



A Reading of Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* as an Anthropocene Discourse

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Abstract

The article explores Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* as a pretext to represent anthropocene along with its causes and impacts in the north-east region of India and thus, representing the whole India. The novella records the causes of anthropocene – deforestation, over-exploitation of natural resources and unsustainable consumption practices along with the impacts – extreme drought, climate change and socio-cultural and habitat losses, in an allegorical way through the narrative which is assisted by myths and archetypes of indigenous culture of the region. The representation of the anthropocene narrative is significant in Indian literary discourse in order to create awareness and promote sustainability. The article locates *Son of the Thundercloud* as an Indian anthropocene discourse. The article states the importance of understanding the indigenous culture and the role it plays in establishing sustainable growth.

Keywords: Indian Anthropocene; Son of the Thundercloud; Indigenous people; North-east India; myth and environmental issues

1. Introduction

Anthropocene claims urgency as it is an epoch division started by the impacts of human as a species on the physical environment of earth. The planet that belongs not only to human but nevertheless it was altered by their influencing presence. The anthropocene working group panel members' official proposal of 2021 positions the epoch to the mid twentieth century which is an interdisciplinary research group (Chakrabarty, 2018). Involvement of an interdisciplinary field of study is important as the aim of the anthropocene research is to communicate with a broad public and to evoke empathy, urgency which comes out of humanistic training and practice. Social sciences and humanities discusses the moral, ethical relations between human and non-human others. This is essential to assist and accompany the technological innovations and research in anthropocene and climate change. Anthropocene in India can be traced to the industrialisation and globalisation along the mid twentieth century. The shift towards westernised environmental philosophy accompanied by the technocratic developmental projects provided the current attitude of the mass - naturalising the exploitation of natural resources, precarious lifestyle and so on. This interwoven carbon based economy is in contrast to the sustainable development which is the need of the hour. The dispositions concerning the fixation of anthropocene epoch are widely contested and despite that the causes are almost similar throughout the world. Misra discussed the advent of anthropocene epoch in India. He points out Atherton's five causes which are "Industrialisation,

population, new materials, biogenic changes and changing water ways” (646). The drastic shift in consumption by the mid twentieth century through industrialisation and globalisation in India influenced the above mentioned causes which engulfed the major causes of anthropocene within itself.

Easterine Kire’s *Son of the Thundercloud* represents the idea through a blend of myth and folk elements with the global concern about the environmental crisis – through her artistic capacity. A sense of urgency runs throughout the novella inferring loss of faith and hope which needs to be restored to understand the relationship between man and nature. This is represented allegorically through the characters, landscape and the mythical references.

Kire employs allegorical interpretations to represent the natural world. On surface, it is a simple mythical story of a widow whose husband and seven sons had been killed by a tiger. A prophesy has been made that a lady will give birth to the son of the thundercloud who will not only avenge the death of his family members but will also liberate his kinsmen from the Spirit Tiger. This is symbolic of apprehending climate change and its impacts. The story has its genesis in traditional knowledge which is a repository of ancient wisdom encoded in mythic folklores. Additionally, the novella through the journey of Pele, the protagonist, explores the humanistic attitudes and historical semblance of the anthropocene epoch. The concerns stated in the work are realistic and analogical to the contemporary scenario of the environmentalism. The events in the work are connected with the ecological background and human relations.

This article discusses the following causes of anthropocene – deforestation, over-exploitation of natural resources and unsustainable consumption practices; impacts – extreme drought, climate change and socio-cultural and habitat loss – as represented in the narrative. The prophetic words of Pele’s grandmother about the son of the thundercloud avenging his family seems irrelevant to the people who are not involved in the story. The tiger killed a family and an heir will avenge them. Nevertheless, the presence of an invincible spirit tiger and its killing spree posits as an awareness to the people about the encroachment of the forest destroying the habitat of the tiger. The spiritual presence denotes that nature will reclaim and every tribal village will be endangered despite the cause of the environmental destruction. The prophesy is for everyone, to act as a community and the call for a spirit warrior who is imbued with the meaning of protecting the humans from environmental degradation is a plea towards reclaiming the position of the human species.

The journey of Pele to meet the warrior is symbolic of the causes and the impacts of anthropocene. Pele, the protagonist, was born in a small village, Nialhuo which is set in the western hills with forests and rivers surrounding it. He is named by his grandmother as Pelevotso which means faithful to the end. His parents were good people who want to continue to live their life as their ancestors had, they did not want their son to be enchanted by any adventurous feel as to make him leave the village, as his grandmother encouraged. They were afraid that their village will abandon like their neighbouring two ghost villages. In the first village there was abundant harvest and the people did not care to conserve the grains. As they left half of the harvest to rot in the land, it led to the swarming of their fields by mice and other insects and they were forced to leave their village. This teaches an effective lesson that one should learn to conserve beside the abundance. The second village had clan fights as the members of upper clan killed a man from the lower clan in a drunken brawl, which resulted in a riot war and people were forced and had to abandon the village. This represents the improper management of the resources resulting in overconsumption of resources and lack of sustainable practices

Though the village of Nialhuo was careful, the impacts of other sustainable habits were faced by them. A famine struck in the village and many children and women were killed, and Pele lost his son and his wife soon his parents and relatives. As a result he left the village to travel without any definite plan. “The drought killed off the children first, and then many of the women, one by one” (Kire 14). This statement presents the view that the women and children are susceptible to the higher risk of any disaster. Women are made solely responsible when it comes to feeding the children and the family and in times are famine, they have to take the responsibility of starving themselves for the sake of children. Physical weakness cannot be taken as a justified variable for the diverse risk. This is a proper analogy

of the unequal distribution of the impacts of anthropocene on the marginalised people despite taking negligible part in causing the environmental degradation. In the collaborative research agreement around the theme of anthropocene, Bill Pritchard commented that

Communities in India will be among those to feel the effects of climate change first. With 66 percent of the population living in rural areas, and an estimated 25 percent of these people living below the poverty line, we know these factors will make them more vulnerable to the impact of climate change. (2019)

Kire provides a possible solution from the tribal cultural values of helping each other in need and surviving together as a community instead of imbalanced cause and impact ration of environmental problems. Pele after travelling for two weeks reached the base of a black mountain, when he reached a human settlement and people were ready to share their food with him though they were facing hard times. This recounts the significance of incorporating individual tribal and indigenous wisdom when assessing the environmental issue of each areas and integrate the native knowledge thought system in decision making and problem solving. This is mostly ignored in many policy frameworks around environmental management or disaster.

Pele continues his travel to the village of the weavers where famine has not visited. He crossed half way of the mountain which lay between him and the village of weavers. On his descent, he sees two sisters who seem as if spirits, so thin and worn. That was a village Nouné where everything was destroyed because of a drought which lasted for seven hundred years, the sisters claim that the elder one is four hundred years and the younger sister is twenty years old. They have lasted in the long surviving on hope, waiting for the son of the thundercloud. They give shelter to Pele and give their account of the village of the weavers, which has moved to south east from earlier time. They show him the stars and he experiences their movement as if it pulls the earth along to the east. Though he did not believe at first as he woke from the night, he realized everything was true and at the edge of the land there was a deep chasm cutting the earth. Pele inquired if this is some sort of preparation for the coming of the son of the thundercloud and learned the purpose. While they were talking a thunder rouse and the sisters were astonished and excited, as they have not seen rain in their lifetime. Pele repaired the roof to withhold the rain and thus postponed the journey towards the village of weavers. The storm slammed the houses of the village blowing them, the sisters and Pele stood under the piece of roof he repaired. The chasm that was opened the last took all the water inside preventing the village from flooding. Once the rain came to an end, they came out to see the soil which was softened, and the seed started to sprout. The two women were like children enjoying the rain, and they looked younger and beautiful. “that the latter rain will replenish the earth and all its creatures (Kire 33).”

They hurried to leave to the village of the weavers. They crossed the mountain without any difficulties with a steady pace that astonished Pele. Mesanuo was pregnant with a single drop of rain which fell on her on her way into the house. She was the tiger widow who has lost her husband and seven sons to the tiger. Into the night as Pele heard the crying of the baby and realized the birth of the child, and the valley of the village of the weavers which was treeless was now filled with trees and rocks and stones. The headman of the village asked Pele about the sudden transformation of the village, and Pele answered them, that Mesanuo gave birth to a son. The headman was surprised to that prophesy coming true – a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son, and he will save the people. She names her son Rhalietuo which means redeemer, the name was given by a man in her dream. Rain started to visit the village again, the people prepared the soil for sowing. After a heavy rain, the river down below the village started flow again. The children of the village had never seen the river as it was dry for many years. Though the river was big and prone to flash flood and landslides, there was still hope as the river started its course again.

Mesanuo’s recounts the story of how famine killed many more that just lives, “... the famine of stories and songs, they killed all the storytellers who tried to tell them about the Son of the Thundercloud. They killed hope” (Kire 48). This connotes the destruction of the traditional sustainable and communal

lifestyle and culture. This curbing of the native knowledge and sustainability led to the spread of consumption based lifestyle eventually paving way to anthropocene. Mesanuo's explanation to Pele about the past events resonates the impacts of lifestyle variation on the people and environment. She stated that in the valley drought has not lasted long as it was in the mountaintop. When she first came, the earth was green, and there was food everywhere, so no one tilled their fields, and there were story tellers who went all over the land telling stories spreading joy and hope. They were all killed by the dark ones, as the stories transformed people's mind and they sought to be 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. The dark ones are a group of people who have been around since before the drought. They thrive on fear and greed. They build fences and they want the trees and rivers and stars to bend to their will. The drought came as a result of people rejecting the joyful stories and accepting the dark stories. Pele understood that the drought will return as long as mankind lives on earth, when people are overtaken by greed and hurt one another.

This is an allegorical idea as environmental problems are related to over exploitation of natural resources without giving any room to replenishment. The dark ones can be kept parallel to the capitalist who reap benefit from resources without maintaining any kind of balance in the ecology.

This is further depicted in the redemption of the village from the drought and how the people become unsustainable without heeding to the indigenous cultural notions of sustainability. This represents a historic event of the socio-cultural belief system that led to the advent of anthropocene.

Before the drought, the river was the source of the life and people called it Mother, as no one comes empty handed after going into the river. "... fathers brought home river fish and fed their families. On the river banks, women often caught frogs that they took home to clean and dry over the wood fire, to be used as a medicinal broth...the river was alive again and the fish leaped in the waters, and the sound of the river was constant... we call her mother because she gives us food: fish, frogs, herbs and water" (Kire 54-55). The villagers rejoiced the rain and started to build granaries to store the harvest as it was obvious. After working hard in their fields, the villagers along with the headman gathered in Mesanuo's house to see the prophetic birthing that saved the village. She looked graceful, no older to the marvel of the village women.

As their hunger was over, prodigious activity took over the village. They always found food. Pele decided to stay in the village, and so he purchased a land from the headman and build a house. The village had enough grains as they followed the custom – not eat the seed grains even in times famine. The villagers enjoyed their work and worked all day earnestly. After a period of time, the villagers were sacrificing for the tiger thinking that it protected the fields keeping the other animals. They were against the idea of killing the tiger and fulfilling the prophecy. Pele pretended to not hear them, and came out. He thanked for their hospitality, he asked about the tiger that killed Mesanuo's sons and husband, the hostess was sarcastic and said that if there was any it would be caught in the community hunt next month. For the first time, Pele felt unsafe in the village. He expressed his fear to Mesanuo and she said that it was the deed of the spirit tiger and its spell will be broken after it was killed. She presented a spear point the sisters gave for Rhalie to kill the tiger.

On the day of community hunt, Pele and Rhalie went to dense forest to experience before the community hunt. They both hid in the separate tree and they saw a tiger moving towards them. Rhalie hesitated but he was firm knowing that that was the tiger that killed his father and brothers. He jumped in front holding his spear and the tiger pounced on him right then. He pointed the spear and it pierced the heart of the tiger and it was killed. Pele came down to see and Rhalie fainted in his arms.

Pele came to the village along with Rhalie carrying the head of the tiger announcing it in a grand fashion. The old men according to the custom arranged for Rhalie to follow the rituals of tiger killing. He has to cook using different pot in a new fireplace for five days. Mesanuo was happy as the prophecy was fulfilled. On the next community hunt, the elders and the young men grouped separately. The young

men should chase the animals towards the hill where the elders waiting would hunt them. First they chased a stag and it was successfully killed, then they saw a deer and shouted in all direction to confuse it, Viphru, the headman's son said that they should kill the deer without waiting for the elders and struck a spear into the heart of Rhalie who was hiding behind the tree. He also instigated the boys saying that it was spirit taking a form of a boy and everyone threw spears and Rhalie collapsed and fell dead. Viphru still convinced the other boys saying that it was the work of a spirit and they had no hand in it. On wondering about the doubtful silence, Pele along with the headman went down to find the bloodied body of Rhalie surrounded by the boy. They expressed innocence but Pele could see that Viphru was cunning. Pele carried the body refusing others help.

Mesano saw Pele who was carrying a burden and realized that it was her son. She insisted on placing the body in the middle of the village and show the people what their sons has done to her son. Rhalie killed the tiger and saved the village but they killed him. Out of guilt of involving her son with prophesy and with the spite on the ungrateful villagers, Mesano leaves the village and dies in the mountains where her sisters once lived.

The death of Rhalie is allegorical in the sense of natural environment. People suffer from famine out of their exploitation and are not aware of their deed. Though the rain come transforming the land, they do not consider to plant trees or balance the consumption rather they become greedier and tend to over exploit the abundance they get. Mesano said that the people were under the influence of the spirit tiger (Kire 121) as they were sacrificing for it. Once the tiger is killed the bad influence will be gone. Once the tiger is killed the people still harbour evil intention, greed and jealousy. This proves the innate evilness in humans which demands more than their want and result in over exploitation. As a result of killing Rhalie the son of the rain, allegorically the rain itself, and the village sees devastation of unseasonal rainstorm. This situation suits that of the climate change, when rain is damaged due to deforestation and exploitation resulting in global warming and the cycle of problems, it results in climate change which consequently results in devastation out of season rain, storms, and cyclones and so on.

2. Conclusion

The representation of the issues concerning anthropocene is empathetic and simple. The readers are able to relate to the characters and events in the narrative. Biswas compares the *Son of the Thundercloud* with the Amitav Ghosh's criteria for representing the climate emergency in the *The Great Derangement*. He comments that Kire's narrative fits the description of a climate change fiction. Hence, the narrative can be identified as an anthropocene discourse.

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