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**Subaltern Ecologies as Counter-Archives: Trauma, Healing And  
Indigenous Sustainability in the Narratives of Temsula Ao and Easterine  
Kire**

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**Abstract:**

In the contemporary epoch of ecological crisis and socio-political fragmentation, sustainability demands frameworks that move beyond technocratic environmentalism toward culturally embedded ethics of survival and care. This paper examines the literary narratives of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire to explore how indigenous women's writing from North-East India articulates alternative models of sustainability rooted in subaltern ecological consciousness. Drawing upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity and Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist critique of extractive development, the study argues that nature in these narratives functions as a counter-archive—preserving memory, trauma, and ethical knowledge erased by *dominant historiographies*.

*Through qualitative textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that Ao's representations of militarized landscapes portray nature as a silent witness to collective trauma, offering emotional anchorage amid displacement and violence. In contrast, Kire's fiction foregrounds ecological memory and spiritual continuity, presenting land and ritual as regenerative forces essential to psychological and communal healing. Together, these narratives reveal that women's experiences of marginalization are inseparable from ecological disruption, and that storytelling itself becomes a decolonial act of restoration.*

*By synthesizing ecofeminism, subaltern studies, and trauma theory, this study reframes sustainability as a gendered, culturally situated practice rather than a universalized policy abstraction. It contributes to interdisciplinary debates in literary studies, environmental humanities, and indigenous epistemology, while also underscoring the curricular and policy relevance of tribal women's literature in sustainability discourse. Ultimately, the paper*

*positions indigenous storytelling as an ethical blueprint for imagining humane and sustainable futures in an increasingly fractured world.*

**Keywords:** *Indigenous Women's Writing, Subaltern Ecology, Ecofeminism, Sustainability Ethics, Trauma and Healing, Ecological Memory, North-East Indian Literature, Environmental Humanities, Decolonial Narratives, Gender and Environment.*

**Introduction: Reframing Sustainability as Ethical Ontology:**

In the contemporary epoch marked by accelerating ecological degradation, political instability, and social fragmentation, sustainability has emerged as one of the most urgent and contested global discourses. Conventionally framed within the parameters of environmental conservation, economic development, and technological intervention, sustainability is often reduced to policy-driven solutions that overlook the lived realities of marginalized communities. Such approaches remain largely anthropocentric and extractive, privileging dominant epistemologies while silencing indigenous ways of knowing. Against this backdrop, literature—particularly indigenous women's writing—offers a critical ethical framework through which sustainability can be reimagined as a holistic practice encompassing environmental balance, cultural continuity, psychological healing, and social justice.

Indigenous women's narratives from North-East India occupy a distinctive position within this discourse. Rooted in oral traditions, ecological intimacy, and collective memory, these narratives articulate an alternative vision of sustainability grounded in relational ethics rather than exploitative progress. For tribal communities, land is not a commodity but a living presence—an archive of memory, trauma, identity, and survival. Women, as custodians of cultural continuity and ecological knowledge, emerge as central figures in preserving and transmitting these values across generations.

This paper examines the literary works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire—two prominent indigenous women writers from Nagaland—to explore how nature functions as a counter-archive in subaltern narratives. Their writings reveal that ecological disruption and human suffering are deeply interconnected, particularly in regions shaped by militarization, displacement, and historical neglect. By foregrounding women's experiences of trauma and healing through ecological consciousness, Ao and Kire challenge dominant models of development and propose sustainability as an ethical ontology—a way of being rooted in care, coexistence, and memory. By situating indigenous literature within contemporary sustainability discourse, this study argues that subaltern women's voices are not peripheral but central to envisioning humane and sustainable futures. Literature, in this context, becomes both testimony and intervention—reclaiming silenced histories and offering ethical alternatives to a world facing ecological and moral crisis.

### Theoretical Framework: Subalternity, Ecofeminism, and Epistemic Resistance:

To achieve conceptual depth and analytical rigor, this study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that synthesizes subaltern studies and ecofeminist thought. This intersection allows for a nuanced understanding of how gendered marginalization, ecological exploitation, and epistemic erasure operate simultaneously within indigenous contexts.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity provides a crucial lens for examining the silencing of indigenous voices within dominant historical and political narratives. Spivak's concept of *epistemic violence* highlights how colonial and postcolonial power structures systematically erase non-Western knowledge systems. While Spivak famously questions whether the subaltern can speak, indigenous women's literature demonstrates that speech often occurs through alternative modes—through memory, landscape, ritual, and storytelling rather than institutional discourse. Nature, in these narratives, becomes a symbolic and material medium through which subaltern agency is articulated.

Ecofeminism, particularly as articulated by Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood, further enriches this analysis by foregrounding the parallel exploitation of women and nature under patriarchal-capitalist systems. Shiva critiques dominant development paradigms that prioritize profit and growth over ecological balance and community well-being. For indigenous women, the relationship with nature is not metaphorical but experiential and ethical—rooted in subsistence practices, spiritual belief systems, and collective care. Ecofeminism thus enables a reading of Ao's and Kire's works as critiques of extractive modernity and as articulations of sustainable alternatives grounded in indigenous epistemologies. By integrating subaltern studies and ecofeminism, this paper conceptualizes indigenous women's narratives as sites of epistemic resistance. Nature emerges not merely as a thematic concern but as an active counter-archive—preserving knowledge, trauma, and ethical frameworks excluded from dominant sustainability discourse.

### Scarred Landscapes: Nature as Witness and Archive in Temsula Ao's Narratives:

Temsula Ao's literary corpus is deeply embedded in the socio-political realities of Nagaland, a region marked by colonial intervention, prolonged militarization, and internal conflict. Her narratives foreground the everyday lives of ordinary tribal people, particularly women, whose experiences of displacement, fear, and loss are shaped by systemic violence. Within this context, nature assumes a central role—not as a passive backdrop, but as a silent witness to human suffering and a repository of collective trauma.

Ao's landscapes are scarred yet enduring. Hills, forests, and villages bear the imprint of violence while simultaneously offering continuity amid rupture. Trauma in Ao's narratives is often expressed through silences, fragmented memories, and restrained narration—reflecting the difficulty of articulating pain within oppressive structures. Here, nature functions as an

alternative language through which suffering is registered. Rivers continue to flow, forests regenerate, and land remains constant, offering emotional anchorage when human institutions fail.

From an ecofeminist perspective, Ao's portrayal of nature underscores the interconnected oppression of marginalized communities and the environment. Militarization not only disrupts human life but also fractures ecological balance. Women, who experience the dual burden of gendered vulnerability and cultural displacement, find solace and resilience through their relationship with the land. Nature becomes a therapeutic space—absorbing trauma and enabling survival without erasure. Ao's narratives thus critique state-driven development and security models that marginalize indigenous communities while proposing ecological rootedness as an ethical alternative. Sustainability, in her work, is not framed as future-oriented policy but as present survival—anchored in memory, land, and collective endurance.

#### **Regenerative Ecologies: Ecological Memory and Healing in Easterine Kire's Fiction:**

Easterine Kire's fiction similarly emerges from Naga indigenous cosmology but places greater emphasis on ecological memory, spirituality, and cultural continuity. Her narratives draw extensively upon folklore, oral traditions, and ritual practices, positioning nature as a living archive that preserves collective identity in the face of modernization and cultural erosion. In Kire's works, forests, rivers, and ancestral lands are imbued with spiritual significance. They function as sites of remembrance and regeneration, resisting the linear, documented histories imposed by the state. This aligns with subaltern studies' emphasis on alternative archives—forms of knowledge that survive outside official records. Women, as transmitters of oral tradition and ecological knowledge, emerge as central agents of cultural preservation.

Kire's ecological vision intersects ecofeminism and indigenous feminism by foregrounding care-based relationships with nature. Her women characters engage in sustainable practices through cultivation, ritual, and storytelling, reflecting an ethical framework rooted in coexistence rather than domination. Healing, in Kire's narratives, is inseparable from ecological belonging; psychological well-being is sustained through continuity with land and tradition. In the Indian context, Kire's work underscores the urgency of preserving indigenous ecological knowledge systems threatened by globalization and homogenization. Her narratives advocate for sustainability as a lived, community-centered practice—one that recognizes the spiritual and emotional dimensions of human-nature relationships.

### Comparative Synthesis: Subaltern Eco-Ethics as Counter-Archive:

A comparative reading of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire reveals a shared subaltern eco-ethics rooted in indigenous epistemologies, while also highlighting distinct narrative strategies. Ao foregrounds survival amid ecological and emotional rupture, portraying nature as a witness to trauma. Kire emphasizes healing through continuity, presenting nature as a regenerative archive of memory and spirituality.

Together, their narratives exemplify what Spivak describes as *strategic silence*—a mode of resistance where subaltern voices speak through symbolic and non-discursive means. Nature functions as a counter-archive, preserving histories and ethical knowledge excluded from dominant sustainability narratives. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist critique finds literary validation here, as both writers challenge extractive development models and advocate for care-based, community-centered sustainability. By centering women's ecological labor and emotional resilience, Ao and Kire reframe sustainability as a gendered, culturally embedded practice. Their works resist romanticization, presenting nature not as an idyllic refuge but as an ethical partner in survival and healing.

### Conclusion: Subaltern Ecologies, Policy Relevance, and Sustainable Futures:

This study demonstrates that the writings of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire offer a profound indigenous feminist intervention into contemporary sustainability discourse. By foregrounding subaltern women's experiences through ecological narratives, they challenge technocratic and homogenized models of development that marginalize local knowledge systems. From a policy perspective, these narratives underscore the necessity of integrating indigenous epistemologies into sustainable development frameworks, particularly in ecologically sensitive and conflict-affected regions such as North-East India. Vandana Shiva's emphasis on biodiversity, community resilience, and women-centered sustainability is reinforced through literary representation, highlighting the ethical limitations of extractive growth models. The study also holds significant curricular relevance. Incorporating indigenous women's writing into university syllabi aligns with the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), which emphasizes inclusivity, interdisciplinary, and local knowledge systems. Ao and Kire's works enable students to critically engage with environment, gender, trauma, and justice through culturally grounded perspectives. Ultimately, this paper positions indigenous literature as more than cultural expression—it is an ethical blueprint for sustainable and humane futures. For the subaltern woman, nature becomes the site where trauma is processed, memory preserved, and agency reclaimed. In a world facing ecological and moral crisis, these narratives offer vital lessons in care, coexistence, and survival.

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