
A Critical Analysis of Myth, Legend and Identity Politics in Easterine Kire's Fiction

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Abstract

This paper analyses how, in Easterine Kire's fiction, myths and legends are central to preserving and asserting Naga identity. The study argues that Kire's use of oral traditions and legends is not decorative but crucial in constructing cultural, spiritual, and political dimensions. Focusing on *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*, the analysis clarifies that myths serve to instruct in ethical conduct, promote ecological awareness, and foster communal solidarity within the Naga community. It contends that Kire intentionally employs these narratives to reposition indigenous knowledge as a means of resisting marginalisation, reconstructing Naga self-representation, and foregrounding cultural agency. Thus, the study aims to show that Kire's fiction revitalises Naga identity by integrating traditional myths as active agents of cultural continuity and political assertion.

Keywords: Naga identity, myth, legend, oral tradition, indigenous epistemology

Introduction

Easterine Kire is regarded as one of the most significant contemporary indigenous writers from Northeast India, and her fiction foregrounds Naga history, culture, and worldview. Born in Nagaland and primarily writing in English, Kire has produced a distinguished body of work. Her novels include *When the River Sleeps* (1999), *Sky Is My Father* (2000), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2002), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2005), and *Bitter Wormwood* (2010). In addition, she has written short stories and essays. Kire's writings receive acclaim for reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems, preserving oral traditions, and addressing the ethical, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of Naga life. Through her fiction, she examines themes of identity, communal cohesion, ecological stewardship, and

moral responsibility. With this work, Kire firmly positions herself as a central voice in contemporary indigenous literature.

Myths, as symbolic narratives, convey universal truths and human experience, often blending history, customs, beliefs, and folklore. The term itself originates from the Greek *muthos*, which originally denoted oral narration. While Homer used it to indicate storytelling rather than fiction, Plato described it as “something not entirely devoid of truth but predominantly fictional” (Cuddon 71). Building on these roots, modern scholarship often interprets myths as dynamic social phenomena, viewing them as tools for communicating cultural, psychological, or symbolic truths. For instance, Northrop Frye views myth as a structural principle of literature, Freud regards it as a symbolic expression of unconscious desires, and Roland Barthes interprets it as a communicative system that conveys ideology, values, and social norms. Collectively, these perspectives reveal myth as a multifaceted concept—a source of sacred truth, a literary device, and an ideological instrument—demonstrating its enduring influence on culture, thought, and society.

Legends, by contrast, consist of traditional narratives rooted in the recent past and combine historical facts with imaginative or symbolic elements. The term comes from Middle English *legend*—*an adaptation of Old French and Latin legere*, meaning “to read.” In recounting the deeds of heroic figures or significant events, legends preserve communal memory and reinforce social values. William Bascom defines legends as “prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today” (Bascom 4). Likewise, Sandra Dolby Stahl describes legends as “traditional narratives, usually set in the relatively recent past, that are told as if they are true” (Stahl 98). Taken together, these definitions demonstrate how both myths and legends shape collective memory, help establish origins, and reinforce communal values; in this way, they contribute to social identity and cohesion.

In Kire’s fiction, myths and legends are not mere literary devices but vital instruments for constructing Naga identity and asserting political consciousness. In *When the River Sleeps*, the hunter Vilie undertakes a mythic quest inspired by the sleeping river, encountering forest spirits, weretigers, and supernatural beings that guide his ethical and moral choices. Similarly, in *Son of the Thundercloud*, Pele learns of ancestral prophecies and legendary figures whose stories link human action to ecological responsibility and communal well-being. Through these narratives, Kire illustrates how myths and legends preserve collective memory, assert ancestral authority, and sustain Naga identity, particularly in contexts marked by colonial disruption and ethnic marginalisation. As Ralte observes, “The Nagas are a people without writing until the latter part of the 19th century. These people...depend on their myths and legends... Kire demonstrates that the Nagas were not a primitive people but a people guided by a strong belief system” (Ralte 216). Oral traditions

form essential frameworks for social behaviour, ritual practice, and collective worldview. Shikhu observes that cultural and religious myths significantly influence Naga society by explaining creation, the universe, the animal world, and the spiritual realm (as cited in Sebastian 2012). Kire draws upon these traditions to articulate moral responsibilities, cosmological understanding, and communal values. In her novels, myths and legends are not mere backdrops but structural elements that shape ethical conduct, social cohesion, and a distinct Naga identity. They are dynamic instruments for cultural continuity, political assertion, and the preservation of indigenous memory. Thus, Kire's literary practice demonstrates that myths and legends function as active tools for cultural continuity, moral guidance, and political assertion. By integrating these narratives into her fiction, she strengthens Naga ethnic identity, reinforces communal bonds, and foregrounds the enduring relevance of indigenous knowledge in shaping social, ethical, and political consciousness.

Objectives of the Study:

The researchers have formulated the following objectives to guide the study:

- To examine how Easterine Kire integrates myths and legends in her novels to construct and negotiate Naga ethnic identity.
- To analyse the role of oral traditions, folklore, and narrative strategies in shaping communal memory, ethical frameworks, and cultural continuity among the Nagas.
- To explore the intersection of myth, legend, and identity politics in the socio-cultural and historical context of Nagaland, highlighting their significance in sustaining indigenous heritage and asserting communal agency.

Methodology of the Study:

This study employs a qualitative literary research methodology. It combines textual analysis with interpretive approaches to explore cultural, ethical, and political aspects of Naga identity. Primary data are drawn from Easterine Kire's novels *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*. These works were chosen for their strong focus on myth, legend, and oral traditions. Close reading and thematic analysis are applied. This allows for examination of how narrative strategies convey Naga cultural values, cosmological understanding, and communal identity.

Secondary data are collected from scholarly books, journal articles, edited volumes, and other critical literature. These sources cover folklore, myths, legends, oral traditions, identity politics, and Northeast Indian literature. They provide contextual and theoretical grounding for interpreting Kire's narrative techniques and the cultural significance of myths and legends.

The study employs a thematic-analytical approach to identify recurring motifs, narrative structures, and symbolic representations of myth and legend, situating them within the historical, cultural, and political landscape of Nagaland. The method allows for a detailed examination of the interconnections between literature, oral tradition, and identity formation,

emphasising the role of storytelling as a medium of cultural continuity and political expression.

Discussion: Myth, Legend, and Identity Politics in Easterine Kire's Fiction

When the River Sleeps offers a compelling depiction of how myth shapes and reinforces Naga cultural identity. In the opening stages of the novel, Vilie, an Angami Naga hunter, emerges from a dream connected to the legend of the “sleeping river.” Over time, this dream becomes a consuming obsession, driving him to undertake a journey in search of the river and the magical heart-stone at its centre. This dream serves as a mythic call, linking Vilie’s personal quest to a collective cultural imagination deeply rooted in the Naga oral tradition. Throughout his journey, Vilie encounters mythical beings such as weretigers, widow-spirits, and deceptive forest spirits, all intricately linked to Naga folklore. These encounters dissolve the boundary between the material and spiritual realms, demonstrating a worldview in which myth actively shapes perception, behaviour, and ethical decision-making. As Shelmi Sankhil observes, “His adventures are not aimless; rather, they are meant to lead him, with the aid of the heart stone, to an enlightened awareness of his situation and make the most appropriate choice in a given situation” (Sankhil 18).

Kire’s narrative portrays a world in which no clear distinction exists between the tangible and the supernatural, reflecting the profound entanglement of Naga life with folktales, spiritual belief, and everyday experience. These myths provide both ethical and cultural frameworks, offering guidance and stability, while simultaneously challenging the dominant narratives that reduce Northeast India to a region defined primarily by conflict and violence. By foregrounding a landscape rich with daily life and remarkable spiritual imagination, Kire demonstrates that myth is not mere entertainment but a moral and cultural lens through which social norms and ethical responsibilities are understood. As Daftuar (2015) suggests, these myths function as reflections on the ongoing struggle between good and evil, providing moral clarity and shaping collective consciousness.

Within Kire’s novels, myth also functions as a powerful political instrument. In the Naga context, myth conveys ancestral wisdom, spiritual understanding, and communal ethics, shaping not only cultural but also political consciousness. Through Vilie’s story, Kire fuses Naga mythic traditions with spiritual cosmology, creating enduring expressions of inherited memory and communal identity. The actions of divine figures such as Terhoumia and Kepenuopfu reinforce the inseparability of human conduct and spirituality within a structured sacred framework, asserting Naga identity while legitimising social and political authority. By embedding these narratives in everyday life, Kire demonstrates how myths preserve a sense of shared belonging and collective responsibility, which are essential to maintaining community cohesion and asserting indigenous agency.

Jan Vansina’s insight that “Oral traditions are documents of the present, because they are told in the present. Yet they also embody a message from the past; they are expressions

of it. They represent the past in the present. One cannot deny either the past or the present in them" (Vansina xii) resonates deeply in Kire's narrative. Her novels illustrate how oral narratives and myths link ancestral wisdom to contemporary Naga identity. The heart-stone myth, central to *When the River Sleeps*, embodies both supernatural power and moral responsibility, illustrating that authority in Naga culture is interpreted as spiritual stewardship rather than domination. Vilie's ethical approach to the heart-stone contrasts sharply with Zote's desire for revenge, which ultimately leads to her destruction, demonstrating that harmony with nature and moral integrity define Naga spiritual and cultural identity. Mishra (2018) notes that the Nagas view nature as a sacred partner rather than a resource to be exploited, situating land, forests, and spirits within a moral ecology that demands respect and humility. Kire's narrative reinforces this understanding, connecting mythic storytelling with ethical and ecological responsibility.

Myth in Kire's fiction is not only a cultural or spiritual device but also an instrument of resistance. Drawing on postcolonial perspectives, the practice of reclaiming indigenous storytelling challenges the distortions imposed by colonial narratives. *When the River Sleeps* achieves this by reinterpreting myths that were often exoticized or sensationalised by outsiders. For instance, the Tekhumiavi, or Tiger-Man myth, is reframed to emphasise kinship, ecological balance, and interconnection, rather than violence or savagery. These myths challenge colonial binaries, such as the division between civilised and savage or rational and spiritual, validating indigenous epistemologies while reinforcing communal agency. The depiction of age-group houses, where youth are educated in both "the natural and the supernatural... so that you go out into the world with knowledge of both" (WRS 28), further illustrates the link between traditional pedagogy, ethical-spiritual formation, and social governance, ensuring continuity of communal values and authority. According to Lalthansangi Ralte (2023), "Easterine Kire writes about the virgin soil of the Naga Hills and how the land is taken by a sojourner from distant lands. The wisdom of ancestors and storytellers is brought to light as they are the ones who have lived longer than others and continue to live on through their stories" (Ralte 216).

Joseph Campbell's Monomyth theory, or Hero's Journey, provides a useful framework for understanding myth-based narratives, identifying the stages of Departure, Initiation, and Return (Campbell 23). Although widely applied to Western literature, Campbell's theory offers insight when adapted to Indigenous narratives. In *Son of the Thundercloud*, Kire blends myths and legends into Pele's journey, grounding the story in Naga ways of knowing. Pele, orphaned by famine, encounters the four-hundred-year-old sisters and learns of the prophecy regarding the Son of the Thundercloud, whose birth will restore fertility to the land. Through these myths, natural events are explained via the supernatural, simultaneously offering ethical guidance and reinforcing collective memory. As Charles Chasie observes, "It is our identity through a set of beliefs and practices that sets

us apart from all others and makes us unique... The solidity of our character depends almost entirely on our culture and value-system" (Chasie 259).

Kire consistently reinforces the primacy of oral tradition in Naga society. In her article *Should Writers Stay in Prison*, she observes, "Naga society was and continues to be a highly oral society" (Kire 273). This foundational belief shapes her fiction, where myths and oral narratives preserve Naga identity, maintaining cultural memory, moral guidance, and ethical norms. Her fusion of magical realism with ancestral storytelling demonstrates that restoring Naga identity requires a return to these oral roots. In *Son of the Thundercloud*, ancestral myths and legend's structure Pele's journey, showing how myths guide human behaviour, moral decision-making, and communal cohesion.

Pele's experiences underscore how myth preserves Naga ethnic identity. Upon reaching the abandoned village of Noune, destroyed by famine, he witnesses human suffering: "newborn babies died because their mother's milk dried up and there was nothing else to give them" (ST 19). This suffering is framed mythically when he meets the two sisters who survived for four hundred years, sustained by hope alone: "every morning when we wake up, we eat hope, and so we live to see another day" (ST 20). Their survival over a seven-hundred-year famine exemplifies how myths conserve emotional strength, ethical resilience, and communal memory. The prophecy of the Son of the Thundercloud further demonstrates that myths operate as frameworks for understanding natural phenomena, transmitting ancestral wisdom, and maintaining cultural continuity.

Kire also illustrates the ecological dimensions of myth, which are central to Naga identity. Human actions are directly linked to environmental consequences, as shown when a village is destroyed by field mice after taboos are ignored—"not one house or granary had been spared" (ST 13). Similarly, clans whose violence led to the desecration of their village demonstrate how myths serve as moral and ecological warnings. Unusual natural phenomena, such as stars moving "like an orchestral dance" (ST 24) or a sudden bottomless chasm, are explained through mythic logic: "The stars do it sometimes" (ST 27). Such narratives illustrate a worldview in which the spiritual and natural worlds are intertwined, reinforcing ethical and ecological principles within the Naga cultural framework.

The miraculous birth of the Son of the Thundercloud exemplifies how myth links life, land, and spirituality. When Mesanuo touches a raindrop, giving birth to a child, the environment transforms: rain floods the land, trees sprout overnight, and the village becomes fertile—"Young saplings...had sprouted up overnight... healthy and straight and tall" (ST 40). Mesanuo explains, "The earth has birthed trees, rocks, stones, and grain... Take care of them and they will take care of you" (ST 46), highlighting the ecological ethics at the heart of Naga identity. Kire also illustrates the contestation of myth. When the headman refuses to accept the miraculous birth, "surely you don't believe...? People prefer to believe what is

more plausible" (ST 116), his disbelief results in social and ecological disruption: "The rain came at night, a monster rainstorm... all arable lands were swallowed by the deluge" (ST 140–141). This episode underscores that alienation from ancestral knowledge leads to both social and environmental collapse, demonstrating the critical role of myths in sustaining ethical, cultural, and political order.

By integrating myths and legends into her fiction, Kire challenges the distancing effects of modernity on Indigenous worldviews. Through Angami Naga myths and folklore, she reconstructs cultural narratives, societal structures, and relationships with nature. As Stuart Hall notes, cultural identity is shaped through the narratives and representations that communities construct about themselves (Hall 223). Kire's reimagining of oral narratives restores cultural memory and strengthens ethnic identity, illustrating that Naga identity is inseparable from spiritual understanding, ritual practice, ecological responsibility, and ethical governance. Her novels reveal that myths and legends are not only literary devices but also tools for asserting political authority, fostering communal cohesion, and promoting land stewardship, thereby reinforcing the political and social dimensions of identity.

In both *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*, myths function as dynamic instruments through which Naga identity, moral responsibility, ecological awareness, and political authority are continuously negotiated. Kire demonstrates that alienation from ancestral narratives leads to cultural, ecological, and social instability, whereas engagement with myths sustains ethical behaviour, communal solidarity, and ecological balance. These narratives underscore the intrinsic link between folklore, identity, and politics in Naga society, illustrating how literary imagination can preserve, reinterpret, and assert the values, beliefs, and agency of indigenous communities.

Conclusion

In Easterine Kire's fiction, myths and legends are not mere stories from the past; they are living narratives that sustain Naga identity, ethics, and political consciousness. Through *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*, Kire demonstrates that myths serve to link ancestral wisdom to contemporary life, guide moral conduct, and foster ecological responsibility. Legends provide frameworks for understanding historical and social realities while asserting communal authority and maintaining cohesion. The narratives show that identity politics in Naga society is deeply intertwined with oral traditions, ritual practices, and spiritual cosmology, and that alienation from these narratives can disrupt both social and ecological stability. By reclaiming myth and legend from colonial distortions and embedding them in her fiction, Kire revitalises indigenous epistemologies, reinforces communal memory, and affirms the political and cultural agency of the Nagas. Her works illustrate that myth and legend serve as critical tools for negotiating ethical, ecological, and political dimensions of identity, showing that cultural continuity, social responsibility, and communal resilience are inseparable from the preservation of ancestral narratives. Kire's fiction thus exemplifies the profound interconnections between folklore, identity, and

politics, situating indigenous storytelling as both a cultural archive and a framework for ethical and political consciousness in Naga society.

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