

Nilanjana CHATTERJEE,
Durgapur Government College
Durgapur, India
nil325@gmail.com

ECOLOGICAL 'SELF' VS THE ECOLOGICAL 'OTHER': INDIGENOUS NAGA ECOTOPIA FOR THE DYSTOPIC WORLD

Recommended Citation: Chatterjee, Nilanjana. "Ecological 'Self' vs the Ecological 'Other': Indigenous Naga Ecotopia for the Dystopic World." *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 8.2 (2022). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2022.14.03>.

Abstract: Critics have used the colonizer/colonized or the Global North/Global South binaries to restore human rights and freedom. But these planetary or ideological binaries – though theoretically convenient – might not be ecologically sufficient to deal with the ongoing sixth mass extinction (Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*). The need of the hour is to critique the existing knowledge systems (science, technology, politics) through the lens of eco-alterity, wherein every agent of environmental disaster is to be identified as the ecological 'other.' In this context, the unique indigenous participation of the ecological 'selves' is to be deciphered and disseminated: The indigenous ecotopias of the earth might provide insights into ecological sustenance, food sovereignty and coexistence. The present study, therefore, situates the relevance of exploring indigenous ecological knowledge systems by proposing eco-alterity as the tool to liberate victims of 'slow violence' (Nixon). In so doing, it seeks to make visible the unique ecotopia of Naga ecological natives – as represented in Kire's novels – that has survived multiple forms of slow violence.

Keywords: Eco-alterity, Ecotopia, Indigenous, slow violence, Nagaland

Introduction

Critics have used the colonizer/colonized or the Global North/Global South binaries to restore human rights and freedom. However, these planetary or ideological binaries

- though theoretically convenient - might not be ecologically sufficient to deal with the ongoing sixth mass extinction (Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*). The need of the hour is to critique the existing knowledge systems (science, technology, politics) through the lens of eco-alterity wherein every agent of environmental disaster is to be identified as the ecological 'other.' In this context, the unique indigenous participation of the ecological 'selves' is to be deciphered and disseminated: The indigenous ecotopias of the earth might provide insights into ecological sustenance, food sovereignty and coexistence. The present study, therefore, for the first time acknowledges the school of Naga Anglophone literature and looks at it as a movement to write back Naga indigenous culture. In so doing, the study identifies the imperialistic agents of environmental disasters and cultural suppressions and proposes an eco-sensible reading of the Naga Anglophone literature to make visible the unique sustainable ways of indigenous living. The study is influenced by Vandana Shiva's environmental theorizations of the only way of 'staying alive' - the ecology of harmony, sustainability, and diversity.

The present dystopic world of violence, poverty, and ecological devastation is rooted in slow violence (Nixon), engendered by unsustainable ways of profiteering from unethical destructions of environment. In this context, the Naga traditional knowledge and techniques - couched in Naga 'people stories' (Avinuo Kire and Meneno Vamuzo Rhakho, *People*) and folk narratives - might prove to be valuable treasure-troves of indigenous eco-ethical knowledge systems. To restore indigenous Naga culture and polyvocal oral narratives, Naga Anglophone writers have used English as a linguistic tool to assert indigenous territorial, historical, and cultural claims with perhaps a protective (but critical) relationship to indigenous people stories and folk culture. Naga Anglophone writing (spanning almost six decades) seeks to narrativize the oral literary culture by couching the Naga metanarratives of everyday life. The Anglophone writers from Nagaland (individually or/and collaboratively) - Easterine Kire (1959 -), Monalisa Changkija (1960 -), Temsula Ao (1945-2022), and Vishu Rita Krocha (1983 -) - are incessantly striving to archive embedded indigenous culture with an 'overpowering' (Patton) urge to restore the unique Naga indigenous knowledge system. Easterine Kire, perhaps the representational writer of Nagaland, is the first Naga Anglophone novelist, and her huge body of work identifies or/and responds to the cultural problem-spaces to highlight the unique indigenous Naga's everyday practices, rituals, traditions, taboos, and belief system that value eco-sensible

ways of staying alive. Kire's folk narratives (*Kire, Don't; Rain-Maiden; Sky; Spirit; When*) and people stories (*Kire, Respectable*) make audible Naga indigenous voices, often under-noticed (even) in her official historicization of Naga ethnicity (*Kire, Walking*).

The positionality of the researcher here is that of a non-indigenous scholar who intends to study Naga indigenous issues. The proposed methodology is based on contemporary research into Indigenous culture by non-indigenous researchers (for example, EA Skille's "Doing research into Indigenous Issues being non-Indigenous" or Anne Heith's *Indigeneity, Ecocriticism and Critical Literacy*). The Naga Anglophone writers are constantly threatened by dominant culture groups in India and worldwide that stereotype Naga people as aggressive, savage, headhunting people (*The Morung Express*) and thereby deny Naga cultural history or identity. However, their literature represents eco-ethical ideas about indigenous people's relationship with nature. By respecting, creating indigenous and general awareness, and being sensitive to heterogeneity within the indigenous group, the study proposes to use Kire's writings as the primary material. Being a Non-Naga Indian, the researcher considers the permeable notion of indigeneity as the significant entry point to cultural traditions of the ecological 'self', suppressed through agents of ecological 'other.' Therefore, it would not be (perhaps) ecologically productive, though theoretically convenient, to pinpoint the study of interface between indigeneity and ecocriticism as a concern for indigenous communities and indigenous researchers alone.

I. Why Eco-Alterity?

The study acknowledges the influence of McQuady Blecker Al-Masri's discourse on Eco-Alterity on the present article, as it meaningfully uses the frame of Eco-Alterity to approach Kire's novels with the aim to restore the Naga indigenous ecological 'self.' Eco-Alterity facilitates an eco-ethical reading of a text wherein the destructive agents of slow violence are identified as the 'others.' The framework allows to create a meaningful dialogic discourse in Section II between "Examining Slow Violence and Explicating their Extent in Kire" and "Staying Alive" stories in Kire. The dialogue between the ecological 'other' and the ecological 'self' facilitates looking at the disempowered ecological natives of the Naga ecology as the empowered knower of the lived space they inhabit. The dialogue not only makes visible the exploitive nature of the ecological other in the name of (mal)development but also explores the indigenous Naga

narratives to decipher and disseminate the meaningful sustainable ways of co-existing both individually and within a community. Vandana Shiva believes:

We are living through the latest phase of an epic struggle that has shaped human history through the ages, between the power of domination and destruction, mastery and ownership, and the non-violent power of co-creation, cooperation, co-evolution. The power of violence and destruction comes from separation – from nature and from each other. Our non-violent power comes from interconnectedness and oneness. (175)

Eco-alterity, as McQuady Blecker Al-Masri points out, refers to an idea of ecological responsibility in relation to an eco-ethical ‘self’ formulated against an exploitative ‘other.’ McQuady Blecker Al-Masri’s use of the literary motifs to identify elements of eco-alterity in select colonial and postcolonial texts through an environmental lens of the desert-ecological ‘self’ has inspired the present study to retrieve the Naga ecological ‘selves’ as represented in Kire’s novels and to look at its indigenous natives as the empowered ecological insider or/and knower. The three literary motifs introduced by McQuady Blecker Al-Masri to make audible the muffled and silenced ecological selves of the Arab deserts are: 1) expressions of nostalgia at the sights of environmental ruins, 2) the depictions of the ecological natives, and 3) the creation of wandering places. The present study, in a similar way, argues that Kire’s folk narratives propagate eco-alterity by approaching Kire’s texts through the employment of the three literary motifs. It is an ‘uneasy’ (McQuady Blecker Al-Masri 3) task, and the reasons, as pointed out by McQuady Blecker Al-Masri, are the texts’ Anglocentrism and the always already projection of a mythical uninhabited land. However, in the context of Naga literature, since the Naga oral narratives are unwritten polyvocal, multilingual records of unique tradition, culture, knowledge, and value system (Kire, *Vikholienuo*), the Naga Anglophone writers have used the English language to archive invisible Naga botanical, geographical, political, culinary, medicinal, esoteric, and environmental linguistic space so that the homogenisation of Naga everyday lives is sufficiently disrupted.

Why Naga Ecology?

With English as the official language, people of Nagaland speak diverse tribal languages. Naga Anglophone literature strategically attempts to represent the lived lives of the Naga ecological natives and their eco-ethical ‘staying alive’ stories. Kire, in the “2016 Gopinath Mahanty Lecture,” identifies the three phases of cultural silencing

of the Naga indigenous identity (Patton): The first phase includes the American religious intrusion in the 1860s; the second phase includes the political subordination by British imperialistic forces in 1919, World War II, and Battle of Kohima (1944); and the third phase begins with post-independent cultural flattening by the dominant nationalistic ideologies. The Naga Anglophone literature, therefore, is committed to depicting survival stories of the ecological natives of Nagaland in the face of historical and mythical disasters. But the very nature of Naga people stories deserves to be problematized. According to Kire:

Of the many narratives silenced by war, the folk tales of the Nagas suffered a long period of being silenced. This was because folk tales require certain settings in order to be told. The Naga war with India, after military operations began in 1956, destroyed the settings for oral narratives. One may not think that something as simplistic as a folk tale would need to be approached with ritual and ceremony in order that its narration might take place, but it does. The folk tale belongs to eras of relative peace in the village community... (ICORN 2012)

Naga people's unique indigenous ecological stories have undergone multiple suppressions. The situation is different nowadays. The school (now a movement) of Indian English Naga woman writers is committed to writing back.

64% of biodiversity in India appears within the Northeast regions (comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura), wherein almost 420 tribes access the Eastern Himalayas and "Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot" (Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund) zones. As Singh et al. observe, "people of the NE region have been surviving with nature and have developed location-specific traditional ecological knowledge system turned to culture and nature" (19). Shiva explains how Biodiversity and indigenous knowledge are integrally related to each other: "Biodiversity has been protected through the flourishing of cultural diversity. Utilizing indigenous knowledge systems, cultures have built decentralized economies and production systems that use and reproduce biodiversity". (72) The present study, therefore, examines the traditional cultural rites and rituals - in connection to the Naga farming practices, esoteric value systems, healing practices, ways of preserving food security, natural resource management skills, ecofeminist awareness, and community and individual wellness - as represented

in Kire. Kire (*Sky*) explicates the deep connection between stories and the Naga ecology:

The village was full of them [stories], the unclean places of the forest, the dark water sources which were death to bathe in; how stories nestled in them but would give up life to go near them and listen to their stories, no matter how sweet, how powerful! There they stayed, dark brooding secrets each village hinted at but were powerless to disclose. There were the other things of the spirit, not strange, but clear truths with no mystery surrounding them, the truths that protected the people if they had lived their lives protecting those truths... (Said 51-52)

The study of these ‘stories,’ hence, is relevant as it is necessary to identify, restore, decipher, and disseminate the Naga ecological ‘staying alive’ narratives, erased by multiple imperialistic suppressions.

II. Examining Slow Violence and Explicating their Extent in Kire

The present section uses the first literary motif – ‘expressions of nostalgia at the sights of environmental ruins’ introduced by McQuady Blecker Al-Masri – in Kire’s novels to make visible the agents of slow violence. In the Introduction to *Sky is my Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, the “village world” (viii) of Khonoma is justly situated as a victim of perennial political aggression since the beginning of the 1800s. Kire (*Sky*) informs us that British attacks included occupying land, cutting down forests, and levying taxes on the ecological natives of Nagaland and forcing them into labour (91). Despite the treaty of Yandabo in 1826, signed between the East India Company and the King of Ava, to control the Anglo-Burmese hostilities against Khonoma, the ecology was constantly destroyed by the British colonial agents of war and violence (viii). The Angami Nagas, the ecological natives of the Khonoma, fought the British several times between 1832 and 1879 until they were forced to arrive at an agreement in March 1880 after the Battle of Khonoma. While Zahan relates the factual data of the British colonial aggression against the Angami Nagas, Kire (*Sky*) vivifies the fierce resistance put up by the tribe. Zahan mentions:

The British started penetrating the Naga Hills in 1832 when Captain Jenkins and Pemberton led an expedition of 700 Manipuri troops and 800 coolies across the Naga and occupied Papoolongmai in the face of fierce resistance by the Angami Nagas (...) It [the Battle of Khonoma in 1880] allowed the British to have a military base in a limited

area that was named as Naga Hills. This is how Naga Hills became a part of British India.
(viii)

However, Kire (*Sky*) makes visible the environmental destruction hurled against the Angami Nagas by the British troops in several unequal battles from 1839 to 1880 until a verbal agreement of peace between British representatives of the British government and the elder ecological natives of Khonoma was reached: The British expeditions were carried out with the purpose to gain control of the land route that would connect Assam to Manipur via Nagaland. For this, the British troops attacked the spear-wielding Naga troops with “modern weapons...in a ‘constant firing of musketry’” (viii). Every British expedition against a Naga village ended with the mandatory ritual of ‘burning the village or the houses of rebels’ (ix). In order to manage the fierce Naga resistances by the ecological natives of Khonoma, a special troop of 500 sepoy, led by Major Focquett, fired sixteen hours of mortar firing, forcing the natives to return to their villages by night. Kire criticizes the nature of the British Government justice after the oral treaty of peace on 27 March 1880:

British Government justice was swift and harsh. After the treaty, Khonoma was burnt completely with restrictions on rebuilding the village. Her inhabitants were dispersed to other villages and orders went out to other villages of the Angamis to settle the abandoned village (...) The villages [Piphema, Meriema, Sechuma, Tsiepama, Pfuchama, Kigwema, Viswema and Jotsoma] that had joined together in the uprising against the Kohima garrison were attacked and destroyed. (xiv)

In this context, it is necessary to identify the literary motif – ‘expressions of nostalgia at the sights of environmental ruins’ – in *Sky is my Father: A Naga Village Remembered* with the purpose of applying the theoretical framework of eco-alterity. Thus, the present section might make visible the cultural resistance by the ecological natives of the Khonoma, re-center the researchers’ focus on the Naga ecological natives as the ecological ‘selves’ instead of the colonized ‘others,’ and empower them as the knowers of unique indigenous eco-ethical knowledge and survivors of British unsustainable, unbearable and unpardonable exploitations.

After spending six years in jail for waging war against the British government, Levi returned to Khonoma and looked at his village “with new eyes” (Kire, *Sky*):

It was no longer the great village that had so awed him as young boy. He saw a cluster of houses rising tranquilly 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 bonding with his ancestral village and he thought he would cry. (47)

The pain and suffering had strengthened his sense of responsibility towards his devastated village. Since then, he and his clan had fought fearful battles with the British troops from 1879 to 1880 until Levi was recognized as one of the bravest warriors of the Merhu clan. After the verbal treaty of peace between village representatives of Khonoma and the representatives of the British Government on 27 March 1880, Levi took the lead in rebuilding the burnt village of Khonoma. He contemplated the past environmental destructions carried out by the ecological 'others':

This was the fourth time that Khonoma had been burnt. Levi remembered the third burning. Houses of the Merhii clan were burnt and uncles had worked hard to rebuild their houses. Levi, then a young boy aged three and a half years, did his bit by carrying in bindings for the house. (108)

Presently, Levi and his comrades looked from the Tsiekha fort at the devastating condition of the Khonoma village:

The village was burning and would continue to burn even after two days until the village would get reduced to half-burnt posts and ashes. The dispossessed ecological natives of Khonoma waited for one full year until they returned to rebuild the village: "All day they worked, carrying posts and digging holes, and setting up the new posts." (109)

Every time Levi faced an ecological devastation, he grew newly determined to protect his home, family, and community. Every sense of loss allowed him to hope for a new beginning.

Similarly, Kire's *A Respectable Woman* is set in the aftermath of the Battle of Kohima wherein people in and around strove to come to terms with the personal, political, and environmental devastation. The Battle of Kohima, fought in three stages between 4 April to 22 June 1944, was a part of the most devastating campaigns of the Second World War (1939-45). The battle was fought between the Japanese and British Indian troops leading to food crises, disease, and death. However, after forty years of destruction and suffering, the woman protagonist claims that their generation has no interest in the military strategies used by the British Indian troops to oust the

Japanese. While both the agents of war are identified as the ecological 'others,' the protagonist ventilates her concern as an ecological 'self' as she and her generation are interested in the human struggles of the ecological natives to rebuild Kohima after the war:

My generation was intensely curious about the war. How had the people survived? What was it like to see one's village bombed? What did they eat when there was no food to be found? What was Kohima like with the influx of a huge soldier population? These were the questions we often asked. (6)

The protagonist's Azuo (Mother) remembers how "there was nothing" (Kire, *Respectable* 8) when she and other dispossessed ecological natives returned to the post-war Dimapur: There was no food supply and dilapidated uninhabitable houses and some old intimate places turned into unrecognizable spaces. Azuo was a child then. She helplessly observed how some people, on their return, mourned loudly and inconsolably while some others brought in posts and bamboo and planks or dug and cleared debris to make new dwellings (10). The only place where Azuo and other children were not allowed to go was the erstwhile British Bakery: "The British had not removed the corpses of dead Japanese soldiers they had found holed up inside the giant oven. It was from that position that the Japanese had been sniping at enemy soldiers causing many casualties" (10). The description is not just an expression of helpless grief at the sight of ruins but also a meaningful nostalgia for a lost home. Every sight of a ruined ecology, as identified in the present section, is also a point of new beginning. The environmental disasters further strengthened the will power and the survival strategies of the ecological 'selves' and inspired them to bridge the gap between one's past (which is beyond control) and present (which can be repaired).

"Staying Alive" Stories in Kire

The present section uses the second and the third literary motifs - 'the depictions of the ecological natives' and 'the creation of wandering places' - in Kire's folk narratives to make audible the voices of the ecological natives. In the context of the motif of 'depictions of the ecological natives' in Kire, the references to unique indigenous cultural performances practised by the ecological natives need special mentioning. These performances, in the forms of rituals and festivals, exhibit the ecological selves' eco-ethical value system and deep understanding of the environment they inhabit. The esoteric value of nature, passed on from Naga ancestors to the present generation

through lived knowledge, has helped the Naga clans to survive the fiercest environmental disasters and has sustained them during times of war and food crisis. One of the most important rituals, mentioned in almost every book of Kire, is ‘Genna days.’ A Genna day is a day declared as a no-work day. It is taboo to work on Genna days and the cultural belief is that those who violate Genna days are punished with injuries and accidents that have even resulted in death (Kire, *When* 243). Piano in *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, like other members of the village, had been initiated in pre-Christian esoteric practices by her father. She devoutly observed the Genna days to protect the fertility of the agricultural fields. Chatterjee in “stand aside death...today is my day’: Contextualizing the Naga Esotericism in Easterine Kire’s Novels,” cites Willaert’s 2020 record wherein people of Manipur and Naga Hills (the present-day Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Myanmar) practised Genna, an indigenous lockdown culture, to fight smallpox and cholera (new diseases transmitted as a part of British colonizing project). Chatterjee, here, further argues how Genna served in preventing epidemics, natural disasters, and unforeseen circumstances. The esoteric practices related to Genna were sustained through strict customary laws and beliefs at the village level. Child Piano’s father would warn, “*If you break the taboos, you break yourself*” (Kire, *Sky* 14). The same esoteric knowledge dawned on Piano’s son Levi in an epiphanic moment on his return to Khonoma after six years of imprisonment by the British government: “So the genna was death to those who defied it but life to those who abided by it. Where he had been [jail], there were no genna days, no signs of chicken sacrifices and the young did not greet the old in passing. (Kire, *Sky* 52)

Apart from the Genna days, “Naknyulum” (Kire, *Spirit* 181), which is not a part of the agricultural cycle, is also a festival of eight-day long lockdown wherein the Chang tribe prohibits outsiders or visitors to enter their village. Some other rituals of eco-ethical sustainability and community wellness, mentioned in Kire’s *Sky*, *When*, and *Spirit*, are “Terhase” (the ritual of making peace with the spirits); “Thekranyi” (the feast of the age groups wherein different age groups accumulate their earnings by performing field labour for hire. With these earnings, they feast on the day of Sekrenyi festival, i.e., the festival of sanctification); “Kelpie” (the festival in the middle of the agricultural year wherein the main focus is folk singing); “Terhunyi” (harvest festival) and “Liede” (the initiation of harvest by a woman who blesses the harvest). These rituals help the Naga tribes propagate, educate, disseminate, and sustain the future

generations towards individual and community wellbeing, and also to sanitize them both spiritually and physically. The ecological natives, by valuing their rituals, consider their respective ecologies as home. They are deeply attached to their clan, and their meaningful interaction with their environment displays a strong sense of bonding and responsibility towards their ecology and their community.

The human stories of “staying alive” in the midst of ruin by restoring everyday food security – at individual and community level – is also an important aspect of Kire’s strategical depictions of the ecological natives of Nagaland. Kire, in almost all her narratives, explicates such historical and mythical survival stories. Shiva explains:

Every aspect of the food crisis – non-sustainability, injustice, unemployment, hunger and disease – is linked to the globalised, industrialised food system, and every dimension of the crisis can be addressed through ecological agriculture and local food systems. To grow sustainability, nutrition and food democracy, we must think small not big; local not global. (94)

Chatterjee in “Women and Natural Resource Management in Naga Folktales and ‘People stories’: Situating Easterine Kire’s Fiction,” points out how Kire’s folk narratives project mythical ways of “food sovereignty” (a concept introduced by Shiva) through optimum utilization and management of natural resources by maintaining an ecological balance with other lifeforms. In *A Respectable Woman*, Kire narrates how Azuo maintained food security during the post-war (the Battle of Kohima) situation through invisible routinized domestic practices. These practises included hanging bunches of chives, garlic, basil, or maize over the kitchen fire; filling the kitchen with the pungent smell of food; warming rice; making *galho* from dried mustard leaves; or simmering meat strips with red sorrel leaves, chili, and red chili flakes. Azuo also unfolded meaningful ways of expressing sympathy and love when a family was visited by death: “At funerals, we don’t know how to ask how the bereaved persons are feeling. Instead, we keep asking them to eat some food. Making food for the family becomes our way of showing them sympathy and a way to partake in their sorrow”. (Kire, *Respectable* 35)

While *A Respectable Woman* records how food security is maintained during the post-war situation within the families, Kire’s folktales make visible the mythical forms of food security carried out for preserving community and individual wellbeing

during periods of food crises and environmental devastation. In *Sky is my Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, Keviselie's wife uses indigenous ways of food preservation in the inner room of the house: "Meat hung over the fire, partially dried. In a corner of the large room, cluster of garlic dangled from a long bamboo. Dried herbs tied with twine hung alongside the garlic, food for the winter months when fresh herbs would be difficult to obtain." (22)

Apart from food preservation, the women of Khonoma actively participate in the food production system and strategically inject the unique ways of field work into the blood stream of the next generation through lived knowledge. For example, Levi's mother, Piano, educates her sons Levi and Lato not to weave in the morning "when the field is calling us" (11). She takes them to the field and explains unique ecological knowledge: "a little rain refreshes you and keeps you cool enough to work on" (Kire, *Sky* 12) and "People did not work as keenly on a full stomach" (13). Piano passionately demonstrates:

Push the soil down like this with your finger," ... She pushed her index finger into the dark loam and deftly planted a paddy stalk in the hole. Muddy water swirled in but she had firmly stuck the plant in the loam. She filled in the soil before moving on to the next one. (12)

Piano further motivates her sons to follow the eco-ethical path of restoring peace and food security through harmony, sustainability, and diversity:

There'll be enough time later for bird shooting after the field is done. Son, when our granaries are filled you may feel free to trap or shoot all the birds you want, but remember, a household is not worthy of its name if its granaries are empty. The sun and rain are the Creator's blessings. They rain and shine in turns for us to make our fields and get our harvests. War is part of a village's life but if we have grain, we can withstand war. If we do not have grain, a few days of war will overcome us. (13)

In *Don't Run My Love*, Vienuo and her daughter choose to live the difficult but fulfilling lives of the farmers. The mother religiously passes on the indigenous food production and food preservation skills to her daughter:

Together, the two of them worked their fields, and much of their time was spent in work ... The early rain in the months of March and April was used for planting beans, pumpkins, and any vegetable belonging to the gourd family. But work began in earnest only when the monsoon rains came to the ancient green valley, and farmers could flood their fields with sufficient water to plant rice. Harvest time made all their hard work worthwhile and no one missed a day's work then. (5)

The mother and daughter, while facing natural hazards like unseasonal rain, practise unique food recycling systems (for example, the black rain-soaked grain would be used as chicken feed). The duo also performs food sovereignty by practising homegrown backyard planting (spices such as basil, chilli, garlic, and country ginger, and medicinal herb like *japan nha*), cultivating (gourd, pumpkin, rice, dried mustard leaves), and obtaining local foods (meat and herbs from forest and locally available organic black tea).

In *When the River Sleeps*, Kire depicts the village of Kirhupfumia women (a minority group of women believed to have the destructive powers) wherein the Kirhupfumias practise systemic methods of eco-ethical food sustainability: They practise field cultivation along with backyard cultivation of indigenous vegetables and spices. Moreover, the community maintains a communal grain-pounding house with several mortars (each mortar having a pair of pestles) set up in a row wherein women pound grain. Shiva acknowledges the eco-sensibility of the Himalayan woman farmers as opposed to the male farmers, "The living forest provides the means for sustainable food production system in the forms of nutrients and water, and women's work in the forest facilitates the process" (Siva, *Staying* 65). The woman peasants in Kire's texts display similar unique eco-ethical ways of food production within the unique Himalayan ecology of Nagaland.

Vilie, the male protagonist of the novel, demonstrates traditional indigenous ways of maintaining physical and mental orientation during a food crisis:

All hunters knew that if they found food after a long period of starvation, they should eat slowly, masticating their food properly to help their digestive organs. "You can eat yourself dead!" the older hunters would warn when they were teaching younger hunters about this. (Kire, *When* 55-56)

During his journey into the forest, Vilie – suffering from acute illness, body ache, fatigue, and fever remembers his mother’s wisdom of eating food during starvation in small portion and resting, and then repeating the same. Mother has always taught him since his childhood – ‘food eaten slowly stayed in your stomach longer’ (Kire, *Don’t* 56). In *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man*, “Forest Song” explicates how girls and women perform field work and practise indigenous healing practices, like gathering bitter wormwood from the forests and using it for treating the villagers. The depictions of ecological natives, in the entire body of Kire’s writings, project the indigenous people as the protector of ancestral land, knowledge, and wisdom.

Kire, while writing the Naga folk narrative, uses memory and imagination to design maps of Naga ecologies, made invisible by agents of slow violence. In this way, Kire creates several ‘wandering’ places. She offers vivid descriptions of the geographical, botanical, and zoological and spiritual descriptions of both mythical and actual places based on her own studies and several interviews with ecological natives of Nagaland, whom Kire has duly acknowledged in all her folk narratives and ‘people stories.’ The diverse ecologies in Kire’s works serve more than mere settings – they are strategically filled with grounded topographies, human and animal lives, vivid flora, and even food culture. In *Sky is my Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, on returning to the village of Khonoma after serving six years of jail for fighting back against the British government, Levi is newly aware of his existence as an ecological native. At the Merhu Kuda, he realizes:

How good it was to be back in the village, to be among his people. Impulsively he picked up a bit of soil and smelled its earthiness. He felt bonded to the village, to the land, and feelings surged up in him that he’d never known before (...) From his vantage point the village of Khonoma spread out before him rather majestically, the fields to his left and the village in front of him and at his back, houses clinging to the cliffs they were built into (...) Fed by the rivers, these fields yielded good harvests each year. The village had never known a year of famine and want. (50)

The eco-ethics that dawn on him teach him to value his ancestral eco-sensible ways of esotericism: “If you honour the spirits, they will bless you, if you defy them, you will learn how mortal man is” (50). The distance in time and space from his ecology connects him back to the space and strengthens his sense of ecological belongingness and eco-ethical responsibility.

Moreover, paratextual contents like the elaborate "Introduction," "Glossary of Angami words," "Oral Narratives of the Merhu Clan," "Oral Narratives of the Thevo Clan," "Oral Narratives of the Semo Clan," "Oral Narratives of the Khwunomia," and the "Acknowledgement" strike a fine balance between the real and the mythical representations of the Naga ecology.

In *Don't Run My Love*, Kire gives a vivid description of a mythical village, the Village of Seers. The Village is believed to be the cradle of ancient indigenous Naga spiritual knowledge. It is supposed to be as far or as near as a seeker would want it to be and to an outsider, it could be 'the furthest point on earth' (79). The uncartographed village – the most powerful Naga legendary village – is depicted thus:

No human could tell and it was pointless to try to situate it in a fixed location because it was inarguably the most powerful village, the village that held answers for all the problems that man could encounter in his physical existence. And by virtue of that power, the village was quite capable of shifting location as it pleased. (82)

Kire repeatedly stipulates that the geographical location of the Village is unmappable and almost impenetrable by delineating the empty streets with only a few humans walking silently on the swampy and dark path to the Village, the mystical great wood apple tree as the gateway to the Village (which marked the boundary between the natural and the supernatural), and the difficult bumpy steps to the old seer's house. In this way, Kire makes visible an indigenous ecology that has a universal appeal wherein the ecological natives incessantly strive to attain ancestral knowledge and wisdom. The Mother and daughter's arduous journey to the Village represents the oneiric idea of returning to one's roots and its unique esoteric insights in moments of crisis and uncertainty.

In *When the River Sleeps*, Kire depicts several wandering lands that belong to the unique ecology of the Naga Hills, markets, farmlands, lakes, rivers, and forests. The most important wandering space among these uncartographed places is the sleeping river by the Border Village. The Border Village is described as a small settlement of determined people who have made their dwellings in an impossible place (88). This Border Village, almost elevated to a paracartographical existence, is reported to be neglected by politicians and the then government. However, despite

government's negligence, the Village thrives with the help of unique eco-ethical ways of rural planning within a unique mountain ecology:

The path widened slightly and they found themselves at the village. There were only a few houses. They were built on the slope above which the path ended. Villie was surprised to see that the houses were built in such a way that they looked as though they were clinging to the slope, and there were steps cut into the rocky surface leading to each house. The path down to the river, which was their only water source, was another flight of steps or footholds carved into the rock. On the other side was the granite face of a mountain bereft of vegetation. (88)

As Villie journeys from the Border Village towards the Sleeping River, the flora and fauna begin to change. Unlike the Border Village, it is 'more lush and green' (Kire, *Don't* 97): The ferns have grown tall and lush, wild banana trees are overloaded with fruits, and diverse birds are found chirping and thriving in the green abundance. However, as soon as Villie approaches the 'territory' of the mythical river, the ecology drastically changes: "(...) all birdsong ceased. In fact, the silence was deafening. Not a leaf stirred, and there was not the faintest of insect cheeping to break the silence. No human sound polluted the forest where the river lay." (Kire, *When* 99)

The description of these wandering lands and the manner of their descriptions further the landscapes' universal appeal by emphasizing their literary and symbolic presence and significance. Kire's intellectual anxiety of authentic representation of certain real and imagined places pertaining to diverse Naga ecologies within the text is clear from the "Glossary of Words in Tenyidie" and the "Acknowledgments." She has referenced researchers for helping her identify the unique facets of the Naga environmental placeness used in the text.

The represented wandering places in Kire, therefore, preserve a balance between Kire's anxiety and conviction in situating invisibilized 'authentic' Naga ecologies, which have been sustained by diverse folk narratives and people stories. The mythical landscapes that Kire creates in her body of work both connect and disconnect the readers from their historical and political contexts. It is up to the readers to engage in a symptomatic reading of the represented landscapes through the lens of eco-alterity to decipher and disseminate the placeness of the Naga ecology, erstwhile projected as empty spaces bereft of indigenous history, culture, and ecology by the ecological 'others.'

III. Observations and Conclusion

By foregrounding the environment and the crises of a unique Indian Himalayan ecology named Nagaland in the texts of Naga Anglophone writer Angami Kire, the study furthers the work of eco-alterity. It proposes to center its commitment towards 'real' (Shiva) knowledge, intelligence, and well-being which are rooted in literature, mythology, culture, social and political commitment, environment, and history that are uniquely regional and ecologically diverse. Kire's Naga eco-literature, during the ongoing degradation of women and the environment, takes us to a world of multiple ecotopias of non-violent ways of sustainable living and diversity, alternative to dominant scholastic paradigms of (mal)development. The study offers an effective way of reading 'slow violence' in the Naga Anglophone literature, which is not immediately visible or audible. While the first section problematizes the sustenance of Naga ecology and its natives, the second section identifies meaningful resistance and survival of the ecological 'selves' despite multiple attacks by the ecological 'others.' The attacks only strengthen the connection between the ecological selves and the unique ecologies they inhabit. The study acknowledges the literary space designed by Kire as a strategy to dismantle cultural, historical, political, and most importantly, ecological flattening of the Naga ecotopias into empty spaces, always already available for domination and exploitation. Eco-alterity, as identified and applied here to access the inaccessible staying alive stories of Naga ecological 'selves,' is perhaps the only meaningful way of researching and empowering the earth during the ongoing sixth mass extinction.

References:

- Heith, Anne. *Indigeneity, Ecocriticism and Critical Literacy*. Umea University, 2022.
- Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund*, 2022, www.cepf.net/our-work/biodiversity-hotspots/himalaya. Accessed on 10 August 2022.
- Chatterjee, Nilanjana. "Women and Natural Resource Management in Naga Folktales and 'Peoplesories': Situating Easterine Kire's Fiction." *Indian Feminist Ecocriticism*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch and Nicole Anae, Lexington Books, 2022, pp. 107-122.
- . "'stand aside death...today is my day': Contextualizing the Naga Esotericism in Easterine Kire's Novels". *Covid-19 in India, Disease, Health and Culture: Can*

- Wellness be Far Behind?*, edited by Anindita Chatterjee and Nilanjana Chatterjee, Routledge, 2022, pp. 168-181.
- ICORN. "Bitter Wormwood: Interview with Author Easterine Kire." *Sampsonia Way: An Online Magazine for Literature, Free Speech & Social Justice*, 16 January 2012, <https://www.sampsoniaway.org/literary-voices/2012/01/16/bitter-wormwood-interview-with-author-easterine-kire/>. Accessed 3 June 2022.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Kire, Avinuo and Meneno Vamuzo Rhakho. Eds. *People Stories: Volume One*. Penthrill Publication House, 2016.
- Kire, Easterine. *When the River Sleeps*. Zubaan, 2014.
- . *Don't Run My Love*. Speaking Tiger, 2017.
- . *Sky is My Father*. Speaking Tiger, 2018.
- . *A Respectable Woman*. Zubaan, 2019.
- . *Walking the Roadless Road: Exploring*. Aleph Book, 2019.
- . *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man*. Seagull, 2021.
- . *Spirit Nights*. New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2022.
- McQuady Blecker Al-Masri, Allison. *Eco-Alterity: Writing the Environment in the Literature of North Africa and the Middle East*. Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University, 2019.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Patton, Jasmine. "Contemporary Naga Writings' Reclamation of Culture and History through Orality." *The (Curious) Reader*, 26 July 2019, www.thecuriousreader.in/features/naga-writings/. Accessed on 22 May 2022.
- Singh, Ranjay K., Srivastava, Ramesh Chandra, and Tapan Kumar Mukherjee. "Meeting Report: Community-based Sustainable Natural Resources Management and Development in Northeast India." *Current Science* 96, no. 1, January 2009, pp.19-21, www.jstor.org/stable/24104718. Accessed 27 July 2022.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Kali for Women, 2010.
- . *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. Natraj Publishers, 2012.
- . *Who Really Feeds the World*. Kali for Women, 2017.
- . *Oneness vs the 1%*. Kali for Women, 2018.

Skille, E. A. "Doing research into Indigenous issues being non-Indigenous." *Qualitative Research*, 8 April 2021, doi.org/10.1177/14687941211005947. Accessed on 15 June 2022.

"The Naga Tribes Stereotyped." *The Morung Express*, 10 January 2017, issuu.com. Accessed on 14 May 2022.

Willaert, Rita. "Traditional Lockdown Practices in the Naga Highlands." *The Indian Forum*, 3 July 2020, www.theindiaforum.in/letters/traditional-lockdown-practices-naga-highlands. Accessed on 13 September 2022.

Zahan, Syeda Ambia. "Naga Agitation: How One of India's Oldest Insurgencies Started." *Outlookindia*, 29 August 2022, www.outlookindia.com. Accessed on 19 October 2022.