

Life, Death and Sustainability through Indigenous Literature An Ecocritical Study of Selected Works from Northeast India

Sayan Mazumder
Jadavpur University, India

Abstract Understanding sustainability in the Anthropocene through ecocritical discourses help us to deal with today's environmental angst. Indigenous literature critically interprets the effects of cultural domination on Indigenous communities. This paper looks at the works of two Indigenous authors from Northeast India to substantiate how literature through its creativity functions as force/medium of renewal and self-criticism of 'cultural ecologies', preserve oral narratives, utilize traditional ecological knowledge, use of conceptual categories like 'ecopsychology' and 'topophilia' in Indigenous literature to reformulate our ideas of life, death and sustainability.

Keywords Indigeneity. Ecocriticism. Sustainability. Cultural ecology. Northeast India. Traditional knowledge.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Methodological Approach. – 3 Primary Texts and Summary. – 4 Literature as Cultural Ecology. – 5 Preserving Indigenous Narratives. – 6 Traditional Ecological Knowledge. – 7 Ecopsychology, Nature-Language and Topophilia. – 8 The Role of Religion and Faith. – 9 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Even the men would have to be very careful, and remember to respect nature the way she expected to be respected. (Kire 2016, 40)

The Indigenous co-existence with the natural world for time immemorial can be interpreted as an example of sustainable ecology. Their voices through literature give meaning to the environmental angst we are suffering today. Interpreting Indigenous literature can broaden our perspectives on how to internalise ideas of life and death and decrease our ever-growing alienation from nature. Literature helps the readers in imagining the consequences of this alienation better than scientific data that might also help in reducing the ignorance that humans have formed as an outcome via the Anthropocene. As residents of the Global South the challenge is even more formidable: it is not unlike walking on a tightrope between development and sustainability. Our vulnerability is even more apparent having lived through the COVID-19 pandemic. We have to shift our focus to the looming climate crisis and find ways to re-envision our future through sustainable ways. Sustainability needs to be understood both culturally and environmentally. Maan Barua in his book *Lively Cities: Reconfiguring Urban Ecology* (2023) talks about how

cities are lived achievements forged by a multitude of entities, drawing attention to a suite of beings - human and nonhuman - that make up the material politics of city making.¹

In the rural spaces Indigenous authors are using the space of literary creativity that can be understood as a means of preserving social and cultural identities as well as the production of new literary ecologies that “examines the interplay between literature and the environment”.² Literary ecologies look at how the complicated relationship between humans and their environments are understood, explored and expressed through different literary forms. Literature plays an important role in critically observing how post-colonial communities elaborate standpoints against cultural domination. In case of Indigenous literature, the complexities of external interventions have had a significant impact on cultural formulation. In a region like the Northeast India, it is crucial to preserve vulnerable species and our pristine landscape, home to many Indigenous communities. Only in the last part of the twentieth century have we seen the beginning

¹ https://researchguides.dartmouth.edu/human_geography/thecity.

² <https://www.transcript-publishing.com/series/literary-studies/literary-ecologies/?f=12320>.

of a global effort to acknowledge the need to secure their endangered cultural and environmental realities. If we dive into the history of the sustainable development agenda, we see that it goes back over 30 years. After the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the need for a global partnership for sustainable development took centre stage because. It was in 2000, at the Millennium Summit in New York that the eight Millennium Development Goals were adopted that led to *The 17 Sustainable Development Goals* (SDG) in 2015 (United Nations 2015). The SDGs have had a significant impact in policy making with regards to the environment around the world. Natural calamities occurring around the world only highlights the significance and effects of the climate crisis.

After the independence of India in 1947, the central government prioritized development over environmental preservation for economic stability and security. Soon even the most remote regions of India were connected by roads. Our natural landscape underwent huge changes. Arunachal Pradesh is a state located in the Northeastern part of India, home to many Indigenous communities felt the tremors of the government policies soon after. Arunachal Pradesh has a reverse of forests containing valuable timber, firewood, land for new industries crucial for economic development. People from different parts of the country came to Arunachal Pradesh to look for jobs. The state government started to produce lumber from that forest for the growing industries. New schools were built that provided Western education to the children. The first priority was development. Natural resources were being massively utilized and exploited. The natural ecosystem started to suffer from this rapid industrialization. If we turn our attention to the Indian history of development, we find Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India in 1972, while addressing the United Nations environmental conference held in Stockholm, argue in favour of development over environment. She went to great lengths to say that if pollution was the price of progress, the people would, in fact, prefer progress. In a country like India, it was essential to develop technologies, promote the Green Revolution, give industrialists more ability to use natural resources post-Independence. The country came together for the cause of development.

Ramachandra Guha in his essay "Environmentalism of the Poor" (2014, 138-49) assesses the challenge that the Global South has to deal with. Guha says that at the beginning, large areas of forests and land were given up by the Indigenous communities. Arunachal Pradesh's economy depended on the export of wood from the forests. Often, people who had to leave their homes due to the rising water levels created by new dams or by the toxification caused by the new industries were tolerated because this sacrifice was for the greater good of the country. In a review of Ambika Aiyadurai's book *Tigers are Our Brothers* (2021), Anirban Datta-Roy elaborates on the

relationship that the Mishmi community of Arunachal Pradesh shares with their natural surroundings as,

The relationship which the Mishmi share with nature, a relationship which includes both wild and domestic animals as well as guardian spirits with whom a reciprocal relationship is maintained through taboos, rituals, and offerings. While indigenous cosmologies of nature have allowed them to engage in activities like subsistence hunting for centuries, these activities are often seen to be in contravention of wildlife laws, a point of conflict which exists among the Mishmi of Dibang Valley and many other forest-dwelling groups across the world. (Datta-Roy 2022, 280)

The Chipko movement³ that occurred during the 1970s, had a significant impact on environmental awareness in India. The women hugged trees to save them from the axe. This movement gained the attention of international media and made Indians more aware of environmental degradation and its consequences. Ecologically aware intellectuals demanded a more “decentralised, socially aware, environmentally friendly and more gentle form of development” (Guha 2014, 165). Guha was convinced that the way Western countries preached ‘environmentalism’ only worked for the countries having more land than required by people, and economic prowess to implement strict reservation of vulnerable regions. But in the case of South-Asian countries it was very important to change the outlook on environmentalism because sustainability of nature came second to the need for resources to sustain human life. The idea of sustainable development is even more complex because of the change in priorities as seen by the Government. The Western ideas of environmentalism must be re-evaluated while talking about under-developed countries such as India.

2 Methodological Approach

In this paper, I will look at selected novels by two Indigenous authors from Northeast India who have contributed greatly towards understanding the ecologies of life and death and the tenets of change, continuity and sustainability through their novels. Specifically, Mamang Dai of Arunachal Pradesh and Easterine Kire of Nagaland, two prominent, Indigenous poet-cum-authors, and their literary works will be discussed in this paper. The methodology of this research paper is based on a comparative framework. Comparative studies help in

³ <https://www.sugiproject.com/blog/the-chipko-movement>.

understanding how Indigenous literature works in creating 'kinship' with natural surroundings, and functions as a reservoir for storing Indigenous knowledge, myths, stories and languages. The comparative framework also helps in building a kind of 'global solidarity' that is crucial in today's world. Comparative literature as a discipline helps in analysing the literary transmissions across literary systems and languages. Indigenous scholarship across the world has emphasized the importance of earth-centric life of the native communities that has helped them to peacefully coexist for time immemorial. It also echoes the primary objectives of Ecocriticism. All told, this research forwards a new way of understanding the environmentally conscious literature from a comparative praxis. The paper will try to eco-critically understand the selected novels and their contribution to understanding the change in 'cultural ecologies' of Indigenous communities through literary explorations. Indigenous Scholarship also demands ethical research and alternate perspectives to produce unbiased knowledge. Beyond the urban cities, the 'change towards modernity' comes at a higher cost. As the environment is deeply connected with the Indigenous life, it must be a collective effort to build up sustainable environments that benefit every community, the human and non-human and nature. Sustainable development means to grow in a way that does not affect the future generations and their ability to grow on their own, that also can mean a process to maintain the continuation of life. Now, during the Anthropocene era, it is very difficult to even provide necessary resources, food and clean water to everyone. Collaborative efforts at every level are absolutely significant to find sustainable solutions for all. This paper aims to look at a few critical aspects like understanding literature as cultural ecology, preserving oral traditions as a means of saving cultural heritage from extinction, utilizing traditional ecological knowledge for sustaining life, analysing Indigenous literature through conceptual categories such as 'ecopsychology' and 'topophilia', use of 'myth and religion' in reformulating the ideas of life and death.

3 Primary Texts and Summary

Mamangs Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) invokes the idea of "collective memory"⁴ of the community to understand how we use memory and mental images to reconstruct our past. The stories in this novel weave the history of Indigenous communities from the snippets of memory. The transition from past to present and back to the past through myths, stories and legends could be seen in this

⁴ <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/hawlbachspace.pdf>

novel. Bonding with the land remains a constant theme of the novel. The ‘fantastic’ stories told by the characters not only re-emphasize the strong connection of people to their community but also signify their deep-rooted love for their surroundings. The second novel discussed here is Dai’s *The Black Hill* (2014). Here we see the first historical journey of a French priest through India’s Northeast that resulted in spreading Christianity throughout the region. The novel is also significant in show-casing the relationship between different Indigenous communities, their failure to unite against colonial aggression, the changing social, cultural and natural atmosphere in the Northeast. Dai’s novel is based on thorough research on actual events and recorded stories that paint the picture of Northeast India and their contact with the Western cultures. Easterine Kire’s novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) talks about a hunter who tries to find a precious “Heart-stone” from a “sleeping” river. This hunter’s journey also highlights a man’s relationship with nature, community, animals and even spirits. Kire reflects on the conflicts of man and his inner self while positing that valuable traditional knowledge of these Indigenous communities is getting lost. The final novel that I will discuss in this paper is Easterine Kire’s *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016). This novel is a blend of Christian mythology and Indigenous faith. The promise of a boy that brings joy, rain and new life to a community almost on the brink of extinction. The metaphors used in this novel also reconnects the reader with the importance of stories and story-tellers. The boy who fell from the sky, or the tiger spirit roaming around the forest that the characters imagine as a brother, creates a space for peaceful co-habitation. It redefines that humans are a part of nature and nature is a part of humans. These stories mark the start of how the Indigenous authors of the Northeast are re-imagining the community through their creative work, expressing their concerns about losing their traditional knowledge and cultural heritage. The precarity and inter-relations of life and death, religion and faith, nature and culture, the changing state of their ecology can be interpreted through close analysis of these texts. A comparative study of these novels might uncover ways in which the authors are trying to address many of these social and ecological concerns.

4 Literature as Cultural Ecology

The discourse of cultural ecology introduced by Zapf in 2016 helps us navigate Indigenous narratives as well. Maria Löschnigg says in her essay “Native Knowledge Systems and the Cultural Ecology of Literature”,

literature operates as a cultural ecology but that they actually constitute a knowledge system within an epistemological ecology. Moreover, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, they indicate and perform a cross-fertilization between different thought systems through forms of creative appropriation. (Löschnigg 2019, 278)

Her work constantly emphasizes the critical points of the knowledge systems of Indigenous literature through its intrinsic features and upholds how understanding the natural environment affords practitioners significant agency. Literature works as a medium that helps in self-renewal and self-reflection of culture creating a framework of cultural ecology. It is through the knowledge mediated via the Indigenous narratives that she enhances her ecocritical approach. Thus, multiple discourses are thus significantly impacted by this research. This research aims to study the texts through comparative methodologies to understand how the authors are utilizing their texts by building platforms for ecological and cultural analysis. The question then lies upon what they did with the narratives and how they did it, and what meaning it might carry are the main subjects of discussion with regards to their ecological space. The comparative aspects of reading these texts and cultures together, is to examine how they talk to each other and how these texts can bring forward the Indigenous voices which had not been heard before.

India's Northeast is a diverse place with different communities, landscapes, cultures languages, traditions and faiths: it is an amalgamation of multiplicities. The sense of shared history and experience, the intrinsic qualities within the literary ecologies helps in forging a new way of looking at the world around us. The aim of this research is to examine how the Northeastern literature is reformulating itself to achieve these goals. Moreover, I show that these texts evince a transition in terms of authorship to activism. The ecological approach in the Anthropocene helps in understanding the human-nature dynamics, reconfiguring the community space, restoring the invaluable knowledge passed down to us, protecting the Indigenous heritage and envisaging a sustainable future. The ecocritical perspective in many ways aids in reconnecting us to the world beyond. It is the start of a dialogue focusing on some key issues of the contemporary time, also an effort to recognize how the knowledge we gain from our existence is being transformed within the ever changing cultural and literary systems. The ecological approach paves the way to reattach the bond that every living and non-living element of this universe shares. Only through introspection, thus reshaping our ideas and restructuring our vision, inclusivity of one and all, that we might succeed in restoring the balance. The ultimate goal is to expand the field of study by addressing the environmental concerns, emphasizing active

participation, ensuring more significance on Indigenous contexts, opening up new avenues of knowledge across the board and providing adequate space for further conversation might start the process of healing. Indigenous literature here helps in ethically interpreting their knowledge systems. This research is a step towards critically understating Northeast India's Indigenous narratives and their significance in shaping Indigenous cultures. As Hubert Zapf discusses in *Literature as Cultural Ecology* (2016),

For this evolutionary function of literature, the formal and artistic qualities of texts are not merely illustrations of already existing environmental knowledge but are themselves actively participating in the production of ever new ecologies of knowledge and communication. Literary form is therefore an indispensable part of the ways in which a cultural ecology of literature looks at texts. (Zapf 2016, 91-2)

Zapf's idea of literature as a medium of preserving the "evolutionary memory" plays a significant part in bridging the gap between the human and non-human ecologies. He also elaborates how the literary texts explore the complex interactions between culture and nature by opening up the potential space for innovation and self-renewal through 'creative explorations'. That is the space where Indigenous literature becomes even more significant. Continuous changes affecting the Indigenous cultures are reflected through the literary ecologies expressed by the interventions of the authors. Ecological thought is thus embedded within the texts, and foregrounds the functional dynamics of the texts that encapsulate cultural connotations of the Indigenous ways of continuity. This research tries to focus on these areas of transitions with regards to the selected novels. The readings of the novels were conducted through an eco-critical lens examining the role of cultural ecology in building up a sustainable model. The novels provide detailed descriptions of the landscapes to contextualize the setting of the stories. The multiple narratives show how each community is respectful towards the customs of other communities, respectful of the elders and the spirits. Even forests or rivers have spirits. The Indigenous people believe humans can turn into tiger-spirits, can leave the body and stay on a tree. It is this 'transition' that makes 'ecotone' a pivotal concept in understanding the 'agency' of nature. Ecotone means to be a transitional area, which is present between two ecosystems (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2021). As the Northeast region is so diverse and ecologically rich, the interaction of the communities and ecosystems help us to comprehend the changes. Ecotone helps in analysing the texts and reading them through an earth-centric lens. The mutual relationship between the people and nature makes Indigenous cultures more important in the

contemporary times. In Indigenous culture, nature is looked at as the protector and the provider. One must follow a certain etiquette in amongst nature and nature would show a path even in the most difficult time. It is important to notice the attitude of the Indigenous people towards nature, that distinguishes them from the modern materialistic approach. The Indigenous authors voice their concerns and also uphold their traditional ways of life through literary production strengthening their foothold in the ongoing conversation. It is also a kind of 'activism' reflecting through their artistic work enabling the Indigenous communities to share their own experience.

5 Preserving Indigenous Narratives

Re-imagining the Indigenous communities through literature can be thoroughly analysed via a comparative study of the texts in terms of their use of the oral tradition, re-articulation of the myths and legends placed within the storyline that paints the picture of the region as a whole. As literature is said to be the mirror of the society, the authors have to 're-envision' the Indigenous communities through their works. Brian Gollnick (2008) in his book *Reinventing the Lacandon: Subaltern Representations in the Rain Forest of Chiapas* discussed how Indigenous communities of the Lacandon jungle have been misrepresented through cultural exoticization. Gollnick finds "oral traces" of indigenous people in dominant cultural outputs by utilising theoretical breakthroughs provided by subaltern studies. He looks at how the jungle region and its people have been portrayed in literary works from the Spanish conquest onwards, as well as how the native people have portrayed themselves in these works, which include poetry, video, photography, and post- and anti-colonial narratives. In Northeast India, Indigenous authors have tried to invoke the 'collective memory' and consciousness of the community with the help of their novels. As Halbwachs explains that "In each epoch memory reconstructs an image of the past that is in accord with the predominant thoughts of the society" (Halbwachs 1992, 40). The authors are trying to 'restore' Indigenous cultures in these rapidly changing times, in a world of advanced technologies and progression. It is crucial to archive the myths, legends, customs, and traditions of Indigenous communities as most of it still remains in the oral form. As Longkumer notes in his essay "Little Nationalities: Writing in English in the North-East" that

Kire's narrative choice of the indigenous oral tradition come as a refusal to adopt the narrative mode of mainstream Indian novel as she emphasizes on illustrating ethnic elements through her use of language, expression and themes. (Longkumer 2021, 78)

So, the authors are re-formulating their novels in a way to provide space for this knowledge to become an intrinsic part of text. Northeast India has a rich repository of oral literature. Ramanujan is the preface of his book titled *Folktales from India* suggested,

Both public culture and domestic culture cannot be fully understood without knowledge of the folk idiom. Every kind of Indian cultural practices, every kind of Indian cultural performance, whether it is the classical epic and theatre or modern film and political rhetoric, is indebted to oral traditions and folk forms (Ramanujan 1991, xiii-xiv)

He emphasized that in the mostly non-literate countries it is the oral traditions that form the ethos and worldviews in the childhood and that is reinforced in the later stages of life.

Oral traditions give us alternative conceptions of deities that balance and complete, and therefore illuminate the textual conceptions. (Ramanujan 1994, 93)

Written literature has its origin in oral literature. Northeast Indian literature still survives by way of folktales, stories and oral narratives. It was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that people from the different Missionaries of Europe started to arrive in Northeast India to preach their religion and find routes to Tibet from the Indian side. They also started to document the topography, the people and cultures of the Indigenous communities. The newly established Missionaries and the arrival of the printing press had a very significant impact in the Northeast in terms of both religion and education. But in terms of literature, it was after independence that we see prominent writers coming out with multitudes of written work from the region. Easterine Kire discussed how the lack of script had been the most difficult hurdle to overcome for writing in Indigenous languages. Indigenous authors have preferred English as the medium of writing given that they originally received English education in school and were comfortable in the language. Both Kire and Mamang Dai have used oral narratives and stories in their work. All of the history, tradition, myths and legends, wars and violence, crisis and exposure had created a unique space for the authors to explore the oral literature and weave it into their work. Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a collection of myths, legends, stories, customs, beliefs, and rituals rearticulated to the readers by various characters at various times. The author herself is trying to find the place from where she used to belong. Her encounters with people of different villages bring up different events that narrate the history of a village, a place, a person, a certain period or historical

incident. All of these are closely bound to the orality of the region. How the culture of a certain place is shaped through its stories and myths can be analysed throughout the novel. In her essay titled “Oral Narratives and Myth”, she addressed the question of the necessity of the old stories and the legends as,

Perhaps in this, myth and memory have their role too. How do we identify ourselves as members of a community belonging to a particular place, with a particular history? Some of the signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as members of a community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we believed in the ‘word’ as composed in our myths and legends. It is here that we may find that peculiar, indefinable something by which we recognise each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community. (Dai 2009, 05)

The importance of the orality also conserves a significant portion of the history of the Indigenous communities. The stories of conflicts between the different communities, the legendary stories of the different spirits, the shaman and his ritualistic influence on the people helps in constructing the community. The history, myths and legends join each other forming the collective memory of the people. When the travellers in *The Legends of Pensam* reached a certain village, they found that arrangements were made for a storytelling session. A big fire was lit for “a long night of stories when myth and memory would be reborn in the song of the ponung dancers” (Dai 2006, 93). It is this idea of being reborn through stories that makes oral narratives even more important. The elders, the singers, the dancers, the shamans play pivotal roles in keeping the stories alive, keeping them connected to their roots. In the other novel *The Black Hill*, Mamang Dai emphasizes the importance of stories.

Every dawn I think all the stories of the world are connected. At night another voice tells me - no, there are more stories yet that are silent and separate. There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago. Perhaps this is one or the other of them. (Dai 2014, ix)

The Black Hill is a great example in which the author not only tells a story but further explores a crucial historical event. The Christian mission within the Northeast had changed the religious and social aspects of the people. It is a significant juncture that has shaped the Northeast we know today. Dai’s first novel can be seen as a series of intercalated stories. Many of the characters are storytellers themselves who help the people inside the story to move forward with a better understanding of the world. Easterine Kire’s works

talk about 're-visitation' into the Indigenous world. Not only does her work narrate different Naga stories and myths to the readers but with that establishes a new world order. After colonization, a distance evolved between the traditional life and the modern life, creating a conflict within the communities. Sometimes the new religion made people distant from the natural world and their own roots. As Kire through metaphors discloses that evil spirits even killed the repository of the 'story-tellers'. Easterine Kire emphasizes how the storytelling culture within her family and community helped her become the writer she is today. All the novels discussed here have been heavily influenced by oral narratives and folk tales. Belonging to the Naga community herself, the Naga cosmology is also a very important part of Kire's work. She puts a boy as a reference to Jesus in the context of her novel *Son of the Thundercloud*, where ultimately the boy becomes the saviour and later on is killed because of conspiracy and jealousy. Her narrative technique very wisely works as an inter-connecting link between the Indigenous faith and Christianity. By combining the two, she re-formulates the Naga life by creating a world of peaceful co-existence. Orality and myth are at the center of her work.

"And there were storytellers who went all over the land telling stories to the people, and spreading joy and hope". "Where are they now?" "Dead. Killed, all killed by the dark ones, those who did not want them to transform people's minds with their stories". "Why?" "Because the people sought to be free whenever they heard the stories. Free of fear, free of shame and constant desire. Without the stories, people believed they were destined to suffer, and they allowed the dark ones to enslave their minds and fill them with fear and sorrow and despair until they died". (Kire 2016, 48)

Kire as the master storyteller uses her novels to turn our attention towards the loss of Indigenous knowledge that is being replaced by the Western education. She emphasizes that the storytellers provide the community with tales of compassion and kindness, give them hope. They have valuable knowledge that is passed down from the elders that keeps getting actively circulated for thousands of years. Kire says that this is the right time when the stories should be revisited in order to keep them alive. The lack of stories and storytellers meant that the

people slowly forgot what they had been told, or believed they were just myths, and they allowed their minds to accept the darkness. So, the drought came as a result of people rejecting the joyful stories and accepting the dark stories. (Kire 2016, 48-9)

In the other novel *When the River Sleeps*, we find Vilie as the guardian of the forest and nature. His journey, and all the supernatural things that happen to him can be traced back to Indigenous belief systems. Vilie remembers all the old sayings, stories, and rituals that in turn helps him navigate through the treacherous paths of the forests. It is this traditional learning that saves his life multiple times. Vilie's story is also a testament to the hunter's way of life deep in the hills and forests of the Northeast, where the Indigenous communities have thrived for a long time.

Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire both use oral traditions, integrating stories and myths into the fabric of their respective novels. Oral narratives work as a vital resource for Indigenous knowledge and literature being produced in the region. Orality is a massive part of Indigenous life and that is why it is very important to 're-tell' these stories and keep the tradition of passing that knowledge to the next generation intact.

6 Traditional Ecological Knowledge

According to P.S. Ramakrishnan, the TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) is very significant due to the rapid change towards technology and the impending environmental crisis. He emphasizes the need to implement traditional knowledge for policy-making and creating a sustainable environment. He says,

This traditional wisdom is based on the intrinsic realisation that man and Nature form part of an indivisible whole, therefore should live in partnership with each other. This eco-centric view of traditional societies is widely reflected in their attitudes towards plants, animals, rivers, and the earth. This whole body of knowledge centred around the economic value of plant and animal species is a part of ethnobiology, and has potential value for the society at large. (Ramakrishnan 2001, 27)

He enunciates that traditional knowledge has economic, social and ethical benefits, particularly in terms of sustainable development. Authors from the Northeast have taken literature as a way of imparting this knowledge. The old sayings/stories that the authors inculcate in their novels would make sense to the people of Northeast as these are taken from the local Indigenous cultures. The myths and the stories serve educational purposes also. The vivid descriptions of farming, the seasonal vegetables, the songs, the trading routes, the animals and their importance are narrated as stories but they in fact remind the new generation of the traditional ways and value systems. Dai's novel *The Black Hill* elaborately describes dangerous routes to

travel the land (Father Krick's journey to Tibet, Kajinsha's journey across the hills and forests), Kire's novel *The Son of Thundercloud* talks about the self-sustainable ecosystems created by the three sisters, description of vegetables and plants Indigenous communities use for cooking, in the novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) we find Vilie talking about the rituals and customs of the hunter communities. Traditional knowledge also includes the rites, rituals, customs and festivals that the communities organize to celebrate their culture. In Dai's *The Black Hill*, we see that one of the protagonists Kajinsha knew the forest so well that he could travel even in the dark. It is the same with Kire's central character Vilie (*When the River Sleeps*) as well. These two characters from different novels are examples of traditional hunters who could survive in the jungle for days on end. On their long journeys, we see them having expert knowledge on how to set traps for food, what plants to eat, and what trees could provide them with medicinal attributes to put on their wounds. While Kajinsha, a village chief made a house so deep in the valley protected by the landscape that it takes many days to just reach there. Only avid knowledge of one's own environment, and utilization of local resources makes life sustainable for these people without the use of any modern technology. Kire's protagonist Vilie made the forest his home, only coming to the rural market for some sugar, oil and tobacco. Both the protagonists from different communities, different novels, different authors share the sense of belonging with nature. They utilize traditional knowledge learned from their elders and maximize what is provided by nature. For example, during a scene in which Vilie cuts himself, a woman from the local weaver community helps him by giving some kneaded pulp of bitter wormwood to ease his pain. This is how the Indigenous people without any access to medical facilities use the environment for survival. On his way back Vilie home found Idele, who was the best bark-weaver of the community, had died. With her death, the knowledge of nettle-weaving art she possessed was also on the brink of extinction. Soon the nettle-weaving art might also get lost forever if steps to revive it are not taken soon. Another important incident of Vilie's journey was the meeting with the Nepali worker Krishna. When Vilie asked Krishna to send his kid to school in the future, Krishna replied that he does not have the means to send the child to school but he would teach the kid his trade to make an honest living. Vilie was asked to be the little boy's teacher. People like Vilie who had the experience, knowledge and the know-how can teach the new generation many things that so-called Western education cannot. Vilie's story helps us understand the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems.

In *Son of the Thundercloud*, we see the young boy Rhalietuo being taught by Pele on how to make a house from the materials found in the forest. Seidze, the boy's aunt teaches the boy about the ways of

collecting food for the family. In the wilderness, there are no markets where one can go and buy food. One has to work very hard to cultivate their lands and save seed grains for the next season. It is intense labour that goes into catching fish, growing rice, taking care of the animals, finding edible fruits and plants. Siedze becomes the teacher of the young boy forming an inseparable bond. Instead of meat, they used mushrooms to supplement their diets. The young boy learns to separate the poisonous mushrooms from the edible ones, and in turn, her aunts make delicious broths for him (Kire 2016). Indigenous communities who source their food from nature has to take good care of their environment. The earth replenishes the trees, the animals and the human world. The rivers provide them with water for cultivation, drinking and fishing. But the modern development and industrialization have many adverse effects on the rivers.

In all the four novels we see the significance of the river in Indigenous life. This connection with nature and natural environment is quintessential for the Indigenous communities. Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) describes the river as a spirit. Here the river is also the metaphor for our consciousness. The Heart-stone that Vilie tries to find in novel, also gives strength to his inner self and transforms him. In the other novel *Son of the Thundercloud*, we find the river coming back to life after the rain. The young children who never knew about the river because of the long drought could hear it for the first time. The head priest exclaimed "The river runs. We are saved!" (Kire 2016, 40). The fantastical events occurring in the texts arise from the belief of Indigenous communities. It is like what Alejo Carpentier (1957) called "the marvellous real".⁵ The traditional knowledge of the Indigenous communities, the relationship that they have with the natural world, the respect they have for the river, the sky, the land and the earth as a whole, have helped them sustain life here for thousands of years. This ecocritical understanding of the texts brings forward a unique attitude that the Indigenous people have towards nature. The synthesis of myth, folklore and traditional knowledge culminates into literature that re-contextualizes the environmental issues at this moment. The traditional ecological knowledge must be restored, archived and utilized with the modern ideas in order to change our materialistic approach towards nature and restore the parity between humans and the environment. Only in that way we can start the process towards sustainable development.

⁵ <https://instruct.uwo.ca/english/785a/Prologue.html>.

7 Ecopsychology, Nature-Language and Topophilia

To understand the attitude of Indigenous communities towards nature, the concepts of ecopsychology and topophilia will be helpful in this research. The term ecopsychology was coined by Theodor Rozak (1992) and is defined as

Ecopsychology studies the relationship between human beings and the natural environment through both ecological and psychological principles. Ecopsychology seeks to develop and understand ways of expanding the emotional connection between individuals and the natural environment, thereby assisting individuals with developing sustainable lifestyles and remedying alienation from nature. (Blaschke 2013, 37)

While doing an ecocritical reading of any text, one needs to understand the complex relationship between human action and its impact on the natural environment in the text. The response of a novel to its local environment is very important. The interaction of the protagonists to animals, forests and rivers, showcases the multifaceted dynamics of ecopsychology. In the essay titled “A Nature Language”, Peter H. Kahn, Jr., Jolina H. Ruckert, and Patricia H. Hasbach introduced a new concept that redefines the human-nature interaction. They articulate in the introduction that,

A way of speaking about patterns of interactions between humans and nature and about their wide range of instantiations. Locking eyes with a wild animal is an experience that can stay with one for a lifetime. The authors refer to such experiences as enacting the interaction pattern of “recognizing and being recognized by a nonhuman other”. (Kahn, Hasbach 2012, 13)

This way of communicating through the nature language could be encountered in the novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) when a ‘were-tiger’ makes its appearance. Vilie encounters the same were-tiger on multiple occasions, the spirits in the trees of the unclean forest, and the battle with the river are examples of this nature language where the environment is given active agency. In the *Son of the Thundercloud*, we see rain coming to the village with the birth of Rhalietuo. While he travels to visit his aunts, another storm hinders their progress. But his mother Mesuano reassures Pele that the boy Rhalietuo (as a metaphor for Jesus) can see his father in the rain. Many events in this novel have religious connotations as well. The Indigenous belief and faith have a deep connection with the environment. In the moments of distress, we witness the protagonists of these novels addressing the sky as their father, the earth as their

mother, building up a sense of kinship with nature. Vilie believes that the forest is his wife. Creating family relations with the natural world, and asking them to protect them is the evidence of how 'ecopsychology' is very much interconnected with their life. The bond between human and nature is not just in their myths and legends but as if they share an ancestry. Similar to a mother feeding and protecting her offspring, the Indigenous communities believe that they are nature's children and that nature will protect them. If one is in tune with the forest, even the most impenetrable jungle makes a way to pass it. Indigenous communities have domestic animals, farm animals, they encounter wild animals like deer and tigers in the forest. Local animals play a significant role in their rituals and customs. The natural landscape, the trees, the hills, and the rivers have material and spiritual value in them. That is why they feel the necessity of communication through the nature language. One of the most interesting parts of the Northeast culture is their myths and folklore. In her essay titled "Myth and the Mizo World View" (2007), Dr. Cherrie L. Chhangte discusses how the origin stories of the Mizo culture created a 'sacred time' where all natural things such as humans, the plant and animal world, and all the living beings could communicate and co-exist peacefully.⁶ The origin stories go on to say how conflicts arose among them and daunting measures had to be taken to resolve the issue.

However, the domesticated animals refused to bow under the dictates of their human masters any longer, claiming that they should have a more exalted position because of their contributions to the victory. They raised a great protest when some of them were to be slaughtered for the feast. The situation became critical until Sabereka, Thlanrawkpa's father-in-law decreed that, henceforth, neither animals, plants nor humans should be able to speak the same language. Thus, with communication cut off between them, other creatures could no longer make protests, and order was restored with humans continuing to be masters over other living beings. (Tribal Research Institute 1992)

This myth clearly expresses how nature language has been a very significant part of different cultures in diverse ways. What is also important to notice is that the domination of humans over nature was also addressed in the Mizo origin story. Taking away the power of communication in-between the living creatures was also a way to 'silence' the natural world. The human world has taken advantage of the forced silence to keep the 'hierarchy' going which in turn

⁶ <https://cherriechhangte.wordpress.com/2007/11/28/myth-and-the-mizo-world-view/>.

has resulted in the decay of the environment. One could understand through these textual and mythical examples of how the nature languageworks and its importance from the Indigenous perspective. The ecological crisis tends to form a psychological reaction termed 'topophilia' - emotions related to a specific place. Yet, it is not just a love for a place but has a deep sense of 'cultural identity' linked with it. When used in the space of ecopsychology, Scott Donald Sampson's work on the 'Topophilia Hypothesis' can provide us with a clear understanding. Scott not only talks about how topophilia is directly linked with the re-envisioning of our relation with nature but also connects it to the sustainability crisis. He gives examples from many Indigenous and oral cultures around the world but specifically theorizes the 'hunter-gatherer' bond within their psychological framework. This is very much interrelated with the texts discussed here. Vilie for example in *When the River Sleeps* (2014) set in an unconfirmable time, is a hunter who explores his relationship with nature. The wilderness becomes a 'sanctuary' to him. Kire's novels provide the readers with magical tales and legends conjoined with people like Vilie and Pele who are believers in their own culture and identity. There is also the love of their land that propagates the protagonist to the 'proper understanding' of 'their' world. As Sampson elaborates,

Present-day Indigenous peoples and many followers of major religious traditions still possess a cosmology, yet most of us in Western industrial societies exist largely without one. The absence of a sense of deep history likely contributes to the dearth of greater meaning and purpose that many of us experience, with one result being the dysfunctional human-nature relationship at the heart of the eco-crisis. (2012, 42)

Kire's novels are very much in accordance to Scott's essay. Vilie's story re-imagines the 'hunter life' of the Indigenous communities while Pele's journey turns him into the witness of the 'revival of nature'. In many different ways each of the discussed novels tries to address the imbalance that has taken place within the human-nature relationship. Mamang Dai's novels explore the changing times through historical events and visible observations. The many stories of *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) put forward how development is changing the landscape that has been there. Dai herself as the narrator addresses that Northeast's remote terrain helped in the region's 'isolation' that in turn protected this rich landscape and forest till now. *The Legends of Pensam* similarly works as a protector and reservoir of the rich Indigenous stories of the people. These stories can make one re-visit the land they were born and brought up, to the hills, forests, and rivers that make this magical. As Dai notes "when you look at the land you forget all your aches and pain" (Dai 2006, Author's

note). Maybe Scott's hypothesis talked about the same people who are intrinsically connected to the land which gives a very strong nature-oriented psychological side to them. Scott concludes with the idea that sustainability can only be achieved through the accumulation of locally sustainable cultures. Geographical locations and sustainability are directly linked with the relationship between the human and the environment of that place. The unique characteristics of each place provide unique challenges that must be dealt with in the ground level only. The Northeast must be given the opportunity to find their own solutions without external intervention. The ecological aspects of the novels thus try to address these problems and find answers through the re-imagined reception of these texts.

8 The Role of Religion and Faith

In terms of the religious aspect, one needs to understand the synthesis of Indigenous faith with Christianity in the Northeast cultures. The presence of Christianity in the Northeast spans more than 150 years and continues to play a huge role in the Northeast states. Colonialism brought the military and also the Church into the Seven Sister states. Due to the dominance of this religion, the social and cultural ethos of the people have also changed over time. Initially, the people who converted had to abandon all their past beliefs and completely focus on Western theology. But in the 1950s and 1960s, the revival of the Church became a significant movement. The Nagaland Christian Revival Church was formed in 1962. Tereso C. Casiño and Yiepetso Wezah in their essay titled "Towards a Relevant Theology of Nature: North-East India Tribal Perspective" (2011) talk about the conflicts between biblical teachings and the traditional beliefs of Indigenous people: they provide many examples of how the Creator-Human-Nature relationship changed in the two worldviews. But a new kind of restoration is taking place in Northeast India. Tereso C. Casiño while discussing the "Theology of Nature" or "Mythology of Nature" says that

A biblical theology of creation assures the communities of North-East India of their God-given identity and future. The people's claim to the land is theologically legitimate. Their present identity and determination to live as a people finds historical mooring, not simply because of their mythical stories, but because of the historical reality of existence from the time their forefathers lived in the land. The use of Indigenous myths to construct a theology of nature in North-East India could pave the way for a contextualized, relevant, and innovative preservation and protection of the environment and ecology. (Wezah, Casiño 2011, 115)

Kire's novel *Son of the Thundercloud* re-associates the people with the traditional Indigenous belief system and also re-contextualises Christianity through their Indigenous experience. Rather than drawing a distinction between Christianity and Indigenous beliefs, she explains that there are a lot of similarities between the tenets of the two faiths. The prophecy of the novel is very much connected to Isaiah's prophecy about the saviour. Kire herself talks about how prophecies are important in her novels. Isaiah prophesized the birth of a child who shall become the everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace (Is 9:6-7). The impending birth of the prophesized son is being constantly reminded to the readers throughout the book. What is even more interesting is that the aunts of the boy warned that people will try to hurt him, afflict him with sorrows, say terrible behind his back even though he will save them from all the misfortunes. This is in the same line of Isaiah's "Atonement of Christ" where he said that the Saviour would be despised and rejected, and would be wounded because of our transgression while carrying our sorrow (Is 53:1-12). Here Kire draws a parallel between the stories of her own community with similar stories of Christianity. It is this interconnection of the Indigenous faith with Christian religion that Kire tries to highlight. Kire's work has also addressed the questions of 'faith' through Indigenous knowledge systems, traditions and beliefs, along with the orality and story-telling culture that is prevalent in Nagaland. In the same novel Kire creates a fable-like story that consists of an amalgamation of legends, and myths, droughts and deaths, of revival and heroic feats and of changing times. All the names of the characters are equally significant. Pelevotso was the name given by the grandmother but the parents shortened it to Pele, which means 'faithful to the end'. Pele in the novel also fulfills his destiny. He is a witness and a believer. This is the 'faith' that Kire tries to emphasize again and again. The names of the sisters are also significant. Kethonuo means truth and Siedze means a future full of hope. They wait four hundred years for the promised son to arrive. The name that is given to this son is Rhaliuetuo. It means the redeemer. She says that

Son of the Thundercloud is a story about love and forgiveness and it points to the world beyond this, which is part of the Christian tradition and also has a place in Naga tradition. (Pou 2023, n.d.)

Easterine Kire's deep connection to Christianity plays a very significant part in the novel. The 'Son' of the thundercloud defeats the tiger and offers redemption to the people suffering due to the drought. The Naga faith and the Christian religion intertwine throughout this novel. Kire prefers to use "nativisation of Christianity" instead of synthesis to understand their religious aspects. In this way, the author 're-contextualizes' faith in Indigenous communities. The story of the Heart-stone in

When the River Sleeps was collected by Kire from her hunter friends. The journey of Vilie is the journey of a man who incorporates the traditional knowledge, the respect for nature and spirits, the cultural ethos of a man of the land. Vilie's adventure makes the reader aware of the terrains, the customs, the taboos, the justice system of society, the nettle leaf plantation, the flowers and the animals, the dangers that lie deep in the forest life. Kire in an interview with Veio Pou discussed about the readers of her work. She explains that to her mind she is writing to and for the Nagas. The language she uses might be English but the way she conveys the feelings will make sense to the people about whom she is writing for. The connection that she primarily tries to form is with her people who have suffered a lot. Through Vilie's journey that ends up making his soul more kind and spiritually aware, Kire tries to redirect the minds of the people of her land.

Kire's novels are not just a collection of folklore but they consist of cultural lessons. The 'modern' world has a great impact on each and every community. But restoring the stories, histories, the socio-cultural specificities and faith can help the Naga communities pave their way through these difficult times. Both of the Kire's novels have the idea of 're-birth' present in them. The change of heart in *When the River Sleeps* to the birth of the promised son of the thundercloud, the idea of re-occurrence plays a huge role. It could be understood as a call for the 'renaissance' of consciousness. The novel starts with the retelling of the story of a miraculous birth. But Pele's grandmother also refers that this has happened before and will happen again. So, it is a case of history repeating itself. The novel sets the story at a tragic time when Pele loses his family due to the famine. The whole community is diminished due to the lack of food. Pele decides to leave his village, he and travels towards the 'Village of the Weavers'. On the way, he finds how famine had ravaged the landscape. The earth has cracked due to the drought. He can only see miles of barrenness and no sign of life. It felt as if the colour of the soil had changed to a 'death-grey' colour. The lush green landscape of the mountains now seemed like a desert. When Pele meets two women on his journey, he gets to know that the famine has made everyone abandon this village which has lasted Seven Hundred years. The sisters are four centuries old and they have lived on 'hope' that the birth of the son of the thundercloud will end this famine and their misery.

"Hope, sir, we have been living on hope. Every morning when we wake up, we eat hope, and so we live to see another day", the younger woman said. Her sister asked, "Tell me, traveller, do you have any knowledge of the Son of the Thundercloud? Do they speak of him where you come from?" The question, and their eerie laughter, caught Pele completely off guard and he lied, "No, I have never heard of him". (Kire 2016, 16)

The extraordinary revelation by the three sisters shock Pele. But he has no other option but to believe them. Even amongst this horrific desolation, this hope that was given by their ancestor had kept them alive. They believed in the prophecy that predicted that the birth of the promised boy would bring rain and end this drought. The soil will give birth to saplings. New life would surround them and there would be food for everyone. Pele wonders about the prophecy when the dry land is ravaged by sudden rain. He and the sisters survived the storm in their small hut. Everyone is amazed by the strength of rain. This marks the beginning of a new time in the story. The 'hope' has come to fruition. It is the time for the son of the thundercloud to be born. The sisters start to look younger before Pele's eyes. Soon they met the woman who will be the mother of the 'chosen boy'. Her name is Mesanuo. She got pregnant from a single raindrop. The hero of the novel is going to be born soon after. It is important to understand the significance of the hero in any mythical story. The people of the world are suffering and they need a saviour to rescue them. Keeping in mind the novel's deep connection with the Christian faith, the redeemer must have a heroic arrival. We see that the prophecy was that he would be born to a woman who had lost her husband and seven sons to the 'tiger'. He would grow up to kill the tiger and avenge the death of his father and his brothers. Not only that, he will bring life to the land that was suffering from drought, death and other dangers. So here his birth is also deeply rooted in the cycle of water, rain and life. The use of the stories of were-tigers is significant in the Indigenous communities. The Angami communities believe that the men who change into were-tigers show unusual signs from an early age. They keep this were-tiger ritual as a closely guarded secret. The elders impart these stories as a part of traditional knowledge to the young generation, but is important to notice that they do not share it with any bad intention but rather educate them about their culture.

We do not recommend these practices but we are telling you about them because knowledge is always powerful. That is what the age-group houses are for, to impart knowledge of the natural and the supernatural to you so that you go out into the world with knowledge of both, and not disrespectful of either world as some people are. (Kire 2014, 28)

It is also important that the elders teach the future generation to be respectful of 'both' worlds. The worlds are spiritual and the material worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead. But one also learns to respect other cultures and their beliefs. Disregarding people from different cultures has become a norm. Rather than thinking of 'other' civilizations as barbaric or ignorant, we must respect their beliefs and cultures. This lesson of 'mutual respect' is very crucial in

understanding the Indigenous traditions. In *When the River Sleeps* (2014) we see Vilie's transformation throughout his journey. His heart transcends from the material world to the spiritual world. Kani, an elder man and a community head teaches him a valuable lesson that it is the purity of heart that enables one to catch the river while it sleeps. He warns Vilie about the impending dangers to get the Heart-stone. He had to be a changed man to be successful in his quest. As he states,

If you are grasping at wealth, you are going to lose something that wealth cannot buy for you. You will lose knowledge of the spiritual. And you will lose the power it offers you. That is true power: that is the only power to aspire to because it gives you power over the world of senses and the world of the spirit. (Kire 2014, 96)

At the end of the novel, we find how Vilie's spirit gained superiority with the help of the Heart-stone and he survived on his way back home. Even one of the were-tigers that attacked him at the very start of his journey later comes as his saviour. This growth of mind and spirit enables Vilie to become a rightful owner of the Heart-stone. It is the 'spiritual' renaissance that takes place inside the protagonist. The novel also re-connects the reader to the nature of the Angami territory. The protagonist's journey is a lesson towards acknowledging the traditional faith and relation between the two worlds. It also creates the space for a revival of Spirit which is necessary in contemporary times. In the *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), the day after Mesanuo gets pregnant from the raindrop, she gives birth to the son of the Thundercloud, whom she names Rhalietuo. With his birth, the rain also arrives as prophesized. All the lands that were barren are now filled with new life. A new dawn has eventually arrived and bathed the valley in golden light. Pele leaves his hut to see what is happening outside. He is amazed at the miraculous sights he witnesses along with the people of the village of the Weavers. Young saplings that have appeared overnight. They are tall, straight, and in good health. Their roots have already begun penetrating the ground, absorbing moisture, and securing a location where they had erupted. Everyone rejoices at the infant boy. They are happy that their suffering has now come to an end. When asked about all the new developments by the village headman, Mesanuo answered that

It's called birthing, headman. The earth has birthed trees, rocks, stones, and grain, just as a mother births her offspring. The trees and rocks are the sons of the earth. Take care of them and they will take care of you and your children. (Kire 2016, 35)

Nature gives new life that helps us live on this planet. The earth is the mother and we must take care of her. The taking place of new

life also signifies continuity in the cycle of life and death. Indigenous faith and Christianity come together through the intricacies of these texts. It reflects how the coming together of both can be observed through the stories that lead the characters to the end of their journeys. Authors like Dai and Kire reflect the constant conflicts of life and death and yet try to re-imagine the world through a framework that has made Indigenous life sustainable even today.

9 Conclusion

The research thus points to the agency of nature within the Indigenous community. The points of interactions and the transitions between the 'human, non-human and nature are closely analysed with the help of conceptual tools. The research has tried to focus on how ecological sustainability becomes a key factor in 're-imagining' the community. The Indigenous communities have a very deep connection with the land. Their psychological response with regards to their 'space' and environment' in the novels have been thoroughly examined. Another objective was to critically interpret how transformations are mapped in literature through synchronic/diachronic readings with specific references from Northeast India. The synthesis of multiple faiths, the restoration of Indigenous knowledge and the oral traditions through literature have also been discussed. This research has tried to highlight on how Northeast literature is 're-configuring' the community through ecological concerns today.

The ecologies of life, death and sustainability have been contextualized in the texts through multiple perspectives. The authors discussed above have conveyed their thoughts by providing hints to the readers. The narratives of the communities co-existing in harmony with nature surely indicate to the sustainable environments in which the Indigenous people have been living for so many years. Creation myths, the spirituality of nature, ecological knowledge and consciousness present in the Indigenous communities might suggest alternative methods of forming sustainable ecologies. The mention of dying arts and crafts and the growing lack of storytellers, narrated within the novels urge us to introspect and take action. If the pattern continues, more and more Indigenous languages, traditional knowledge, Indigenous art and oral literatures might be lost. The ecological changes are already affecting the ways of living and earning livelihood. Soon the scarcity of necessary resources might bring a complete collapse to the Indigenous heritage. The Northeast literature is spreading awareness in its own way. The authors are 're-configuring' their novels to accommodate and archive Indigenous knowledge and also voicing their concerns through literature. It is very important to move away from the colonial ideas of environmentalism and

proceed towards a sustainable future keeping in mind the needs of the Indigenous in an inclusive manner. Re-visiting Indigenous literatures and cultures might provide alternative pathways and enable us to form a new vision in the days ahead.

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