

**ECOFEMINISM AND ADIVASI LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR'S *THE MYSTERIOUS AILMENT OF RUPI BASKEY* AND EASTERINE KIRE'S *SKY IS MY FATHER: A NAGA VILLAGE REMEMBERED***

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**Abstract**

*The indigenous community has always been situated outside the paradigm of modernity. The indigene, considered to be the first and original inhabitant of the land, has been perceived as a reluctant subject of development and regarded as a disruptive force in the nation building process. The systematic ravaging of nature and her resources for commercial gains by the colonial capitalist powers led to the exploitation and displacement of this self-sufficient community. In the two works presented in the paper, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* by Easterine Kire, the Santhal and Naga communities are presented through an insider's view. Through these works this paper intends to study the close relationship that these adivasi communities share with nature and the changes that the outside forces of development have on their lives. The identity of the adivasis, especially the women, is interwoven with their ecology. The lives of these adivasi women clearly defined and circumscribed by patriarchal structures within the traditional tribal society, are impacted greatly by these changes. Despite the uniqueness of both the Santhal and the Naga communities as seen in these works, the repercussions of development are the same; they struggle to conserve their basic livelihood and existence.*

**Keywords:** *indigenous, Adivasi, Santhal, Naga, nature, ecofeminism, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, Easterine Kire*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Adivasis also considered as the 'original inhabitants' have always shared a close relationship with nature. They view Nature as sacred and an integral part of their collective identity. When the invasive forces of modernity and development hit this self-sustained community, they were ill- prepared to deal with it. This is more so with the women as most of the tribal societies being patriarchal in nature, they suffer the most under the dual forces of capitalism and patriarchy. This paper attempts an analysis of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* and Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* from an ecofeminist perspective. Unlike other works on indigenous communities that are written by outsiders, the authors Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Easterine Kire belong to the Santhal and Naga communities respectively; the same communities that they portray in their works. The first half of both these works chronicle the unique beliefs, rituals, and societal codes of their communities and the second half is a narrative of the gradual and painful erosion of their worlds. Women play a central role in both these works and there is a clear parallel between the process of modernisation and the systematic decline of the lives of its women protagonists. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section gives a brief introduction about ecofeminism. The second section examines *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, and the third section focusses on *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. In examining these works an attempt is made to look at the rituals and traditions of the tribal societies and their oneness with nature, the role of

women in these male dominated societies and the devastating effects that the external forces of development had on them. This sums up the very premise of ecofeminism which is reflected in the concluding section.

### **ECOFEMINISM**

Since pre-Industrial Revolution times, capitalist forces have unscrupulously exploited nature and land resulting in the devastation of the lives of people who were sustained by nature. The term 'ecofeminism' was first used by the French feminist Françoise D'Eaubonne in the 1970s. Dr Vandana Shiva, an ecofeminist, sees a connection between the oppressive forces of patriarchy which subjugates women and the forces that destroy the environment.

It is no coincidence that the gruesome game of war—in which the greater part of the male sex seems to delight—passes through the same stages as the traditional sexual relationship: aggression, conquest, possession, control. Of a woman or a land, it makes little difference. (Mies and Shiva, 15)

Ecofeminists believe that the liberation of women is interlinked with the liberation of nature.

### **THE MYSTERIOUS AILMENT OF RUPI BASKEY**

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, who won the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar for his novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, through the tumultuous story of the Baskey family, paints a vivid picture of the Santhal community of Kadamdihi, their rituals, practices, their festivities, and traditions. The Santhals follow the Sarna religion and worship nature and its spirits. Their closeness to nature is evident from the names given to the places; Tereldihi, Rupi's village, was named after the terel or the kendu whose leaves are used to roll bidis with, Lowadihi -named after Iowa the fig tree and Kadamdihi, the place where most of the action takes place in the novel is named after the kadam tree.

The Santhal society is patriarchal in nature. 'Amongst Santhals, women's bodies are not considered appropriate vessels to receive gods.' (Shekhar 25) There is constant pressure on women to get married and bear children. Somai-haram and his first wife, Older Somai-budhi had been married for more than a decade but she could not bear a child. She suffered three miscarriages before she finally gave birth; but not before it ended in her bleeding to death. After her death, Somai-haram married the younger Somai-budhi primarily to take care of his infant child. Since it was clear her role was not to procreate but merely to take care of the infant, she was treated like a servant and had no voice in the family affairs. 'This woman is a karma-kuri your father has brought home to cook and clean for you. You must treat her like one' (47)

The first chapter titled 'The Strongest Woman of Kadamdihi' is indicative of the strong and hardworking Santhal woman who toils shoulder to shoulder with men in the fields, manages the household chores and looks after her family at the same time. Rupi was born and raised in a village in the hills and had grown up 'hunting sparrows with slingshots even as she performed the routine tasks expected of any girl in the village'( 2) Her marriage to Sido brought her to Kadamdihi in the plains where life was only slightly easier as compared to the hills. At her in laws' house in Kadamdihi, the entire family would collectively get down to the work of planting rice. Even late into her first pregnancy Rupi would be in the fields with the other women, transplanting rice saplings. The author paints a vivid picture of this rustic woman with her sari and petticoat hitched up to her thigh with splashes of mud on her body and face working in the field with a rounded belly. In fact, she bore her child squatting in the middle of a rice paddy, shin- deep in slush. Merely five days after giving birth she was ready to go back to the fields.

The intricate relationship between women and nature is reflected in the frequent association of nature and women, 'Rupi blushed like a joba-kusum in full bloom'(19) In his recurring dream Somai-haram would see his wife sitting under the dogor tree in the backyard where the tree is in full bloom. This image of Older Somai-budhi sitting contently amid the serenity of nature is a symbol of a woman in perfect

harmony with nature. Best friends Della and Putki found endearing terms to address one another; *Reyar-Baha-Winter Flower*. 'O my friend Winter Flower O my beloved Winter Flower' (49) is how they addressed one another.

The novel is centred around the mysterious ailment that gradually incapacitates Rupi who was once the strongest woman in Kadamdihi. Gurubari who is responsible for sucking the life out of Rupi, came into her life as a friend but 'twined around her like alakjari- the golden vine which latches on to the trunk of a healthy, green tree, sends its roots deep into its heart and, robbing the host of all nutrition, leaves it an empty shell.'(6) Chakraborty quotes Satyen K. Bordoloi who in a review of the novel points out that Rupi's illness under Gurubari's spell represents the subjugation of adivasis under non- adivasi hegemony:

The aboriginal tribals of India birthed their civilization amidst a lot of pain and struggle. Then after, the rest of the civilization and its rival in resources, city-settlers, gave them an illness that was like the alakjari vine which engulfs the tallest, greenest trees of the forest and sucks their hearts out. Now the tribal people, once the strongest in the world, live out their days in the backyard of human consciousness, and their life dissolves into an incomprehensible ruin around them. (Chakraborty 6)

Rupi's travails begin when she moves from the rural Kadamdihi to the industrialized Nitra to accompany her husband Sido who is a school master there. Her journey is symbolic of her transition from her idyllic world to the modern world which eventually paralyzes her entire being. Rupi's glimpses of the wireless tower, the railway power substation, the chimneys and the copper factory, the tarred roads, the uranium mine and the township with storeys one above the other, overwhelms her. At a point in the journey she wished the train would move backwards. Probably sensing her unease her husband Sido asks 'Nitra is not very far now. Are you uncomfortable?' (90)

Sido takes her to majhi's house in Nitra where Bairam master stayed with his wife Gurubari. The majhi's house was divided into two parts; the majhi and his family lived in one half while the other half was given to the two Santhali teachers Bairam and Sido.

Gurubari with her sweet friendly gestures practises 'dahni bidya' and inflicts the disease on Rupi, leaving her physically weaker after each encounter. Gurubari not only entices her husband but also her son Jaipal and ensures that the ailment destroys the intimacy between Sido and Rupi. Rupi is desperate to return to Kadamdihi, 'Take me to Kadamdihi, 'Rupi pleaded. 'Take me. I don't want to stay here.' (141) 'In Nitra, Rupi's enthusiasm sank like a bar of soap in a pond.' (151) The chapter titled 'Fall of the strongest woman of Kadamdihi' marks the collapse of this strong adivasi woman.

Gurubari represents the advent of industrialization in the life of the unsuspecting Adivasi community which slowly and steadily destroys their occupation, livelihood and independence. Just like Rupi, the indigenous people have been made crippled and dependent. Just like the strongest woman of Kadamdihi is rendered helpless and immobile on a cot in the backyard of her house, the adivasis have been alienated from their own lands and the once independent community is now completely at the mercy of the state for their very survival.

### **SKY IS MY FATHER: A NAGA VILLAGE REMEMBERED**

Easterine Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* is the first novel in English by a Naga writer. The novel is an fictional account of the fiercely fought battle of Khonoma (1879-1880) between the warriors of the small Angami village and the British Imperial Army in an attempt to resist the colonial rule of the British and to protect their ancestral lands. The novel spans three generations- Kovi and his sister Vipiano; both lose their spouses early in the story, Kovi's three children, Vipiano's sons Kelevizo and Lato, Kelevizo, his wife Pelhuvino and their sons Rokokhoto and Sato. Through this story Kire unravels the Naga culture, their oneness with their land, their myths and legends, their fierce reputation as the 'warrior village' and their essentially patriarchal societal structure. The Nagas are portrayed as an immensely hardworking tribe who are proud of their culture and would die to protect their independence. Their love and attachment to their land is seen through Levi's experience:

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 had

never known before. I should feel so strongly for a mistress, he mused, smiling to himself. (Kire 737)

There is harmony between man and nature; the rivers ensured that the fields yielded good harvests each year. 'The village had never known a year of famine and want...So it was true what the elders said: If you honour the spirits, they will bless you'(748) They believed that everything in nature possessed a distinct spiritual essence. Their animistic belief is seen when Lato replies to the question posed by his elder brother Levi, that 'man and tiger and spirit were once brothers.'(331) When Keviselie dreamt of a short-tailed gwi, it was interpreted by the elders as a sign of the spirits blessing him.

Community feeling and consideration for one's clan was more important than individual progress as is reflected in the words of a village elder, 'be content with your share of land and fields. People who move boundary stones bring death upon themselves. Every individual has a social obligation to the village.' (496) Teaching was imparted usually by a chosen elder in the evenings at the dormitory through exchange of stories. Each age group had a parent; Levi and the other boys in his age group looked forward with excitement for these community meetings. Kire acquaints us with Naga rituals like the elaborate Feast of Merit ritual to praise the Creator for an abundant harvest. When Kovi's newborn survives but his wife dies, he is forbidden from mourning as it was the strictest of taboos to mourn an unnatural death and none of the tribe members would dare break it. There were genna days when no work was permitted, there were rituals to solicit peace between man and spirit. Vipiano knew how important 'it was to abide by all the rituals, especially the taboos forbidding work.' (284)

Val Plumwood presents a list of binary oppositions where the masculine qualities are juxtaposed with the feminine qualities. Plumwood demonstrates how this dualistic structure of otherness and negation determines the master identity. This is evident in the Naga society where the roles of men and women were demarcated clearly. Women were meant to stick to the matters of their concern like the home and

the family. The men saw themselves as warriors meant to protect their families and the lands from outsiders. Planning for battles was done in secret in the thehou, the community house and women were kept away from it. When Kovi's wife enquires casually about one of the men visiting him, he curtly replies 'Its man-talk. Don't ask after the business of the clan, woman.' (144) Men who would not avenge an attack on their village were spitefully referred to as a woman 'Thenumia.' 'A man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your house and you do nothing about it.' (223) Even teenage boys had their fixed ideas of masculinity which they picked up from the men in the village. This is evident in the teenage Levi scolding his brother 'You're a big boy now, stop sniffing and do a man's job.' (237)

The love for battle sport resulted in the deaths of many of the warrior men which left their widows to fend for the family. Naga women had a tough life managing both the home and work in the fields; Vipiano faced a difficult life ahead after the death of her husband; apart from coping with loneliness, she also had to work for a living and raise her sons. She is compelled by circumstances to adopt a sternness uncharacteristic of her for raising her children, else the clan would find fault with her mothering. The pressure of meeting standards of the clan is immense for womenfolk of the Naga tribe. 'Life had taught her not to be too happy.' (625) Vipiano checked herself every time she felt she had laughed too freely. 'The wind and sun had carved harsh lines on her face, and it was impossible for Lato to imagine his mother as a young girl with an unlined face' (268) However Vipiano considers the sun and rain are the Creator's blessings. Her oneness with Nature is seen in the ease with which she works in the fields embracing the sun and the rain.

Her elder son Levi's first clash with the British colonial forces leads to a painful six years in jail. His perspective when he returns to his village after completion of his term could be viewed as the change in perspective of the Adivasi community after their encounter with the invasive forces. Levi, hardened by jail life, saw his village with new eyes. It was no longer the great village that had so awed him as a young boy."(702) Pelhuvino, Levi's wife is anxious when she hears that 'the whole village is buzzing with



talk of war with the white man'(1081) even as the colonial forces make plans of crushing Khonoma to put an end to their open defiance and stubbornness in yielding to the British administration. During the Angami attack on the against the British forces, G.J. Cawley, District Superintendent of Police paradoxically felt that the attack was justified 'for they had occupied Angami lands, cut down their forests, taxed them and forced them into labour which they hated.'(1241)The villagers bravely sustained the battle for four months but eventually were no match for the numbers of the British army and had to give in. Fearing the reputation of the Angamis, the white man had dispersed the clans of Khonoma, dispossessed the villagers and burnt down their village. 'Even after two days, smoke still rose from the smouldering remains of some of the houses...This was the punishment of a proud people who dared to control their own destinies.' (1452)

A parallel can be seen in the destruction of the land and the health of Vipiano; she succumbs to her prolonged illness. Her daughter in law Peno's struggle in reconciling the traditional views of her elder son Roko and the Western influence on her younger son, Sato is symbolic of the identity struggles faced by the Naga community with the entry of the colonial powers. Rifts are caused within families when some member decides to embrace the white man's religion. Peno's relationship with her husband is strained and they become 'like strangers, coldly courteous to each other,' (1744) until one day he meets with an untimely and accidental death. Peno's dream where she 'saw a great tree of the forest fall to the ground' (1771) depicts the destruction and collapse of the old way of Naga life. The death of Peno ' a healthy woman used to working in the sun and rain and had never been the worse of it'(1884) shows how the destruction of their land by invasive forces can destroy even the strongest woman in the community.

## CONCLUSION

Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy look at ecofeminism as 'based not only on the recognition of connections between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies' but also 'on the recognition that these two forms

of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism, and neocolonialism.’(2) Both the selected works depict how the inroads of modernisation disrupts the lives of the indigenous communities. Both the protagonists, Rupi and Vipiano who are considered strong, hardworking women gradually lose their vitality as they move away or are displaced from their lands and natural surroundings.

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