

Indigenous Ecotopia in Easterine Kire: A Reading of *Son of the Thundercloud* and *Sky is My Father*

Padhiyar Santokba Karubha Ph.D. Scholar (USLM Karnavati University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat)

Article Received: 25/09/2023

Article Revised: 26/10/2023

Article Accepted: 29/10/2023

Published Online: 31/11/2023

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.10.93

Abstract

The present study examines the indigenous ecotopia of the Naga people as portrayed in the literary works of Easterine Kire. Specifically, her novels *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) and *Sky is My Father* (2018), both set in Northeast India, are analyzed. The study delves into the impact of colonialism on Nagaland, particularly in Khonoma village, and how it has created conflict. It explores the unique relationship between the Naga community and their natural environment, offering insights into indigenous knowledge that has sustained their way of life. The study draws a connection between ecotopia and ecologism, highlighting the value of indigenous ecotopia in addressing environmental crises. Kire's works are a powerful reminder of the need to protect indigenous wisdom. The study underscores the importance of exploring indigenous ecological knowledge through the lens of ecotopia and eco-alterity. It also delves into pertinent social, political, and economic concerns.

Keywords: indigenous, ecotopia, colonialism, utopia, ecologism, eco-alterity.

The term 'ecotopia' combines 'ecology' and 'utopia' and was coined by the anarchist writer Murray Bookchin. It refers to a society that is the first ecological utopia, and Ernest Callenbach's novel of the same name describes it in detail. Callenbach's work emphasizes environmental preservation and criticizes the rapid industrial expansion that prioritizes growth over society, education, and the environment. In *Ecotopia Emerging* (1981), Callenbach expands on the issues an eco-friendly society must address, emphasizing urbanization and community development. Ecotopia is a society that prioritizes environmental protection and the welfare of all living beings. It holds a holistic view of the planet Earth, considering it as a shared home for all inhabitants. This community significantly emphasizes sustainable practices and works towards a harmonious coexistence with nature. However, society also embraces high

technology and materialistic lifestyles. The term 'ecotopia' is rooted in indigenous culture's utopian vision and their close relationship with the environment. Easterine Kire's novels explore this concept in depth, emphasizing the deep connection between characters and the natural world. Indigenous ecotopia often involves landscapes that are blessed and filled with cultural significance. *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) and *Sky is My Father* (2018), Kire's novels, introduce the concept of indigenous ecotopia as a resounding theme within the narratives. This recognizes and respects the deep connection between indigenous communities and the Land. The Naga homeland is represented as a place where every hill, river, and tree has a mystical story. Kire's characters embody an eco-friendly lifestyle. However, rapid modernization, development, and external influence often clash with traditional values and practices.

Discussion

Easterine Kire is a master storyteller who weaves together a tapestry of narratives that showcase the magnificence and intricacy of the indigenous ecotopia in Nagaland. Her novels offer readers a glimpse into a world where nature and culture are inextricably intertwined, and the characters navigate a rapidly changing landscape while striving to maintain the delicate equilibrium between human existence and the environment. Through her rich storytelling, Kire illuminates the significance of preserving indigenous knowledge and practices, not only for the benefit of people but also for the planet. In her novels, we can observe an ecotopian sensibility in the structure; the material's content emphasizes establishing a better society.

In her work, *Sky is My Father* (2018), Easterine Kire delves into the deep connection that the Naga tribe has with nature through their traditional practices, such as farming methods and rituals with the Land. The descriptions of their rituals and beliefs are immersive, allowing readers to visualize the tiger-hunting ceremony where Vilau, a young Naga warrior, is instructed by the elders to fulfill the ritual after killing the tiger for the first time. Kire's writing underscores the imperative of fostering a symbiotic relationship with the natural world and highlights the pivotal role that safeguarding indigenous cultures plays in promoting global well-being.

“When he reached his house, he continued the ritual by making a new fire from split bamboo. The sparks from the friction of the split bamboo against a piece of wood grew into a little flame...when the fire was made, Vilau killed a pig and chopped off the right leg to give the tech then-u (the man who injures the tiger at a tiger hunt)... then he would fetch water again in order to complete the tiger killing rituals.” (Kire, 2018.16-17)

The preservation of the environment is explored in Kire's literary work, *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), which highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge. The protagonist embarks on a journey to rediscover the roots and wisdom of his ancestors, which underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge in environmental conservation. Exploring the customs and practices of indigenous communities that encourage a peaceful coexistence between humans and the environment is also a focal point of the book. Moreover, it examines

the impact of external development forces on these societies, especially on women who had a marginalized role in male-dominated communities. Kire's work expresses a deep concern for the loss suffered by her people during the colonial period and its aftermath, as well as the beauty of their lives in the physical and spiritual realms. Eco-spirituality is a concept that connects nature and spirituality. "Eco-spirituality is the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment"(Lincoln, 2000), as described by Valerie Lincoln in 2000 (Lincoln, 2000). Critics have compared eco-spirituality with other movements, such as deep ecology and ecofeminism, citing similarities and differences in their approach to environmental issues. Deep ecology recognizes the inherent value of all living beings and uses this view to shape environmental policies (Alan, 2012). Another movement is the Dark Green Religion, which considers nature sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and deserving reverent care (Taylor, 2009). This movement believes in the personification of divinity and spiritual power in nature and the natural world.

There are three essential aspects of ecological ethics: deep ecology, shallow ecology, and spiritual ecology. These aspects promote the ideas of ecotopia and democracy. Shallow ecology aims to prevent eco-scams, while deep ecology strives for genuine awareness of environmental issues and avoiding any actions that harm the environment or ecology.

Ecospirituality's ecofeminism explores women's relationship with nature. *Françoise d'Eaubonne* coined the term in "*Le Féminisme ou la Mort*" 1974. (Merchant, 1992. p. 184) The connection between women and nature, encompassing cultural, societal, and religious aspects, is explored through eco-spirituality. The "ecofeminist framework" was outlined by Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen in their 1993 essay titled "*Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health*." They argue that women and nature are more strongly connected than men and nature and that it is necessary to search for historical and cultural roots to define the Naga identity and protect the integrity of the Land and clan. The native people of Khonoma serve as the protectors of the territory, as Kire (2018) describes.

“Her warriors were muscular and wiry—a stock of men for whom an agility of mind was as important as an agile body.” (Kire, 2018. 2)

The inhabitants of Pelhu village are deeply concerned about the safety and security of their Land. The community is firmly against any efforts made by the native community living in *Garipheju* village to take over or assault their Land. In the event of any such aggression, the people of Pelhu have decided to organize a retaliatory expedition against *Garipheju* village. To this end, they have collaborated with the Khonoma community and devised a comprehensive plan for the expedition. The plan includes strategizing and coordinating with the community members to ensure that the expedition is successful and that their Land remains protected. “The disgrace of the first battle was still a bitter memory of Khonoma.” (Kire, 2018). 4) Exposure to external influences may lead to a weakening of people's attachment to their native Land. “Encroach aggressively upon the village world of Khonoma beginning from the 1800s.” (Kire, 2018. viii).

In search of a strategic route from Manipur to Assam, the British colonial forces embarked on an expedition to Nagaland. The colonial power faced opposition from the Angami people of Khonoma, the native residents, as they were dissatisfied with the encroachment on their Land, resulting in a clash. Regrettably, the natives could not prevail in their clash with the colonial forces. Kire (2018) provides further insight into this incident,

“British entry was resisted fiercely by spear-wielding warriors who saw the expedition as an incursion into their lands. They rolled down rocks on the intruders but were overcome by the modern weapons” (Kire, 2018. viii).

The indigenous population of Nagaland dramatically emphasizes the importance of community solidarity in their daily lives. Historical accounts show they overcame significant challenges to preserve their cultural heritage and maintain their independence from British colonial rule. Their hard-working nature is often depicted in various narratives, portraying them as a proud tribe that values its traditions and beliefs. One such account, Levi's experience, demonstrates their deep attachment to their Land and its significance in their lives.

“At the Merhu Kuda, he drank in the cool morning air and closed his eyes against the strong wind blowing up from the valley. How good it was to be back in the village, to be among his people. Impulsively, he picked up a small quantity of soil and smelled its earthiness. He felt bonded to the village, to the Land, and feelings surged up in him that he had never known before. I should feel so strongly for a mistress, he mused, smiling to himself.” (Kire, 2018. 50)

Land holds significant importance in the cultural consciousness of indigenous communities, serving as a tool for the preservation and expression of their unique identities. Nicole Ineese-Nash (2020) emphasizes the role of Land in shaping cultural identity, recognizing it as a critical element of indigenous heritage: “Land serves as a nurturer to all, and asks only for us to practice gratitude and respect in exchange All humans belong to the Land. We are the products of Creation, originating from the stars in the sky world and birthed through the waters of our mothers.” (Nash, 2020. P.5) Siezo's statement shows how the Angami people's growth and development are intrinsically linked to their natural surroundings and environment. This symbiotic relationship is particularly evident in how their Land has nurtured the native Angamis.

“Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, I believe in Kepenoupu.” (Kire, 2018. 71)

Nature is a healer and the ultimate savior of humankind. J.B. Fuller, the principal commissioner of Assam, expressed in 1909 that the northeastern region of India is a collection of various nationalities. B.G. Verghese referred to this region as "another India" because it is the most diverse part of a diverse country. This area is significantly distinct from other regions and needs to be more widely known and well-understood. In the United States, the Northeast region comprises a multitude of ethnicities, cultural traditions, and environmentally conscious

practices, resulting in a diverse and unique blend. In ecocriticism, the concept of "place" holds great significance as it refers to the emotional attachment people have to a particular location. This emotional connection with a place is also reflected in literary works; the village is often portrayed as the ideal place to live due to its richness and abundance. However, the older generation laments the younger generation's lack of affection for the village as they were not taught to love it as they did. The elders reminisce about when the village was overflowing with granaries, and there was no shortage of space.

“It is the best place to live in. We are blessed. Our young should not think there are lands better than this to build a home... They feared that if the young were not taught to love the village, it would soon be abandoned. They had seen it happen around them.” (Kire, 2016. 12)

The text describes the existence of two ghost villages, which were once thriving communities. The first village had become very prosperous due to the abundance of harvests, filling the granaries. However, the villagers needed to be more careful and address the traditional taboos that governed their practices. As a result, they left their harvests to rot in the fields. One afternoon, the villagers were startled to witness an unusual event that bewildered them.

"When they returned from fields, the villagers saw black clouds of field mice swarming over their granaries and homes. Not one house or granary had been spared, and people had to abandon the village because it is taboo to live in a village when animals and insects have wiped out its food stores."(Kire, 2016. 13)

Kire familiarized us with Naga rituals, the taboos and rituals that expose the people's indigenous religious faith, and it is mainly connected to social and agricultural life. As they follow the indigenous rituals, they observe "*genna day*," the day off from working in the field. To their cultural belief, failure to comply with this practice results in punishment through injuries and accidents, and they commemorate the "*terhunyi*" harvest festival. *Khunuo lievi* is a rigorous *genna* day, as mentioned in a text when Billie asked what the *khunuo lievi* to his father answered:

“It is a day on which it is taboo for us to work. If we work on this day, our crops will be damaged by insects, birds, and animals.

..There were three more Genna days before the festival came to an end. The care with which the genna days had been adhered to filled the elders with a sense of well-being. They had successfully held the genna to prevent the paddy from dying and another genna to prevent sterility of the soil, as well as the genna to ensure the fertility of the soil. It should go well for this year's harvest, they said to one another.” (Kire, 2018. 57)

Festivals and rituals are significant indicators of ecological identities, eco-ethical values, and the profound comprehension of the environment in different cultures. In the Naga community, children are trained to be socially responsible and acquire essential skills such as crafting, hunting, and house-building. This practice instills a sense of responsibility towards society and enables them to develop practical skills that can be utilized for their livelihoods.

“It was early yet, an hour or so to sunrise, but most people in the village started the day at first light, working long and hard in the fields or the forests. Younger boys learned to weave baskets.” (Kire, 2018. 10)

A feeling of togetherness is fostered within the community as they learn about diverse cultures and histories. The village functions are inclusive, and all attend, creating a supportive environment. In the Naga community, there was a clear distinction between the roles of men and women. Women were primarily responsible for domestic and familial affairs, while men were viewed as warriors protecting their families and lands from external threats. Battle planning was conducted discreetly in the community's communal house, Thehou, with women being excluded from the process. When Kovi's wife casually inquired about one of the men who had visited him, he responded curtly.

“It is man-talk. Do not ask after the business of the clan, woman.” (Kire, 2018. 3)

Men who would not avenge an attack on their village were maliciously referred to as a woman “*Thenumia*.” Kire's novels demonstrate the connection between ecologism and utopia by emphasizing the construction of a better society through concepts of ecology and feminism. The balance between these two themes highlights the importance of creating a utopian society.

“A man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your houses and you do nothing about it.”(Kire, 2018. 8)

Reinstating the indigenous identity of the Angami people was made possible by the significant contribution of the Naga community. The indigenous societies are intrinsically connected to their Land, as it forms an integral part of their culture, traditions, folklore, and rituals. The environmental concepts of place, wilderness, and deep ecology are relevant in these novels. Furthermore, some ecofeminist concerns are visible in this novel. The book begins by stating that the Naga society is patriarchal and women are not considered equal to men. Women are confined to specific areas and are not permitted to engage in activities perceived as masculine. The houses in the community have rules that restrict women from entering, and according to the text, no women were allowed inside.

“Talk in the thehou, the community house, often centered round what was called man's talk. No women were allowed to come to the thehou or enter the male dormitories...” (Kire, 2018. 7)

The struggle for land ownership and its defense led to the loss of many warrior men's lives, leaving their widows to care for their families. Naga women faced particularly challenging circumstances as they had to manage household responsibilities and farm work. Vipiano, the sister of Kovi, experienced a difficult life after the passing of her husband. She had to support her children and earn a living while living alone. Naga women possess a strong love for their Land, yet they also inspire a warrior mentality that encourages their husbands and sons to pursue war without hesitation. Challenging the scholastic paradigms of mal-development, it portrays a world of ecotopias that is non-violent and aims to promote sustainable development.

The works mentioned here are related to environmental issues and human relationships. They explore the reasons behind deforestation, overuse of natural resources, famine, climate change, and loss of culture in the Anthropocene era. The narrative uses allegory with the help of myths and the indigenous culture of the region. Myths are imaginary beings or objects that cannot be proven to exist. These novels are unique because they combine myths, religion, history, and environmental concerns of the present day. As a Kire, the author naturally portrays a mystical healer. In the first chapter of the *Son of the Thundercloud* novel, readers learn that after the death of Pelevotso's grandfather, the outskirts of the woods was where his grandmother resided.

“...she had lived alone, collecting jungle herbs to heal sick and wounded animals and men.” (Kire, 2016. 11)

The granaries were swiftly infested with swarms of field mice, resulting in significant grain losses. Insects caused severe damage to food stores. These events offer us an insight into ancient wisdom that disregards taboos. This wisdom is invaluable in the contemporary materialistic world, where a few individuals control the world's resources, and wastefulness and exploitation are prevalent. In another text, *Sky Is My Father* (2018), after being imprisoned for six years for his involvement in a rebellion against the British government, Levi comes back to his birthplace, Khonoma. He looks upon his village with a newfound awareness, recognizing himself as an ecological native. He acknowledges that his existence is tied to the environment, and his village's well-being is directly linked to the health of the natural world.

"It was no longer the great village that awed him as a young boy. He saw a cluster of houses rising tranquility above a rock face. The village looked smaller to him now. Where he had been taken, the villages were much larger. At the same time, he felt a deep bond with his ancestral village, and he thought he would cry." (Kire, 2018. 47)

The Anthropocene requires us to rethink our relationship with the planet and how we interact with the environment, life, and livelihood. Indigenous people's lifestyles and cosmology offer valuable resilience in times of adversity. However, using the term "indigenous" to replace "tribe" may create new issues, even though it has been used in anthropology for some time.

In ecological ethics, three fundamental aspects are considered: deep ecology, shallow ecology, and spiritual ecology. These aspects promote the ideals of ecotopia and Ecocracy. Shallow ecology aims to prevent any occurrence of eco-scams, while deep ecology advocates for genuine awareness of environmental issues and emphasizes avoiding any actions that endanger the environment or ecology.

Despite having their own spiritual beliefs, the Angamis were subjected to cultural colonialism by American missionaries, which led to their experience of spiritual dispossession. Throughout the colonial period, the Angamis were forced to abandon their traditional customs and practices.

“The missionary efforts of the American Baptist mission at converting the war-loving Naga tribes received the support of the British Government” (Kire, 2018. xv).

The intention of the American missionaries who arrived in the Naga territory was to modernize and civilize the Indigenous Naga people, whom they perceived as primitive and uncivilized. Dr. Sidney Rivenburg, one of these missionaries, started to convert the natives in Kohima. By exploiting the lack of education and modernity, he preached about Christianity or told patients about heaven and salvation while treating their illnesses. He stressed that Christianity was the only religion capable of saving their souls and making them civilized. As a result, many people in the Naga territory converted to the new religion, making Christianity an essential tool for social change. Levi asserted that the conversion to Christianity played a vital role in the colonial project in the Naga territory.

“...How is it, my son, that you have turned your back on all we have taught you of what is good in our ways? ...The white man killed your grandfather's brother and burnt your grandfather's house four times. Do you hear me, Sato, four times? You have the blood of your ancestors in your hands. (Kire, 2018. 127)

The loss of Indigenous cultural identity was initiated by cultural colonialism, as it led to finding similarities between Indigenous spirituality and the new religion but prioritizing the latter. Despite recognizing the reverence and devotion of the old religion, the protagonist gets converted by Dr. Rivenburg and informs his family accordingly.

“The number of converts was steadily growing at the Mission, which meant that there was a great deal of work for the early converts like Nisier and Sato.” (Kire, 2018. 145)

The adoption of Christian identity serves as a means of preservation for those who choose to follow this path. “Apart from the mostly Hindu and Muslim population of the Indian heartland, and has been partly an act of resistance that parallels the political and armed resistance.” (Baruah, 2007, 110)

Conclusion:

Easterine Kire's literary work provides valuable insight into the life of the Naga people during the colonial period. Her work draws attention to the cultural dispossession experienced by the Angami Nagas during this time, which has hitherto only been depicted through colonial narratives. The written works of Kire are notable for being the first to capture the unique culture, which had been impacted by the British government's colonial expedition and the imposition of Christianity. The Nagas have always considered their distinctiveness or uniqueness at the core of their indigenous identity. In response to the social, political, and cultural invasion of colonialism, as well as the non-indigenous religions and cultures, the Nagas differentiated themselves and protected their otherness. As an indigenous writer, Kire strives to decolonize herself through her writing and fulfills her duty as an indigenous storyteller. The Northeast region of India is home to several indigenous groups, each possessing a knowledge system steeped in their history, tradition, relationship with the local economy, people's lives, and their understanding of the world around them.

Additionally, the ecotopian concept can fulfill the ecofeminist goal. Nowadays, Eco-Utopian philosophy is associated with multiple ideological concepts. Utopia is a dynamic, tumultuous, and agonizing process of making a better world with no end.

References:

- Barua, A. *Debating 'Conversion' in Hinduism and Christianity*. 1st ed. Routledge. 2015.
- Bhat, Shilpa Daithota. 'Aamchi Mumbai' in *Rohinton Mistry's fiction: urban ecology, filth and foliage*. GREEN LETTERS: STUDIES IN ECOCRITICISM, VOL. 24, 2020.
- Bhat, Shilpa Daithota. *Ambulocetus versus Trishanku: 'Nowhere' space, diaspora and genealogical tourism through Paleontology and Hindu Mythology*. JOURNAL OF TOURISM AND CULTURAL CHANGE, 3 Oct. 2019.
- Bhat, Shilpa Daithota. *Hackneying hybridity? Fending off 'foreignness,' Khoja Community and hybridization in The Magic of Saida*. Culture and Religion an Interdisciplinary Journal, 5 Feb. 2019.
- Charan, Ashish. Tanu, Gupta. *Ecotopia: Ecological Concerns and Alternate Womanspace in Select Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Rupkatha vol. 15. 2023.
- Chatterjee, Nilanjana. *Ecological 'Self' vs the Ecological 'Other': Indigenous Naga Ecotopia for the Dystopic World*. MJCST 8.2. 2022
- Ecospirituality*. Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 21 Sept. 2023.
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecospirituality. Accessed 9 Oct. 2023.
- Kire, Easterine. *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. Speaking Tiger, 2018.
- Kire, Easterine. *Son of Thundercloud*. Speaking Tiger, 2016.
- Kumar, Shiv. *Imagined Ethnography and Cultural Strategies: A Study of Easterine Kire's Sky is My Father and Don't Run, My Love*: Rupkatha Journal, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2022.

- Lincoln, V. *Ecospirituality. A pattern that connects*. Journal of Holistic Nursing: Official Journal of the American Holistic Nurses' Association vol. 18, 2000.
- Shome, Tanima. *Colonial Nostalgia and Destabilizing the Imperial Voice: A Study of William Dalrymple and Vikram Seth's Selected Travel Narratives*. Paragon International Publishers, 1, 2018.
- Shome, Tanima. *Dean Mahomed: challenging the West with the best of Indian culture*. *Labyrinth: An International Refereed Journal of Postmodern Studies*, vol. 10, issue 4, 2019.
- Shome, Tanima. *Towards an Epochal Shift in Ecological Discourses: A Reading of the Hungry Tide*. Research journal of English language and literature Vol. 10 issue 2, 2022.
- Vinayakaselvi, Angkayarkan. *A Reading of Easterine Kire's Son of the Thundercloud as an Anthropocene Discourse*. Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 2020.