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Dynamic Hill Adaptation: A Cultural Ecological reading of Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father*

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Abstract

Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father* is deeply grounded in Naga hill life and the application of the idea of Steward's cultural ecology analyses the core cultural features closely connected to survival and economic life, depicting the hill environment as not just a geographical setting but as the living presence that shapes people's way of living, work, community administration and spiritual beliefs. Through the framework of cultural ecology, this paper examines how the cultural practices and social organization in the hill communities are adaptations to their physical surroundings. Further the paper also focuses on the religious transformations that occurred in the existing ecological beliefs showcasing the dynamic nature of Angami culture rooted in their hill environment.

Key words: adaptation, cultural core, ecology, hill life, dynamic

Introduction

The novel *Sky Is My Father*, depicts the life of Angami people of Merhu clan in the Khonoma village of Nagaland. Through characters like Levi, his mother Piano, and his brother Lato, the novel traces the community's hard work, especially in the fields, and strong kinship which are central to life in the hilly terrain. The fierce nature of warriors in the village, and their raids and revenge are linked to honour, guided by deeply ingrained beliefs and customs. Levi's life of imprisonment by Britishers to again finding a peaceful place in the village reflects the tension between tradition and modernity. The arrival of Christian missionaries under colonial influence draws the attention of younger generations like Levi's son toward new beliefs and education. This resulted in the emotional conflicts within families evident in Levi's anguish over the path his son chose. By the end, the novel shows a society in transition, capturing the difficulty of cultural change from older to new ways.

Methodology

This study is grounded in the theoretical perspective of cultural ecology which analyses how human culture interacts with and adapts to their environment. Though humans are biologically different they have successfully adapted to the environments with their flexible cultures. This framework also challenges the western notion of humans as superior to nature and perceives both as interconnected. Julian Steward, an American anthropologist's major work *Theory of culture change* laid the foundation for the theoretical framework cultural ecology. Steward is of

the view that culture adapts to its environmental conditions. In times where the studies in cultural evolution lost its significance, Steward was determined to revive it in accepted ways.

Steward's (1955) primary arguments were that (1) cultures in similar environ-

ments may have similar adaptations; (2) all adaptations are short lived and are

constantly adjusting to changing environments; and (3) changes in culture can

elaborate existing culture or result in entirely new ones (Sutton and Anderson 22).

Societies never undergo the same fixed development as each culture is dynamic and flexible and the societies develop in different ways to get adapted to its environmental circumstances. His idea of cultural types included patterns which studies why certain cultural features develops in particular places. These similarities don't grow by chance but by the groups getting adapted in comparable ways to similar environments. Steward's method of cultural ecology involves studying how people produce and survive in their environment, studying their behaviors related to those survival methods and how environment plays a crucial role in shaping culture. He is of the view that any culture develop with respect to its environmental and historical conditions. The cultural type of patrilineal band which traces the descent through father found in different societies such as the Bushmen of South Africa, Australian Aboriginal groups, the Tasmanians, and some Shoshonean groups explains that these similarities developed because these groups adapted in similar ways to similar environmental conditions (Steward 321).

Steward clearly differentiates cultural ecology from other types of ecology by showing how culture creatively adapts to their environments. The ecological studies which focused on studying the relationship between species and its environment were later extended to involve human beings as well as they are also the part of web of life. Humans are distinct from other organisms in a way as they have culture which affects their interaction with the environment. Studying about the adaption to one's environment helps in better understanding of the reasons for different societies devel-

oping different cultural patterns. Cultural ecology shows the adaptations of human culture to their environment. According to Sutton and Anderson, cultural ecology links environmental resources, knowledge, and work patterns that people use to access and utilize them (qtd. in Das et al. 367). It explains how the environment, technology and human behavior work together to shape cultural development. Cultural ecology mainly focuses on the cultural core wherein not all parts of culture are equally connected. The primary features like social, political, religious patterns, work organization, food production and land use which are connected to survival comes under this core where environment has the strongest influence.

Literature Review:

Existing studies in the select novel mainly focus on postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives tracing the identity, culture and history of Nagaland. These studies analyzed the impact of British colonization foregrounding the text as a counter narrative to reclaim the indigenous voices and restore the suppressed history of Angami community. The existing research revolves around themes like resistance, cultural loss with particular attention to their oral tradition that is under extinction in the face of colonial disruption. Such studies also acknowledged the bond between human, nature and spiritual world. Despite these various approaches, the framework of cultural ecology has not been systematically applied to analyze the novel. Though the importance of nature has been recognized, the idea of how ecological conditions influence culture and social structure has not been explored. This where the idea of cultural ecology by Julian Steward offers a significant contribution. By incorporating the specific context of hill ecology this study adds a profound contribution that is missing in the existing research, foregrounding culture as an adaptive way of life to the ecological conditions of Merhu clan of Khonoma village. .

Textual Analysis

Cultural ecological reading to *Sky Is My Father* helps shows the how the Naga hill society portrayed in the novel is not merely a scenery but an active participant of forming cultural identity, community structure and worldview. Each society differ in its way of adapting to the

environment with respect to its complex or simple nature. A small hunting and gathering communities' survival efforts are not the same as that of modern industrial towns which is connected to a larger town. The cultural core which is the part of culture connected to survival economy is largely based on complex technology and long historical development.

The Naga community's reliance on farming based on jhum cultivation patterns, forest materials, seasonal cycles and village life highlights their adaptation to a hilly terrain. Their hill ecology with dense forest and limited plains and dependence on rainfall shows how their environment influences social patterns. Their community bond, respect for land and collective agricultural labor are not random cultural traits but are ecological adaptations required for survival in the hilly terrain. The interconnection between nature, human and the spiritual world are part of ecological adaptation. Their rituals, oral traditions and moral codes to keep up the social harmony and protect land belong to the cultural core. The disturbance in the traditional ecological balance due to modernization and external political forces can be interpreted under the framework of cultural ecology which sees any cultural transformation in the text as a response to ecological and economic change.

The three main ideas are examined under Steward's idea of Cultural ecology. First is the relationship between the technology and environment. Here the technology refers to the tools to produce food and other basic needs to survive in the environment. With the advancements in the society it develops new needs for survival adaptations. Secondly it examines the survival activities which shape behavior and social organization by determining whether people live in small or larger groups based on the way people find food and resources. Thirdly it examines how these survival patterns affect the whole culture.

The Angamis village life of Khonoma depicted in the novel *Sky is My Father* clearly reflects the idea of cultural ecology. The warrior culture of Khonoma can be understood as ecological adaptation rather than as a matter of pride and aggression. Life in the hilly terrain with limited cultivation requires strong territorial defense and clan solidarity. "The key principle of their right living is to avoid excess

in anything and be content with their share of land and fields" (Kire 30). Their resistance against Britishers highlighted not only their political independence but also their urge to protect land, resources and identity which is the part of cultural core as land is connected to their subsistence and survival. The Britishers rule disrupted the ecological balance bringing a shift in Khonoma's sociocultural integration from an autonomous warrior village to a colonially governed settlement. The process of modernization and the later adoption to Christianity altered the cultural core, revealing how evolving historical and technological forces reshape ecological adaptation.

The community house thehou's social structure is shaped by ecological realities. In a hilly society like Kohima community cohesion and collective decision making is essential for defense and survival. Their institution of thehou trained young men in warfare and social responsibilities to defend land, keep up clan honour and manage resources which are crucial for survival in a hill ecology. The moral codes to respect elders and opting for communal living enhances their social stability. Emotional expressions are regulated by cultural norms and their warrior acts to prove strength are all fundamental in a terrain where physical endurance and courage are valued survival traits. The cultural transmission of ecological knowledge is highlighted through the instructions of Vipiano to her sons Levi and Lato regarding cultivation. This indicates that cultivation in the hills demands deep understanding of soil and also demands coordinated labour.

The belief that animals and humans coexist regulate the hunting practices ensuring smooth balance with their ecology. Rituals like Feast of Merit reflect the idea of subsistence patterns influencing social structures which is an example of cultural ecology. The feast's reliance upon the agricultural surplus and livestock are successful adaptation to hill ecology. Their kinship bonds and social hierarchy are strengthened through sharing of meat and exchanging gifts among the clan members. Here the economic productivity is directly linked to political status and social prestige and the feast is not only religious but also ecological in the sense it redistributes resources within the community and reinforces social integration. As Steward claims larger economic

productivity paves way for higher social integration. Similar environmental conditions like hilly terrain, shifting cultivation, insufficient resources and forest ecology leads to certain patterns like cohesive clan framework, cooperative labor, warrior traditions, ritual feasts, and stewardship of the land. The cultural core remained linked to ecological adaptation irrespective of the new historical changes by colonialism and Christianity. The novel traces how Angami society's social organization, rituals, warfare, agriculture, and spirituality are not isolated traditions but interconnected responses to hill ecology. The principles of cultural ecology like technology, environment and social structure persistently impact one another within a living cultural system. Kire's narrative depicts how these core features develop from the way people adapt to their natural environment of hill ecology. The ancestral wisdom is passed down to the younger generation in the male dormitory and through storytelling. These stories and ecological wisdom teach young men how to behave in forests and wilderness areas. Forest are both a source of food and danger in a hill environment and their belief systems are adaptive to create caution calling for collective action, which increase survival in a risky ecological setting. These beliefs are the part of cultural core which regulate human behavior in nature.

The festivals in their clan are tied to agricultural cycles. Strict Genna days where work and outsiders are restricted is observed to conserve energy and maintain spiritual balance with land and crops. Under the framework of cultural ecology these rituals are not just religious acts but also regulate agricultural production and social unity. Marriage rituals involving spears, chickens, salt, and blood blessings unite domestic life with land and ancestors. House construction with community reflects collective labor, necessary in a hill farming economy. These rituals act as core institutions shaped by subsistence needs. The geisu ruotho ritual to treat Siezo's illness again reinforces ecological thinking. His sickness is believed to be linked to an "unclean" water spot at Dzünha. In ecological terms, this could represent real environmental risks like contaminated water. These kind of ritual brings back the balance between humans and environment. Though such beliefs about spirits may not be real it helps people to be cau-

tious about certain places promoting safer ecological mechanism. Families depend on agricultural as their survival in hills requires continuous labour. During the festivals of Sekrenyi and the rhoutho ritual, children symbolically sow seeds to reinforce the centrality of farming.

The frequent raids in the mountainous range of Angami society and their warfare were traditional strategies for protecting resources and maintaining prestige. Their guerrilla tactics and the use of hilltop forts, fire missiles, bamboo defenses, and strategic retreat highlight adaptation to mountainous terrain. With the arrival of Britisher's mountain guns, rockets, and superior firepower, the ecological balance shifts making the traditional warfare ineffective against industrial military technology. The peace treaty followed by the destruction of Khonoma prioritizes survival of women, children and food supplies to ensure survival rather than continuing resistance. This shows a shift from warfare to survival strategy. According to Steward cultures change when old patterns no longer ensure survival. The peace agreement here is not their weakness but an ecological adaptation to overwhelming force reshaping the core values of bravery and honour to new realities.

Sato's acceptance of Christianity is not the complete neglect of his tribal worldview but an idea of integrating new ideas into old frameworks. Steward's theory allows us to perceive this cultural syncretism not simply as replacement, but as adaptation demonstrating culture as not static but as an evolving response to environmental, political, and spiritual pressures. The rituals, traditions and conversions are continuous adaptation to changing ecological conditions. As Steward puts forth, their culture evolves from the interaction between people and their environment, and transforms when that environment changes.

Levi's opposition to Sato's conversion shows how religion is interconnected with the ecological and social system of the village. With people like Levi, traditional beliefs like sacrifices, genna days and ancestral workshop are not only spiritual but a crucial part in maintaining balance with nature, ancestors, health, agriculture, and clan unity which inturn manages disease, farming cycles, hunting success,

and social order. In such circumstances, Sato's conversion was only perceived as betrayal threatening the ecological balance which shows how core cultural features arise from adaptation to the hill environment.

Social customs operate as adaptations to keep up order in a tightly knit ecological setting. In a small hill community like Khonoma any violence would disturb their harmony and social order. Penyu's exile, a seven year banishment reflects ecological and social regulation which becomes a cultural mechanism to regain balance, prevent revenge cycles, and secure the community's stability.

Their oral narratives are part of their cultural adaptation to preserve the ecological wisdom from ancestors. Ecological thinking is reflected in the every aspect of their survival including warfare and rituals. The arrival of Christianity which doesn't fit into their ecological thinking created tensions shifting their focus from a cultural type which relied upon environmental adaptation to universal faith leading to a different level of cultural integration. Overall the Angami Naga culture portrayed in the novel developed as a constellation of core features like rituals, exile, warfare customs, settlement patterns, oral traditions, and clan structures which are shaped by adaptation to the hill ecology. This clearly reflects the principles of cultural ecology.

Discussions and Findings:

The idea of cultural ecology to the select novel brought in the active phase of nature that shapes human life rather than as a passive background. Through the analysis under the framework of cultural ecology it has been revealed that the cultural practices, ecological wisdom, settlement patterns, social order, rituals and traditions exhibited an adaptive response to the specific conditions of hill ecology. Shifting away from the destructive impact of colonization, this study highlighted how the environment shapes human culture and in turn how the community actively adapts to their surroundings. The key findings from the textual interpretations through the lens of cultural ecology are as follows:

The bond between the people of Merhu clan and their hilly terrain reflected the core principle of cultural ecology that culture and environment are interdependent.

The way of life which includes food habits, warrior nature, settlement patterns, community bond, cultural practices, social organization and rituals which are the core cultural features are all adaptive mechanisms to hill ecology.

The preservation of ecological wisdom including resource management, farming cycles, respect for nature exhibits sustainability.

Nature as an active participant shaping people's live rather as a mere background.

The ecological practices in the hilly terrain that sustain the cultural practices of Angami community are subjected to gradual transformation in the long run. This shows the dynamic, flexible nature of culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper analyzed the unique way of life in the hills through the framework of cultural ecology. All the core cultural features that are mentioned in the text developed as adaptations to their hill ecology demonstrating the principles of cultural ecology, where environment and culture are closely interconnected.

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