

THE MORAL LIFE OF NATURE: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN KOKBOROK LITERATURE

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical conception of nature in Kokborok literature, with particular attention to oral traditions and contemporary writings of Tripuri communities in Tripura. It argues that Kokborok literary imagination represents nature not as a passive resource but as a morally responsive and relational entity. Forests, rivers, animals, and hills are portrayed as ethical agents that regulate human conduct through reciprocal relationships of care, restraint, and accountability. Drawing upon folklore studies, translated Kokborok poetry, and indigenous epistemologies, the study situates Kokborok literature within broader debates in environmental ethics, particularly biocentrism and ecocentrism. The article further explores how contemporary Kokborok writers extend traditional ecological ethics to critique modern development, displacement, and ecological degradation. By foregrounding indigenous moral cosmologies, the paper contributes to environmental humanities and indigenous literary studies.

Keywords: Kokborok Literature, Environmental Ethics, Indigenous Knowledge, Oral Tradition, Ecological Criticism

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation and ecological crises have generated renewed scholarly interest in indigenous knowledge systems and their ethical engagement with nature. Indigenous literatures across the world offer alternative moral frameworks that challenge anthropocentric paradigms dominant in modern industrial societies. Kokborok literature, rooted in the cultural traditions of Tripuri communities of Tripura, provides a significant yet underexplored site for examining indigenous environmental ethics.

Kokborok literary expression, ranging from oral narratives to modern poetry, articulates a worldview in which humans exist within a network of moral relationships involving forests, rivers, animals, and spiritual entities. This article argues that Kokborok literature conceptualizes nature as a moral being, capable of response and ethical regulation. Such representations resist instrumental views of nature and affirm a relational ecological ethic grounded in coexistence and responsibility (Debbarma, 2009; Jamatia & Debbarma, 2024).

2. Theoretical Framework: Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Worldviews

Environmental ethics provides useful conceptual tools for analyzing indigenous literary representations of nature. While anthropocentrism prioritizes human interests, biocentrism and eco-centrism recognize intrinsic value in non-human life forms and ecological systems (Taylor, 1986; Leopold, 1949). Indigenous worldviews often align more closely with eco-centric ethics, emphasizing relationality, reciprocity, and moral restraint.

Scholars of indigenous studies argue that oral traditions function as repositories of ecological knowledge and ethical norms (Berkes, 2012). In the context of Kokborok literature, ethical principles are embedded in narrative forms rather than abstract philosophical treatises. Folktales, ritual songs, and myths transmit environmental responsibility through storytelling, reinforcing moral limits on human action toward nature.

3. Nature as a Moral Being in Kokborok Oral Traditions

Oral traditions form the foundational layer of Kokborok literature, and within these narratives, nature is consistently endowed with moral agency. Forests, animals, rivers, and hills are portrayed as ethically responsive entities that participate in regulating human conduct. Moral order, in this worldview, extends beyond human society to encompass the natural and spiritual realms.



Ethnographic studies of Kokborok folktales document a recurring belief that forests are sacred spaces governed by unseen spirits, where ethical behaviour determines human survival (Debbarma, 2024). Acts such as reckless hunting, unnecessary tree felling or disrespect toward animals are believed to invite misfortune, illness or social imbalance. As Jamatia and Debbarma (2024) note, suffering in Kokborok narratives is rarely accidental; it is narratively linked to ecological transgression.

These stories function as moral instruction, teaching restraint and accountability toward the environment. Nature is not silent or inert but capable of response, rewarding care and punishing excess. Such representations underscore an indigenous belief that environmental balance is inseparable from moral conduct.

4. Forests, Hills, and Rivers: Ethical Landscapes in Kokborok Literature

In Kokborok literary imagination, landscapes are not neutral backdrops but ethically charged terrains. Forests symbolize sustenance, protection, and ancestral continuity. Hills represent endurance and historical witness, while rivers embody nourishment and cyclical renewal. Together, these elements form a moral geography that shapes human identity and responsibility. Translated Kokborok poems included in *An Anthology of Kokborok Poems* repeatedly associate deforestation with cultural erosion. The loss of forests is depicted not merely as ecological damage but as a moral rupture that destabilizes cultural memory and ethical balance (Debbarma, 2009). Similarly, hills are portrayed as silent witnesses to displacement and historical change, reinforcing the idea that landscapes retain moral memory (Jamatia & Debbarma, 2024).

Rivers occupy a sacred position in Kokborok belief systems. Folklore studies record rivers as moral spaces governed by norms of respect and restraint, where pollution or neglect is viewed as ethical violation (Debbarma, 2024). Through elegiac imagery and reflective tones, modern Kokborok poetry mourns environmental loss while implicitly critiquing development paradigms that disregard indigenous ecological values.

5. Animals, Spirits, and Ethical Kinship

Animals in Kokborok literature frequently appear not as inferior beings or mere resources but as moral equals and spiritual companions within a shared ecological order. Oral narratives, ritual songs, and modern literary expressions consistently portray animals as participants in a reciprocal moral relationship with humans. Hunting, for instance, is rarely represented as an act of domination; rather, it is framed as a morally regulated necessity, governed by ritual apology, restraint, and gratitude. Ethnographic studies of Kokborok oral traditions note that the taking of animal life is traditionally accompanied by ritual acknowledgement, reinforcing the belief that animals possess intrinsic worth and spiritual presence (Debbarma, 2024).

Such narrative motifs function as ethical instruction, emphasizing that survival does not confer moral superiority. As Jamatia and Debbarma observe, Kokborok folktales often associate indiscriminate or excessive hunting with misfortune or social imbalance, thereby discouraging exploitation and excess (Jamatia & Debbarma, 2024). This narrative logic aligns closely with indigenous bio-centric ethics, wherein non-human beings are understood to possess moral status independent of their utility to humans (Taylor, 1986). Animals, within this worldview, are not expendable commodities but co-inhabitants of a morally structured environment.

Beyond animals, Kokborok literature and oral belief systems frequently invoke nature spirits associated with forests, rivers, hills, and specific ecological zones. These spirits function as guardians of ecological balance, embodying ethical limits on human action. Folklore studies record a widespread belief that forests and water bodies are inhabited by unseen entities whose role is to protect the integrity of the natural world (Debbarma, 2024). Disrespect toward these spirits, through acts such as reckless tree felling, pollution of rivers, or violation of sacred spaces, is believed to result in illness, crop failure, or communal discord.



In literary narratives, these spirits symbolize moral accountability, reminding humans that ecological transgression carries ethical consequences. Their presence reinforces the idea that nature actively responds to human behaviour rather than remaining passive or indifferent. As Berkes argues, such beliefs reflect indigenous ecological knowledge systems in which spiritual cosmology and environmental ethics are inseparably linked (Berkes, 2012). By embedding moral restraint within narrative and belief, Kokborok literature cultivates an ethic of care grounded in coexistence rather than control.

Together, the representation of animals as moral beings and nature spirits as ethical guardians challenges anthropocentric hierarchies that privilege human interests above all else. Instead, Kokborok literature affirms a relational worldview in which humans are ethically accountable to a broader community of life. This ethical kinship underscores an indigenous ecological philosophy that prioritizes balance, reciprocity, and respect—values increasingly relevant in contemporary discussions of environmental sustainability and ecological justice.

6. Contemporary Kokborok Writing and Ecological Critique

Contemporary Kokborok writers extend traditional environmental ethics into modern contexts marked by displacement, land alienation, and ecological degradation. Poems and essays increasingly address the impact of state-driven development projects, deforestation, and capitalist extraction on indigenous life worlds. Nature becomes a site of resistance and a witness to historical injustice.

The forest, once a moral home, is reimagined as a threatened entity requiring ethical defence. This literary turn reflects an evolving environmental consciousness that blends ancestral wisdom with contemporary ecological awareness. By articulating environmental loss as both ethical and cultural crisis, modern Kokborok literature offers a powerful critique of development models that marginalize indigenous ecological relationships.

7. Conclusion

Kokborok literature presents a rich ethical vision in which nature is morally alive, relational, and deserving of respect. Through oral traditions and contemporary writing, it articulates an indigenous environmental ethic grounded in reciprocity, restraint, and coexistence. These literary representations challenge anthropocentric paradigms and contribute valuable perspectives to environmental humanities and ecological ethics.

By foregrounding indigenous moral cosmologies, Kokborok literature demonstrates that ecological sustainability is inseparable from cultural survival and ethical responsibility. Recognizing such indigenous voices is essential for rethinking human–nature relationships in an age of ecological crisis.

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