



ECO-ETHICAL CONCERNS IN EASTERINE KIRE'S WHEN THE RIVER SLEEPS

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ABSTRACT :

*In a rapidly evolving global landscape, eco-ethics has surfaced as a pivotal field of inquiry and exploration. Environmental ethics, a branch of applied philosophy, investigates the core principles that shape environmental values while addressing the practical issues tied to societal attitudes, actions, and policies designed to protect and sustain biodiversity and ecological systems. Given the alarming catastrophic events plaguing our planet and humanity's aspirations for sustainable growth, promoting eco-ethics among the populace has become an essential concept of immense significance. The north-east region of India, rich in diverse flora and fauna, precious mineral deposits, and time-honoured lifestyles, is now confronted with threats to its ecosystem and the livelihoods of its people. The signs of environmental degradation manifest through pollution, deforestation, surging population numbers, and the vanishing of wetlands, among other indicators. Taking this degrading environmental scenario into account the role of literature in ushering an era of environmental consciousness can hardly be exaggerated. This pertinent aspect of the catastrophic developments is amply demonstrated by the fictional works of certain northeastern writers. Among them Easterine Kire is a name worth mentioning especially because of her notable work of fiction *When the River Sleeps*.*

Keywords: : *Environmental ethics- biodiversity- environmental degradation- catastrophic developments- environmental consciousness.*

I.Introduction:

In an ever-changing and swiftly transforming global environment, the field of eco-ethics has emerged as an incredibly crucial area of study and thoughtful examination that cannot be overlooked. Environmental ethics, which is a significant subset of applied



philosophy, delves deeply into the fundamental principles that inform and shape our environmental values, all while simultaneously tackling the real-world challenges associated with societal attitudes, actions, and the policies that are specifically designed to safeguard and sustain the rich tapestry of biodiversity and the intricate ecological systems that support life. Considering the alarming frequency of devastating catastrophic events that are currently wreaking havoc on our planet and the collective aspirations of humanity for sustainable growth and development, it has become increasingly imperative to promote the understanding and practice of eco-ethics among the general populace, transforming it into a matter of profound importance that holds immense weight in today's world. The north-eastern region of India, renowned for its extraordinary wealth of diverse flora and fauna, its valuable mineral resources, and its time-honoured traditional lifestyles, now finds itself facing an array of serious threats that jeopardize both its delicate ecosystem and the livelihoods of its resilient people who depend on it for survival. This critical dimension of the ongoing catastrophic developments is vividly illustrated in the compelling and imaginative works of various writers hailing from the northeastern part of India, whose narratives reflect the pressing environmental issues of our time. Among these talented authors, the name Easterine Kire stands out prominently, particularly due to her remarkable literary contribution entitled *When the River Sleeps*, which captures the essence of the struggles faced by her people while intertwining themes of nature, identity, and survival. Through her storytelling, Kire not only sheds light on the ecological dilemmas but also weaves a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, thereby enriching the dialogue surrounding eco-ethics in a manner that resonates with readers on multiple levels. Such literary endeavours serve to inspire a deeper appreciation for the natural world and encourage meaningful conversations about the urgent need for environmental stewardship in the face of adversity. Ultimately, the intertwining of fiction and eco-ethics highlights the powerful role that literature can play in fostering awareness and driving change, making it an indispensable tool in the quest for a sustainable future.

II. Objectives of the Study: The objectives of this paper are

1. to assess the relevance of eco-ethics in the novel *When the River Sleeps* written by Easterine Kire



2. To critically assess the fictional work of Easterine Kire bearing eco-ethical concerns in keeping with the context of the present day world.

III . Methodology:

For the analysis of the work of Easterine Kire the neo-critical approach of close text reading has been followed. The analytical methodology based on primary and secondary sources has been explored to carry out an in-depth analysis of the work. In addition, the existing critical materials have been referred to go beyond such existing criticism to reach further critical possibilities for establishing fresh insights into the vision of the work.

IV. Analysis and Discussion:

Earlier Work:

Given the alarming disastrous events plaguing our planet and humanity's quest for sustainable growth, the promotion of eco-ethics among the populace has emerged as a fundamentally significant notion. To comprehend the significance of ecological ethical awareness, familiarity with the principles of ecocriticism is essential. A leading figure in the field of ecocriticism is Lawrence Buell, distinguished for his seminal work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. He has articulated crucial components that can unveil potential ecocritical interpretations in any literary work. According to him, the existence of non-human elements should be evident rather than merely superficial. Concentrating exclusively on human matters should not be regarded as the primary focus. The ethical perspective of the text encompasses the responsibility of humans toward the environment. Rather than being a static entity, the environment should be portrayed as a dynamic process.

In Peter Barry's insightful work, *Beginning Theory*, as articulated by Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism encompasses the intricate bond between literature and the natural world. The phrase "ecocriticism" finds its primary usage in the United States, while the term "green studies" is favored in the United Kingdom. This concept of ecocriticism first emerged in the late 1970s during gatherings of the Western Literature Association, which focuses on the literary heritage of the American West. However, the evolution of ecocriticism in the USA owes great debt to the influential works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry



David Thoreau. Conversely, the UK's interpretation of ecocriticism draws inspiration from the British Romanticism of the 1790s, rather than the American transcendentalism of the 1840s. The trailblazer of the UK's version of ecocriticism, also known as green studies, is Jonathan Bate. His seminal publication, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, marks a significant achievement in this domain.

Various critics have defined ecocriticism with their innovative approach and analysis. In his book *Ecocriticism* Greg Garrard remarks about ecocriticism and its future implications:

Much ecocriticism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism, just as feminism seeks to overcome androcentrism. The metaphysical argument for biocentrism is meant to sustain moral claims about the intrinsic value of the natural world, which will in turn affect our attitudes and behaviour towards nature.

(Garrard 176)

In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, a milestone in ecocritical writing; Cheryll Glotfelty quite rightly emphasises on the significance of awakening the ethical obligations of mankind towards the world of nature. She underlines a compelling need to address the challenges emerging at the outbreak of catastrophic changes overtaking the planet earth and threatening to take the entire humanity towards an apocalyptic turnaround. However, she does admit that scholars of literature focus on inquiries surrounding value, significance, legacy, perspective, and language, and it is within these domains that they are significantly enhancing environmental cognition. In the belief that the ecological dilemma has been intensified by our fragmented, compartmentalized, and excessively specialized epistemological stance towards the world, scholars in the humanities are progressively striving to familiarize themselves with scientific disciplines and embrace interdisciplinary methodologies.

In the domain of eco ethics the name of Holmes Rolston III stands out conspicuously. Five themes consistently echo through Rolston's works: (1) the inherent worth of nature, a value that transcends human-centric views and may even oppose them as it exists independently from humanity; (2) the holistic interconnectedness of ecosystems; (3) the obligation to nature arising from its intrinsic value, which logically refutes the naturalistic/is-



ought fallacy; (4) the intrinsic value of species as unique forms or collectives of life; and (5) biocentrism, which asserts the intrinsic worth of and the consequent duty to honour every single living organism.

Many environmental dilemmas that we face today are not merely isolated ecological crises; rather, they are profoundly intertwined social quandaries that hinge upon the moral and ethical principles that govern our interactions and relationships with one another and the natural world. In the realm of Indian English Fiction, ecological considerations have perpetually existed in varying magnitudes. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are some of the glaring examples of fiction with strong adherence to eco-ethical concerns.

Being an integral part of the country, the northeast of India is also not eluded from the influence of ecology which is apparent in the works of the significant literary writers of the region. This region is a haven of affluent cultural diversity punctuated by the varied manifestations of ethnicity and ancestral heritage. Among them Easterine Kire is a name to be held in reverence for her remarkable exploration of the theme of eco-ethical concerns. Through the replete images of magic realism blended with sensuous and bountiful natural settings in her work *When the River Sleeps* she presents an awe inspiring tale which renders the readers filled with ecological consciousness of the highest pedigree.

Discussion:

Easterine Kire enjoys a conspicuous presence among the luminaries in the firmament of northeaster fiction. Her fictional work remains a testimony of her art of storytelling and rich fecundity of indigenous sources. The story of her novel *When the River Sleeps* explores the enchanting myth of the sleeping river, a narrative shared with Kire by her fellow hunters, as disclosed in her dialogues. Consequently, the tale itself emerges from the reservoir of wisdom cultivated through the craft of storytelling. It unravels the journey of a lone hunter named Villie and his quest to the tranquil river in search of a heart stone that can grant him extraordinary powers. Yet, the book goes beyond a simple portrayal of Villie's pursuit of the heart stone during the river's rest, deeply examining the rich fabric of Naga oral traditions,



providing insight into their spirituality and beliefs. Flawlessly intertwining the socio-cultural heritage of the Angami Naga with the narrative, it illuminates the significance of oral literature and folklore as a vital aspect of their identity.

When the River Sleeps by Easterine Kire unfolds in a manner reminiscent of a timeless fable, devoid of unnecessary embellishments, and it boldly explores the life and existence of the novel's enigmatic and mythical hero. Set against the breathtaking backdrop of the enchanting hills of Nagaland, the narrative intricately weaves together the tale of Vilie, a solitary Angami hunter who has made the vast and mystical forest his home and sanctuary after leading a life filled with both love and loss. Kire artfully delves into the duality of Vilie's existence, juxtaposing the memories of his past with the stark realities of his present life.

The personification of nature is vividly illustrated in the narrative of "When the River Sleeps," where Vilie frequently asserts with conviction that "the forest is my life," establishing an intimate bond with the natural world around him. In moments of solitude and despair, nature envelops him like a nurturing mother, providing comfort and solace when he feels utterly alone. The forest stands as a robust shield, protecting him from the malevolence that lurks within the hearts of men, highlighting the intricate relationship that nature shares with the narrative. Kire skilfully weaves both the natural elements and the supernatural threads together, creating a rich tapestry within her storytelling. Utilizing a conversational style throughout the novel, she captures the reader's attention with an engaging narrative. The seamless intermingling of superstition, rationality, and compassion serves as a defining hallmark of Kire's work. Intricately entwined within the broader storyline is a subplot that revolves around the tragic killing of a migrant Nepali family, which includes Krishna and his devoted wife.

Ecocriticism, a fascinating field of study, delves into the intricate relationship that literature forges with the natural environment, exploring the myriad ways in which nature is depicted and celebrated within the written word. Set against the breathtaking backdrop of the lush and verdant hills of Nagaland, this novel paints a vivid portrait of a world where the forest serves as a sanctuary for many of its characters, presenting nature not merely as a backdrop, but as an empowered and benevolent provider, a nurturing force that offers protection and solace to all those who seek refuge within its embrace. Vilie, who is aptly referred to as "the guardian of the forest" (Kire 72), finds his sanctuary amidst the villages that dot the landscape



of the forest, where the villagers graciously open their doors to him, a weary traveller and stranger, inviting him into their homes with open hearts and offering him nourishment and shelter, expecting nothing in return, a testament to the profound bonds of community and generosity that flourish in this idyllic setting.

In the intricate power dynamics presented within the narrative, nature emerges as a formidable force, characterized by empowerment rather than oppression, wielding the capacity to bestow blessings and fulfil the desires of those who honour its presence. The river, which holds a significant place in the title of the novel, serves as a poignant example of nature's benevolence, illustrating how it acts as both a protector of Vilie and an entity that he, in turn, seeks to safeguard, creating a reciprocal relationship that underscores the deep bond between humanity and the natural world. The forest, a sanctuary and home to Vilie, encapsulates his identity as “the guardian of the forest,” symbolizing the harmonious coexistence that can be achieved when individuals recognize their roles as protectors of the environment, fostering a profound connection that transcends the boundaries of mere existence. The esteemed forest department of Nagaland has honoured him with the prestigious title of the “official protector of the rare tragopan,” a magnificent bird species that proudly nests within the lush greenery of Vilie’s designated section of the forest. The passing of Vilie is not merely a personal tragedy; rather, it holds profound significance, as he breathes his last while valiantly safeguarding the heart-stone, an object imbued with sacredness and immense value in the eyes of the community.

Easterine Kire’s novel *When the River Sleeps* is replete with images of nature and its constant bearing on human existence. The very beginning of the plot exhibits a metaphorical assertion in the form of the river of Villie’s dream which tries to consume him, “Villie plunged his hand into the river. It was cold-close to freezing-and perfectly still.” (Kire 1) Villie maintains a close proximity to nature as is evident from the narrative, “The forest was home to Villie.” (Kire 3) Though he is averse to marriage after his massive personal bereavement in the form of his heartthrob Mechuseno’s death, nature provides a healing effect to his afflicted soul. While narrating the tragedy that cast a demoralizing impact on Villie, the glowing imagery of nature is used to good effect:



It was the summer he turned eighteen, and the heavy monsoon rains had finally given way to warmer days. The late summer sun dried the muddy field paths and teased out the dragonflies. Everyone was out and about, preparing for the harvest season.

(Kire 5)

In the novel Kire's magic realism thrives on ecological settings of phenomenal nature. The tempting spectacle of nature quite bizarrely leads to Mechuseno's demise as she is haunted by an enigmatic spirit resembling a tall dark man. Mechuseno's excruciating suffering caused by both fear and fever ends with her tragic death as she is buried outside the village gate. Her demise led to Villie's departure to the forest as his home and he kept reiterating, "The forest is my wife." (Kire 7)

Villie's fascination for the sleeping river which promises to provide untold powers to him shrouds him with queries such as "Is it possible that only forest dwellers can understand such things exist in the places not frequented by man? Will the magic of the river work only for a believer? Would it work in spite of lack of faith?" (Kire 11) Villie fortifies his house amidst nature to keep the dangerous animals at bay. After a long delay he eventually completes the task.

While halting in the midst of his passage Villie observes the manifestation of nature which reminds him of the necessity to put off the journey till the next day. It reads "Villie looked at the sun in the horizon. It was probably two o'clock in the afternoon. He saw that the leaves of the plantain were already holding little pearls of moisture condensed from the heat." (Kire 16). Villie's journey resumes with words of caution from Krishna, the Nepali woodcutter, "Travel carefully Saab, the forest is dangerous to those who don't know it, but it can be kind to those who befriend it." It proves to be worthwhile advice as Villie is found to take shelter on a tree with branches close together. He climbs up the tree and makes a bed across three branches. Though it seems to be not the most comfortable place to rest, it serves the purpose of providing safety from snakes, bears and other dangerous beasts of the forest. He sleeps soundly to regather strength for the next day to resume the journey at dawn. (Kire 21) This shows the co-existence of human in the bosom of nature which provides succour to his afflicted body and mind.



The names of certain herbs and their positive impact on human beings is cited through Villie's remembrance:

He recalled the names of herbs that he should not be without, Ciena or bitter wormwood and Tierhutiepfu, a soft leafed plant with a rather unpleasant smell. While Ciena was good for warding off evil spirits, the other herb was supposed to be good for a number of ailments.

(Kire 32)

Villie's deep sense of contentment is reflected in rendering his service towards biodiversity conservation and contributing his part for ecological preservation. It is reflective when he says,

The government pays me to see that the tragopan population does not go down in numbers, while the village uses my services to look after the gwi in the area. It is a good life and to be paid for living it is more than I could ask for. (Kire 36)

A description of the Nettle Forest provides one of the key facets of Ville's expedition to obtain the covetous heart stone. It acquaints the readers with a ecological set up amidst mysterious developments. Kire says,

The Nettle Forest was not as big as its name would suggest. It was less than half a kilometre, and the nettles grew very high- some as tall as trees in the heart of the forest. Those had never been harvested as it was impossible to pass through the thick growth to get to them. So they had grown unhindered until they reached their present height.

(Kire 40)

Forest is also observed as a haven of safety on certain occasions. When Villie reaches the rainforest amidst his journey he heaves a sigh of relief, He comments, "Only when he was in the heart of the rainforest did Villie feel safe. He found a fig tree to rest beneath."

(Kire 48)



Nature's power of healing is precious as it provides succour to human pain and affliction. Similarly, the moral obligation towards biodiversity and eco-ethical consciousness is also worth applauding.

There was a movement on the ground. Squirrels were running up and down a tree. He did not have the heart to kill them for food so he looked around to see if there were any herbs. Finding a patch of Vilhuunha, he made a paste out of the leaves and stuck it on his injury and let the brown juice seep into his open skin. The bleeding stopped immediately. (Kire 49)

The protagonist Villie's fascination for forest is deep rooted and unshakable. The author adequately sums up the bond between them in the following words:

The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it; and food when his rations were inadequate. The forest also protected him from the evil in the heart of man. He felt truly wedded to her at this moment. (Kire 51)

The affinity with nature is pervasive during illness as Villie adds herbs to his pot and feels nourished by the green forest leaves which he eats partially cooked. He also enjoys walking on the mossy forest floor as he feels the tenderness of its effect on his feet as well as muscles. This leads to his recovery from fever. (Kire 56-57)

In the narrative the challenging aspects of nature are perceived during Villie's expedition. He traverses through tough terrains having steep hills with rarely any vegetation on it. Though the roots of some trees and shrubs give him handholds, it is always dangerous to rely on them. He has to ascertain meticulously before venturing to proceed by holding those. Amidst such challenges the moist and pleasant taste of natural drinking water and shelter of grass bed soothed his fatigue of a hard climb. The beauty of nature enamoured him to such an extent that he is left in a state of oblivion. Kire presents an exquisite spectacle of nature's bounty amidst turmoil and struggle of man, "The sky was a deep clear blue dotted with clouds, and for long moments he stared at that peaceful sight. It almost made him forget why he was there." (Kire 62)



The medicinal properties of certain shrubs are worth mentioning as narrated in the novel. To heal his injury Villie relies on the curative power of an herb called wild ginseng. He makes a paste of it and smears it on his ankles and the wrists. He also pulls out the root of one of those plants and smashes it with a rock. Then he puts the ginseng into his tea mug and soaks it in hot water. After it has soaked, he drinks down the mixture. (Kire 81)

Villie had faith in the curative power of herbs and wild plants and was familiar to such precious medicinal plants. Although the awareness about such herbs eluded many, Villie was no stranger to those. During his adventurous pursuit to get the heart stone he had to confront certain mishaps or misadventures. He faced human brutality in severe forms, supernatural aggression in its most frightening forms, yet he resorted to healing provided by the flora of nature.

Existence of human amidst the most challenging natural landscapes is a thing to notice in the narrative. The hospitable couple Kani and Subale live on the rocky ledges of the hills and prefer to utilise the limited plains for cultivation to support their subsistence. Kani's company during Villie's journey acquaints him with the probable hazards from spirits and demons. The ultimate revelation of such supernatural phenomena is done through an exploration of the kingdom of nature.

As they kept walking, the vegetation changed; it became more lush and green. Back at the border village, Villie had seen the plants stubbornly pushing their way out through the rocks and struggling to stay alive, looking skeletal and undernourished. But here the ferns effortlessly grew tall and lush, spreading themselves out. Plantain trees dotting the landscape were top heavy with fruit, but these were wild bananas and not fit for human consumption. Birds were in abundance, flying overhead or calling from treetops where they were feeding on the overripe fruit. (Kire 97)

Villie's introduction with Ate is one of the crucial moments of the story. Ate tells him that people come to them to ascertain the effect of certain herbs to cure diseases. She remarks, "When they need us to tell them what herbs would be good for curing tumours and other ailments, they come to us with offerings. (Kire 133)



She appreciates Villie for maintaining a balance between hunting animal for food and protecting the ones entrusted to him. Villie replies by reiterating his earlier claim that the forest is his wife as it provides food and shelter to him and he is content with that.

Villie and Ate's walk through the woods brings forth the abundant charm of nature where different species of flora and fauna contribute towards the symphony of ecological affluence. It is narrated by the author with a picturesque presentation of imagery:

Birds sang in the trees, and squirrels and flying foxes flitted from tree to tree. The trees were shady but not thick as in the unclean forest, and the birdsongs and rodent noises made it an agreeable walk. (Kire 174)

Kire's narrative takes the readers through an exploration of Nagaland's remote mountains and natural surroundings. It transports the readers to a world of natural phenomena as well as supernatural elements. The fusion of ecological setting with manifestations of magic realism enriches the narrative with a haunting touch of mystery and suspense. The natural settings familiarize us with both the struggle as well as the joy of inhabiting amidst such settings. Villie's journey remains a testament of resilience, self-belief, spirituality and compatibility with nature in spite of adverse circumstances. Though Villie's tragic death somewhat mars the climax of the narrative, it amply reinstates a legacy of his worthwhile existence on the earth.

V. Conclusion:

In the context of the present day world Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* serves the purpose of orienting the readers with eco-ethical obligations. Beyond anthropocentric perspectives it takes everyone to the realm of natural bounty and ecological euphoria. This work underlines the essence of preserving one's environment and thriving in the kingdom of nature.

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