women, Kire delves into nuanced explorations of gender roles, cultural identity, and the symbiotic rapport between humanity and nature.

Kire masterfully showcases the empowering and multifaceted relationship between women and nature through various female characters in the narrative. The natural environment, particularly the forest, provides a liberating space for women to shed societal constraints and embrace a sense of freedom. Immersed in nature's embrace, women acquire knowledge, resilience, and agency, enabling them to confront life's adversities with fortitude. By intertwining the experiences of women with the nurturing power of the environment, Kire elucidates how nature serves as a catalyst for women's empowerment and personal growth.

"When the River Sleeps" vividly underscores the vital synergy between women and nature, portraying them as essential sources of sustenance and belonging. Through this exploration, Kire underscores the profound impact of women's relationship with nature in fostering survival, resilience, and a profound sense of place within the world.

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