
The Sacred and the Wild: Eco-spiritual Dimensions in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

Dr. Prafulla Kumar RaiAssistant Professor, Department of English, Deenanath Pandey Government Women PG College Deoria, UP India

Article Received: 25/09/2025**Article Accepted:** 23/10/2025**Published Online:** 25/10/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.10.435

Abstract:

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) is a profound exploration of the interrelationship between the human and the natural world, deeply rooted in the spiritual ecology of Naga cosmology. This paper investigates the eco-spiritual dimensions of the novel through the lens of contemporary ecocriticism, deep ecology, and indigenous epistemologies. Drawing upon the theories of Lawrence Buell, Arne Naess, Cheryll Glotfelty, Vandana Shiva, and Graham Huggan, this study situates Kire's work within the broader framework of Indian ecocritical fiction. Kire's narrative challenges the anthropocentric paradigms of modernity by presenting nature not as a passive backdrop but as a living, sentient presence imbued with spiritual vitality. Through the protagonist Vilie's journey to find the "sleeping river," Kire redefines the human-nature relationship as reciprocal and sacred. The novel's fusion of ecology and spirituality exemplifies an indigenous environmental consciousness that transcends Western dichotomies of nature and culture. This paper argues that *When the River Sleeps* articulates an eco-spiritual vision that integrates ethical, ecological, and metaphysical dimensions, offering a model of sustainable coexistence grounded in indigenous wisdom and respect for the sacredness of the wild.

Keywords: Easterine Kire, Ecocriticism, Eco-spirituality, Deep Ecology, Indigenous Cosmology, Postcolonial Environment

Introduction

Easterine Kire, one of the most celebrated voices from Northeast India, occupies a distinct position in Indian literature through her sustained engagement with Naga culture, memory, and spirituality. Her works often bridge oral traditions and modern storytelling, invoking the living landscapes of Nagaland as repositories of cultural and ecological knowledge. *When the River Sleeps* (2014), which won The Hindu Literary Prize, stands as a remarkable instance of ecological fiction that blends myth, folklore, and environmental consciousness. The novel follows Vilie, a lone hunter, who embarks on a metaphysical journey to find a sleeping river that is believed to grant visions and spiritual strength. The river

becomes both a literal and symbolic source of life, connecting the material and the spiritual, the human and the natural.

In the context of contemporary Indian fiction, Kire's narrative emerges as a counter-discourse to Western representations of nature. It reclaims indigenous ecological wisdom that sees the environment as animate, interconnected, and spiritually potent. As Cheryll Glotfelty defines, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xviii). Kire's text extends this relationship into the spiritual realm, suggesting that ecological balance is not only a material concern but also a moral and sacred responsibility.

This paper examines how *When the River Sleeps* articulates a Naga eco-spiritual worldview, one that challenges the commodification of nature and reasserts the sacred dimensions of the environment. Through the lens of ecocriticism and indigenous ecological thought, the study explores how Kire transforms the forest, the river, and the mountains into spiritual entities that shape human destiny. Her narrative demonstrates how ecological harmony is inseparable from spiritual integrity—a vision profoundly resonant with both deep ecology and traditional Naga cosmology.

Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism and Indigenous Ecology

Ecocriticism as a field emerged from the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s, shaped by thinkers like Rachel Carson and later theorized by scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Greg Garrard. It seeks to interrogate how literature represents nature and how such representations influence our understanding of the environment. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell argues that literature can reorient human consciousness by revealing "the moral and aesthetic dimensions of our relation to the nonhuman world" (Buell 7). This idea is central to Kire's project, which blends moral ecology with spiritual insight.

Arne Naess's theory of "deep ecology" also illuminates Kire's vision. Deep ecology challenges the anthropocentric worldview and proposes an "ecocentric" ethic that recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings (Naess 95). Vilie's respect for the spirits of trees, animals, and rivers reflects this worldview. His journey is not one of conquest but of communion, where survival depends on attunement to the natural rhythms of the wild. Nature in Kire's world is not inert; it is alive, watchful, and often sacred.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, as developed by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, adds another layer of complexity. In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, they argue that environmental degradation in postcolonial societies is intertwined with histories of colonial exploitation and cultural erasure. Kire's narrative subtly reflects this connection. The intrusion of modern logging, deforestation, and the loss of traditional beliefs signify not just ecological decline but cultural disintegration. The forest, in Kire's novel, becomes a symbol of both ecological and spiritual memory—a space resisting colonial and capitalist encroachments.

Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist perspective further enriches this framework. In *Staying Alive*, Shiva argues that women and indigenous communities possess an alternative ecological rationality based on care, reciprocity, and sustainability (Shiva 42). Kire's female spirits—guardians of rivers, trees, and mountains—embody this life-affirming energy. Their presence reminds Vilie, and by extension humanity, that ecological harmony depends upon reverence for the sacred feminine embedded in nature.

Textual Analysis: The Sacred and the Wild

At its core, *When the River Sleeps* is an exploration of the sacred geography of the Naga world. Vilie's journey through forests, hills, and villages is a pilgrimage across a landscape suffused with spirit and consciousness. Every natural element—trees, rocks, and streams—possesses a personality, a spiritual agency that demands respect. This animistic worldview aligns with indigenous cosmologies across the world, where the environment is understood as a living network of relationships rather than an external resource.

Nature as a Sentient Presence

The novel opens with the forest as a living, breathing entity that tests and shelters Vilie. Kire's descriptive prose blurs the boundaries between the human and nonhuman realms: "The forest was awake, watching him, aware of his every movement." Such moments evoke what Buell calls the "environmental imagination"—a narrative capacity that allows readers to perceive nature as a moral and imaginative presence (Buell 25). The forest is not passive; it is a participant in Vilie's spiritual evolution. It becomes his companion, guide, and sometimes his adversary, demanding humility and endurance.

The Sacred River

The "sleeping river" at the heart of the novel represents the intersection of the natural and the supernatural. It is believed to bestow visions to those who find it, symbolizing enlightenment and renewal. The river's sleep signifies both tranquility and latent power—a metaphor for the cyclical rhythms of nature. When Vilie dreams of the river, he is drawn into a spiritual quest that transcends material desires. His journey becomes a process of ecological initiation, where he learns to interpret signs, honor spirits, and align himself with the will of the natural world.

Interconnectedness and Indigenous Ethics

The Naga cosmology depicted in the novel affirms the principle of interconnectedness. Human beings are part of a continuum that includes animals, plants, and spirits. When Vilie kills a wild animal, he offers prayers and rituals to appease its spirit—a practice that underscores an ethical relationship with nature. This resonates with Naess's deep ecology, which asserts that self-realization involves recognizing the self as part of the larger web of life (Naess 98). Kire's narrative transforms this philosophy into lived experience through Vilie's humility before nature's mysteries.

The Sacred Feminine and Ecofeminism

Kire's novel also embodies ecofeminist dimensions. The female spirits who inhabit the forests—such as the Tiger Spirit Woman and the river goddesses—represent the creative and nurturing aspects of the earth. Their power is ambivalent: they protect those who respect the land but destroy those who exploit it. Vandana Shiva's concept of "feminine principle" (Shakti) as the source of ecological balance finds resonance here. Kire's depiction of the

sacred feminine challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric notions of dominance. The novel's spirituality is thus inherently ecological and feminist—affirming care, reciprocity, and reverence over control.

Dreams, Spirits, and Ecological Consciousness

Dreams function as bridges between the physical and the metaphysical worlds. Vilie's recurring dream of the sleeping river symbolizes the call of nature's wisdom—an invitation to recover harmony with the cosmos. As in indigenous epistemologies, dreams are not mere psychological events but revelations from the natural world. They guide moral behavior and sustain ecological ethics. The novel's dream motif thus reinforces Kire's eco-spiritual message: that to live well is to listen to the voice of the wild.

Eco-spiritual Vision and Indigenous Cosmology

Easterine Kire's eco-spiritual vision emerges from her deep rootedness in Naga oral traditions. Her narrative enacts what Graham Huggan terms a "re-enchantment of the world"—a literary recovery of wonder and respect for the nonhuman (Huggan 12). The novel resists Western binaries of civilization and wilderness, reason and myth, positioning indigenous cosmology as a source of ecological wisdom.

The sacredness of the wild in *When the River Sleeps* lies in its moral agency. The natural world is not merely symbolic but ethical—it rewards purity and punishes greed. When Vilie confronts dangers in the forest, his survival depends not on physical strength but spiritual attunement. His reverence for nature contrasts sharply with those who violate its sanctity, such as poachers or exploiters. Through this contrast, Kire constructs an ecological ethics grounded in indigenous spirituality, where the environment commands moral respect. Furthermore, Kire's prose revives oral storytelling traditions that embody ecological consciousness. The oral narrative mode itself is ecological—it preserves collective memory, transmits ethical codes, and connects humans to their landscape. By transforming oral myth into written narrative, Kire reclaims a cultural ecology threatened by modernity and globalization.

Conclusion

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* offers a powerful reimagining of ecology through the lens of indigenous spirituality. The novel transcends the boundaries between nature, myth, and religion to articulate an eco-spiritual consciousness that is both deeply local and universally resonant. Through the journey of Vilie, Kire demonstrates that ecological harmony arises from humility, reverence, and interdependence. The wild is not an external wilderness to be tamed but a sacred realm that sustains life and meaning.

By integrating ecocritical theory with indigenous cosmology, this paper has shown that Kire's fiction contributes significantly to the growing field of Indian ecocriticism. Her narrative aligns with Buell's environmental imagination, Naess's deep ecology, and Shiva's ecofeminism, while offering a distinctly Naga perspective rooted in oral and spiritual traditions. *When the River Sleeps* stands as a testament to the capacity of literature to heal the rift between humanity and the earth—a reminder that in respecting the sacredness of the wild, we rediscover the sacred within ourselves.

References

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.
- Kire, Easterine. *When the River Sleeps*. Zubaan, 2014.
- Naess, Arne. "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement." *Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1973, pp. 95–100.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, 1988.
- Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." *Iowa Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1978, pp. 71–86.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004.
- Warren, Karen J., editor. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Indiana University Press, 1997.