

AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF *WHEN THE RIVER SLEEPS***Dr. Rupanjoli Hazarika**

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Abstract

Studies of varied indigenous cultures around the world and telling a critique of their stories for the sake of understanding the ways to preserve nature has been one of the areas of investigation of ecocriticism. The myths, beliefs and tells of such indigenous cultures are entwined with the environment in such threads that the absence of one component might present a hazy picture of that culture. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* is a novel from the northeastern part of India that unveils permanent spiritual bonding between man and nature in an indigenous setting. The objective of the present study is to explore how the environment forms the culture of the Naga tribes since their route to knowledge, growth, spirituality, and peace inevitably springs from Mother Nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, the Nagas, nature, spirituality, culture.

Introduction

The northeastern region of India consisting of the seven sisters presents a colourful mosaic of hundreds of ethnic groups each with its diverse myths, legends narratives, and material cultures. So far torn apart by socio-political unrest and ethnic differences, the fictional as well as non-fictional writers of the region today find solace in going back to the roots and telling their stories to the educated elites both in their own regions as well as outside about the belief-systems deeply ingrained in their cultures. This resurgence is the sequel to the awareness that the unique cultures of the ethnic groups and the beautiful landscapes of the region with flora and fauna are prone to avalanches on account of slow but marked advances of urbanisation and development. One such preoccupation of the writers of the region today is to tell about their very breath, that is, nature which forms their worldview soaked with spiritual practice and ritualistic way of life. These writers although do not form a conscious school of nature-writing, they show striking similarities in conscious use of myths and tales of their respective communities. Mamang Dai's *The Legend of Pencam* (2006), Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2012), Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree: Lotha Naga Tales Retold* (2017) are such examples of tellings from North East. These narratives are not ordinary foregrounding of legends and folktales with marked intent of extolling nature or, bearing ecological consciousness, they are also rudiments of the revivalist tendency of fostering individual as well as ethnic identity from the advancing cultural aggression of mainstream India.

When the River Sleeps is a perfect instance of fiction that coils in its plot the beliefs of the Angami Naga tribe in terms of nature, and how the forest as the manifestation of nature is an app-pervading

presence that determines the living of man of the region- all told through narration of beliefs and myths of the community. It is the story of the protagonist of the novel, Vilie, who, having acquired the Stoneheart of the sleeping river that enables one to acquire anything wished for, finally abandons it overcoming yearning for any worldly gains.

As the story unfolds, Vilie is a lone hunter belonging to Angamis, a Naga community living a solitary life in the Zuzie forest. The novel opens up with his decision to explore the river of his repeated dreams which is about “catching” a stone from the heart of the sleeping river that would bestow him with magical power. This was supposed to be a life-threatening mission because for that matter one had to overcome the rowdy spirits, vengeful sorceresses, and spirits of the forest. The protagonist however succeeds in obtaining the stone because of his pure and compassionate heart, excellent knowledge of the flora and fauna of the mountains of Nagaland along with the Naga traditions, vast experiences of solitary hunting, and help from the headman Kani and his wife Subale. On his way home, he stumbles upon a village of the *Kirhupfumia* where lives “the most feared persons in the mountains” and “supposed to have the power of death at the ends of their fingertips.” In every village of Nagaland, they are considered outcast. One such *Kirhupfumia* named Zote tries to snatch away the heart-stone from Vilie to take vengeance upon her ancestral village. He feels pity for the twisted soul that ‘she had allowed herself to become’. Later, she manages to steal the heart-stone from Vilie during his sleep and destroys her ancestral village with its power of war. Eventually, ancestor spirits get invoked by her “evil deed” and administers their ghastly justice as she has to give away her mortal body. Vilie rescues here the life of Ate, sister of Zote. Ate was manipulated by her sister to believe in her maleficent power but Vilie convinces her that she is not at all a poisonous touch to others. He tells her that one becomes what one believes. In the novel, Ate is also killed by a *weretiger* but Vilie brings her back with the help of the heartstone and all his knowledge of the supernatural- a great relief to Vilie. It is informed in the beginning of the novel that Vilie lost the girl of his admiration at the age of eighteen, when she encountered an evil spirit in the jungle. For months he left flowers at her grave and finally made the forest his wife.

Empowered by spiritual knowledge and universal love, Vilie also gives life to the baby of a Napali couple who was murdered by someone greedy in search of the heart-stone. The baby, almost on its deathbed, is handed it over to Ate for motherly love and care. Readers are surprised to find that Vilie hands over the heart-stone to Ate out of love and concern. Ville, as he retreats to his forest house, is also murdered by the same murderer who killed the Napali couple. In the end of the novel the readers find Ate frequently visiting Vilie’s house in the forest with her husband and the Napali kid, named Vibou and expressing her profound gratitude and love towards Vilie as her late father for saving her life twice. She also informs her husband that she left the heart-stone on her second visit to the place as only Vilie had the virtues of being the genuine owner of the heart-stone. As revealed, the heart-stone is not as a medium to have materialistic gain but to gain knowledge of the spiritual and thereby get transformed.

This story of Vilie in the novel *When the River Sleeps* sets the perfect background for its study in ecocritical perspectives, with its description of flora and fauna, rivers and forests, and the elements of magic and sorcery. Lawrence Buell has the opinion that ecocriticism is “a study of the relationship between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalists’ praxis” (1995: p.8). The novel presents such a paradigm. [Eugenia Recio](#) and [Dina Hestad believe that](#) “Indigenous Peoples hold unique knowledge systems and practices for the sustainable management of natural resources. Many have a special relationship with the environment, the land, and all living things.” This observation opens up another possibility of the novel’s discourse since the beliefs and faiths, myths, and local telling’s of the plot provide a “local version” of the relationship between human and nature, or the cosmos.

Methodology

As a field of investigation ecocriticism sought “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert: P.107). For Glotfelty (1996: P. xviii), “Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective...ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies”. While dealing with the field of ecological reading of texts, two verticals emerge- anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism places human beings at the centre of everything as controller of all other beings and things, as evidenced by the sermon of Lord God: “let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth” (Holy Bible 1-2). Environmentalist historian Lynn White Jr. holds that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (2015: p.43). Ecocentrism, on the other hand, is a binary opposition- it places the ecosystem at the center instead of humanity.

Today texts are also studied from ecological perspectives leading to the emergence of such fields as ecofeminism, post-colonialism perspectives of ecocriticism, and ecomarxism, but the obvious difference between ecocentrism and these approaches is prominent- ecocentrism is characteristically eco-conscious whereas other approaches are “ego-centric” or “ego-conscious.” Hence, burning environmental issues of the planet requires only an earth-centric approach that accepts Earth as an ecosphere rather than a social sphere.

There have been attempts to seek an alliance between industrial development and ecological balance by revisiting the indigenous cultures. Jonathan Bate views that the task of literary ecocriticism is to address a “local version” of the question, that is, “place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of relationships between humankind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being, and dwelling” ((1991: p.8). Richard Kerridge recognises that “ecocritics have looked to indigenous non-industrial cultures, exploring the possibility of alliance between these cultures and the wider environmental movements” (2006: p.530). These praxes are overtly present in the novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014). It may be seen as an extension of such efforts of the ecocritics to revisit the indigenous cultures for the sake of

gaining back the bountiful nature, and also for understanding nature in its myriad manifestations. The novel applies ecological concepts in an indigenous setting enabling its readers and critics to develop an environmental attitude in an age of ecological disaster.

“Let nature be your teacher.”-Wordsworth:

If ready to perceive, nature is the best teacher, and a mindful observation of nature unveils the secrets and wonders of the world. In *When the River Sleeps* Vilie believes that Nature is the best teacher to man, which echoes the great English pantheists who believed that every object of the cosmos is the manifestation of God. Wordsworth considers Nature as ‘a motion and a spirit drive all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things’ (“Tintern Abbey”). P.B. Shelley addresses the all-pervasive soul of the wind in the poem ‘Ode to the West Wind’. Vilie strongly believes that a child can have the best teachings only in the womb of Nature equipped with Naga traditional knowledge system. Once in the novel, Vilie had a conversation with his neighbour Krishna and his wife regarding the educational prospect of their baby. The Nepali couple expressed their desire to educate him in their trade instead of formal education through a school. At this, Vilie said, “I guess he will go to the best school then.” (Kire, 2014, p. 15) He also thought, “What could school possibly teach him that his parents could not improve upon? They were rich in their knowledge of the ways of the forest, the herbs one could use for food ...the bitter herbs to counteract the sting of a poisonous snake.” (ibid, p.15)

The most important subject of the novel is the transformation that one goes through being in touch with nature. Ate transformed when Vilie placed the heart-stone in her palms to convince her that she didn’t have any malignant power: “It seemed to have the power to transform the heart” (ibid, p.139). Vilie could watch and see before his eyes “...her face softened by the knowledge passing into her from the stone” (ibid, p.139). The same spiritual knowledge had been earned by Vilie from the heart-stone. It enabled him to live with peace and faith having “power over both the world of the senses and the world of the spirit” (ibid, p.96). All these were possible because of the heart-stone obtained from the river spirit.

Nature is the best Company

The relationship of man and nature as constant companion and source of joy and inspiration has been variously extolled, described and interpreted in different cultures of the world. If William Wordsworth in the poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” expresses happiness in the delightful company of Nature as a perpetual source of joy: “The waves beside them danced; but they out-did the sparkling waves in glee: a poet could not but be gay, in such a jocund company” (Lines: 13-16) In oriental cultures such as India nature has also been the protective shield, as exemplified by some marriage customs. Tulsi and Pipal marriages are performed in Hinduism to avoid certain matrimonial misfortunes of fate. The Rautiyas, a large caste in Bengal “go through the form of marriage to a mango-tree, before regular wedding; while among the Kurmis and one branch of the Kols, both aboriginal tribes, the bride and bridegroom are wedded, not to each other but the bride

to a *mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*), and the groom to a mango.” (Edwardes, 1922, p. 83) Haberman (2013, pp. 74-75) in his book *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* states that for Hindus trees are human not objects, unlike the Western concept. He opines that a tree is considered by them as ‘an animate sentient being with feelings and consciousness’. OSHO says, “if you behave as if everything is a thing, then you are the center, the things are just to be used. The relationship becomes utilitarian.” While talking about a meditation technique that enables one ‘to feel the consciousness of each person as your own consciousness’ he advises to start with a tree as the ‘tree is alive, and it feels.’ (2001, pp.133-37) So, tree wedding in Indian culture finally leads to the realization of ‘Oneness’ irrespective of whatever beliefs society imposes upon us.

In *When the River Sleeps*, the readers remain astounded observing Vilie’s close affinity to nature; here he takes the forest as his wife! He is on the path of oneness consciousness sooner or later. Seno, Vilie’s girl of admiration, died following her encounter with a forest-spirit. After her death, heartbroken Vilie used to offer fresh flowers at her lonely grave for several months. Then one day silent and suddenly he left his village to make the forest his home. It was not that the thought of going back to village life never came to his mind, but he thought that the forest was his wife in the absence of Seno: ‘He began to think that leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife’ (Kire, 2014, p. 9). Later in his expedition to the heart-stone, once he accidentally witnessed a murder case. Eventually, he had to suffer for some time as the actual murderer named Hiesa accused Vilie of the death of Pehu. However, Vilie solved the problem initially by hiding in an unclean forest i.e. certain spirit-infested places shunned by villagers. The forest not only provided him with necessary safety but also all his needs were fulfilled: “The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it; 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” (ibid, p. 51). Vilie also knew how to deal with the forest: “One could deal with it by learning to treat it like a companion and no longer an adversary” (ibid, p. 10).

Rituals, customs and protection of nature

William Roeckert (1996, p.108) in his essay “*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*” says, “The idea that nature should also be protected by human laws, that trees (dolphins and whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights is one of the most marvellous and characteristic parts of ecological vision”. This “ecological vision” gets the finest execution not in the modern urban society swayed by consumerism but in the customary laws of the ethnic communities. The Naga faith systems that extoll the protection of nature are amply exemplified by Vilie’s actions, which look insignificant but speak volumes of ecological wisdom. Vilie never killed a being of nature out of greed or, entertainment but only to fulfill his hunger: “He was quite used to shooting smaller animals for food but he had never shot a tiger. For one, he could not use it for food. Secondly, he would be obligated to perform the tiger-killer rituals which were complicated and not meant for a solitary hunter to fulfill alone in the forest” (Kire, 2014, p. 25). The novel also reveals that Nagas observe

certain rituals to protect Nature. Once Ate told thoughtfully, “My uncle killed a tiger when we were still in the old village. The men brought it home and threw their spears at it long after it was dead. My uncle had to perform a very complicated ritual...When he died his grave had the tiger-killer marker.” (ibid, p.186) The village council of Dilhoma had to take stern action against weretiger at one point in time, “But when the cattle in the village began to diminish alarmingly, the village council demanded that the men send their tigers away to another region. This was done and the cattle population was restored in the next months” (ibid, p. 27). Likewise, the Zeliangs do not cut down the fig tree (ibid, p. 116).

Vengeful nature and vulnerable man

In S.T. Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Nature punishes the mariner physically and mentally for killing an albatross in the sea. The death of the lovebird caused the wrath of the spirits. Only penance and love for Nature could rescue him from the curse of the supernatural: “Water, water everywhere and all the boards did shrink...water, water everywhere no any drop to drink (Lines: 119-122)” and “he prayeth best, who loveth best all things both great and small; for the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all (Lines: 614-617). This is no surprise to hear the same tune and tone in the novel *When the River Sleeps*. Krishna’s parting words with Vilie were: “The forest is dangerous to those who don’t know it, but it can be kind to those who befriend it” (Kire 20). He advised Vilie to be friendly and respectful to the forest in his expedition. Zote, a *Kirhupfumia*, took vengeance upon her ancestral villagers as they outcasted her because of her maleficent power. However, inevitably she got death punishment from her ancestral spirits for her sudden sorceress attack. Here wise Vilie said to Ate: “The ancestor spirits could not tolerate her evil deed of harming both the guilty and the innocent and they took their revenge on her” (Kire, 2014, p.160). Innocent Ate on the other hand nourished love and empathy in her heart for all. She tried her best to protect Vilie and his heart-stone from Zote. Hence, she was rewarded with a new life in its all potentialities.

Beliefs, myths, and healthy ecology

Beliefs and myths play powerful roles in the worldview of a community. Dreams are considered by the Angamis Nagas as divinely inspired means to foresee the future, act as channels for supernatural volition, and get connected to a specific place. J.H. Hutton (1969, p. 246) discusses the significance of dreams among the Angamis in the book *The Angami Nagas*. According to him, dream practitioners consider dreams as the primary medium of divination: “The Angamis have almost a science of dreaming, and it is practiced in particular by old women, who take fees for dreaming...After nightmares or usually bad dreams, offerings consisting of feathers and part of the intestines of a fowl are placed outside the village gate on a plantain leaf...”. The story of *When the River Sleeps* begins with a dream. Vilie has the dream in which he struggles feebly against the forceful water of a river to get the heart-stone. Then in a panic outburst for breath, he finally realises that it has been the same dream for the last two years. Consequently, the protagonist decides to go on the journey in search of the sleeping river. It is all

because of a folktale that fascinated him day and night. According to it, when the river falls asleep, “it turns the stones in the middle of the river into charm. 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... That way you can make its magic yours. The retrieved stone is a powerful charm called a heart-stone” (Kire, 2014, p. 3). Then, towards the end, Vilie has to give his life because of the same heart-stone. Most importantly, he attains knowledge and power of the spiritual from the river. So, the whole plot of the novel is inspired by a dream about a heart-stone. The significance of beliefs regarding dreams among the Nagas completely justifies the story of the novel.

Michael Heneise holds that “An Angami myth of origin, shared by other tribes such as Sumi, Rengma, Chakhesang and Lotha Nagas, details how the people came to be and their connections with the spirit and animal world. *Kepenuopfü*- lit. ‘birth spirit’ (the *pfü* suffix denotes female gender), is both the creator of all living beings as well as an ancestor of humans and is the term used for God and Creator in the *tenyidie* Bible. The origin myth holds that *themia* (man), *tekhu* (tiger), and *ruopfü* (spirit) were the sons of the same mother” (ibid, p.16). The novel *When the River Sleeps* gives several references to weretigers, as in the expression: “He stared into the darkness struck with wonder at the fierce strangeness of the weretiger or *tekhumiavi* as these beasts were called. The men whose spirits had metamorphosed into tigers” (ibid, p. 26). Further, “It is not only the tiger that men transform themselves into. There are men in the other tribes who have been known to turn their spirits into snakes, and their women’s spirits have become monkeys” (ibid, p. 23). Thus, customary laws on tiger killing among the Angmis found in the novel have originated from the sibling spirit of creation myth. This fosters an eco-friendly ambience recognising man as part of nature. Certain plants along with animals are also protected and nourished by the Naga Community: “The Zeliangs did not like to cut down the fig tree. They called it their brother tree because one of their folk tales told them of a fig tree that had helped to hide a man of their tribe, and saved him from being killed by spirits.” (ibid, p.116). Vilie respects and loves all the components of nature because of his traditional and spiritual knowledge. He realizes that everything is connected in this cosmos.

Conclusion

The novel *When the River Sleeps* epitomises the Naga worldview of coexisting in harmony with the rich natural surroundings through narratives on rituals, beliefs, and characterization on a subtle scale. The expedition undertaken by Vilie to obtain the stone-heart and his subsequent action of giving it up metaphorically suggests the significance of man’s harmonious coexistence with the cosmos. Here, in the novel, nature is everything- an overpowering spirit, a benevolent friend for those who seek her as a companion, and a malevolent ogre with ugly faces for those who betray the cosmic laws of nature. The success of the novel lies in intertwining nature-awareness together with tellings of magical, supernatural, and fantastic worlds soaked in the folk culture of the community. And that is how the novel calls upon the “ultra civilized” world to fall back to the indigenous traditions and revisit man’s imbibed spiritual connections with nature.

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