

**Indigenous Ecological Consciousness in Easterine Kire's
*When the River Sleeps***

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Abstract

When the River Sleeps (2014) is a landmark literary work in the emerging canon of Nagaland literature written by Easterine Kire. The novel, set within the sacred forests and river systems of Nagaland in Northeast India, presents landscape not as passive backdrop but as an active and living entity. Through the mythical- turned spiritual quest of the protagonist Vilie, a solitary Angami hunter, Kire presents a sophisticated Indigenous ecological consciousness rooted in Tenyimia cosmology — one in which forest, river, village boundary and spirit-territory together constitute a living environmental ethic. This paper examines how Kire reconstructs the indigenous landscape, renders the river as a sentient ecological entity and articulates principles of restraint, reciprocity and reverence as the foundation of the Naga community's relationship with the natural world. It purports that the novel serves not merely as a literary work but as a means of indigenous ecological knowledge-preservation in upholding the tribal environmental wisdom for sustainable living and ecological resilience.

Keywords: Indigenous, environment, landscape, Northeast India, Kire, Naga Literature

Introduction

Easterine Kire, born in Kohima, Nagaland is one of the most important voices of the Northeast Indian literary tradition. Her writings reveal a depth of cultural rootedness, indigenous wisdom and novels swarm with hunters, healers, elders, nature, spirits, in precise-the human beings and the non-human beings. *When the River Sleeps*, the 2014 published novel of Kire gives a solid exploration of the world and lived experiences of both the human beings and the natural world. The present paper purposes to examine the indigenous wisdom and consciousness through an ecological exploration.

The novel details the story of Vilie, a 48-year-old solitary hunter from the Angami tribe in the Zuzie village of Naga hills. Vilie is paid by the forest department for protecting an endangered bird species tragopan and a bison known as *gwi*. Vilie has committed himself entirely to the forest and its safety as a way of life. In the novel, Vilie undertakes a dangerous journey to the deep forest in search of a heart-stone — a mystical but powerful stone said to be resting beneath a river only during the brief period when the river goes to sleep, in other words, to silence. The stone is believed to grant wealth, power, women and victory. His quest is not just physical but a mythical expedition deep into the indigenous ecological and spiritual knowledge that has shaped the Naga people's entanglement with their lands for generations.

Throughout Vilie's journey, which covers the thorny nettle forest, the Zeliang man Keyireusap's fields, the unclean forest near Rarhuria, the border village, and finally the banks of the mystic Sleeping River itself, Vilie encounters spirits, sacred and forbidden territories and is constantly surveyed by a natural and ecological world that is fully alive, abundantly conscious and self-governing. Throughout the course of *When the River Sleeps*, the Naga forest does not testify itself only with the role of passive setting that unfolds the entire narrative but equally a protagonist that drives the narrative. Kire does not characterize the forest from the outside- as a distant observer- she portrays it from the inside- as a dweller. This paper interprets the novel as a work of ecological narrative that not only represents the Naga natural world with imaginative richness but probes into the inherent system of indigenous knowledge and ethics within that representation.

Vilie, with his profound knowledge of the forest as the guard and a lone hunter, traverses through the forest mindful enough that every step is observed keenly and every act carries a consequence. As a person from Tenyimia tribal clan, his understanding of the forest is vast but not comprehensive — there also remained some phenomena beyond his understanding. This major intellectual humility is central to the novel's ecological vision. The forest is portrayed not as something to be mastered; it is something to be learned,

continuously and with reverence. In connection with his frequent dreams and his eventual journey looking for the mystic stone, Vilie discusses with a Seer (a wise and elder person with spiritual wisdom of generations). The forest is depicted as older and wiser and formidable than men. The Seer's guidance to Vilie describes the lived experience and indigenous consciousness of the Naga clan and forest ecology.

"He had learned early that the forest kept its own counsel. You could read its signs, but you could never read its mind. The best hunters knew this and acted accordingly — with patience, with attention and with the knowledge that they were guests in a world that had been there long before them and would remain long after they were gone." (Kire 31)

Kire showcases that the environmental ethics of the inhabitants are rooted in their lived habits - in the daily practice of attention and reverence towards the forest. Krishna, the Nepali shaman, shares his forest life experience to Vilie: "Travel carefully Saab, the forest is dangerous to those who don't know it, but it can be kind to those who befriend it" (20). This epistemological humility is evident in Vilie's encounter with a weretiger at Keyireusap's shed. The weretigers are originally the clansmen whose spirits have turned into tigers with accumulated power. Weretigers cannot be simply shot and killed, it requires many members of the clan's presence to perform rituals. Alone in the forest but affluent with inherited knowledge, Vilie traces the names of his men whose spirits believed to have been turned into weretigers, he steps out and calls the names into the dark:

Kuovi! Menuolhoulie! Wetsho! Is this the way to treat your clansman! I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman. I am not here to do you harm. Why are you treating me as a stranger? I come in peace. You owe me your hospitality. I am your guest! (Kire 26).

This incident reveals how the forest operates as a social and relational space, not a wilderness to be conquered. It is utterly governed by kinship obligations, rituals protocols and spiritual knowledge rather than by firepower.

Kire portrays forest as a shared social space, inhabited by spirits who serve as its custodians and law enforcers. Their prohibitions and permissions regulate human intervention and exploitation of forest resources. These spirits act as a safeguarding angel that no single human can exhaust what belongs to the community. When Vilie observes the taboos associated with particular trees and streams in the forest, he is not simply performing religious duty; he is participating in a system of resource management that has sustained the forest for generations.

The River as Conscious Entity

The river serves as the moral and spiritual centre of the novel. The very title of the novel heralds its central ecological context: the river itself is personified as a living being, conscious enough of the consistent sleep wake cycle, like humans do. The river sleeps at a particular time of year enabling access to its much sought-after heart-stone. When Vilie and Kani, the fisherman who hosts and accompanies Vilie on his journey, reach the Sleeping River, the ecological bizarreness of the place was felt clearly by both the men. Kire writes:

Everything was still. No river or fish sounds. Not even the hint of a breeze. It was rapidly getting dark, and they could only see the shadowy outlines of trees and the big rocks on the river's edge. Vilie raised his head and saw a smooth body of water lying perfectly still. It was the sleeping river at last. (Kire 101).

As Vilie and Kani wait in deafening silence, the spirit widow-women- the river's jealous guardians- perform their strange ritual of fetching water and return to their dwellings up the hill. Only when the widow-spirits depart does Vilie enter the river — and the river responds. It pushes him down and under with what Kire describes as an almost human violence. To survive this encounter, Vilie falls back not on physical strength but on the divine belief imparted to him in preparation for the journey:

Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuopfü fights for me, today is my day! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs to the stone! (Kire 103).

The river surrenders to Vilie because, the quality of his intentions were revealed throughout his journey and because of the spiritual knowledge bestowed upon him by the seer and the people like Subale, Kani and others he had met across his journey. To retrieve the mythical stone all it requires for Vilie is not technological skill but spiritual knowledge.

In depicting the river as a being which is mindful of its own rhythms and freedom, Kire's narrative rejects the utilitarian view of water as a mere natural resource to be exploited by humans. Rather, Kire frames river as a relation to human being with an indigenous view that nature is not passive or static but a participant in the loop of life.

The river had its own memory, longer than the memory of any man or woman alive. It remembered the first hunters, the first villages, the first prayers offered at its banks. And it judged. Those who came to it with clean hands and a respectful heart were given what they needed. Those who came with greed were taken. (Kire 86)

Vilie's journey towards the mythical heart-stone can also be an expedition to establish an amicable relationship with the river that terrified his dreams in the beginning of

the novel. Once achieved, the heart-stone itself will serve as a kind of ecological passport — a token of the river's recognition that Vilie has earned the right to carry its power. This depicts the reciprocal relationship between human beings and their ecological environment: Between the two entities, there is not extraction but exchange, not conquest but agreement.

Spirit-Territory and Customary Environmental Ethics

One of the most distinctive features of Kire's ecological imagination is her rendering of what might be called spirit-territory. That are zones within the forest and along the river that fall under the jurisdiction of particular spirits and that carry specific customary obligations for the human intruders. These territories are not marked on any map. They are known through oral tradition, through the stories of elders, through the accumulated experience of generations who have learned.

Vilie's journey through the novel is in large part a navigation of these spirit-territories. Each zone he enters demands a different mode of behaviour: different speeds of movement, different levels of noise, different ritual preparations. The unclean forest near Rarhuria is one such zone. The old men and women of the community had warned children never to go near it, as it was believed that the spirit children would take human children and release them only when they are tired of playing. The forest songs that emanate from this region — sung by beautiful long-haired spirit girls — are described not as entertainment but as traps.

“A forest song was a spirit song sung very melodiously and could be heard by a lone hunter, and also by a group of people such as an age-group. The old men said that the spirits used forest songs to enchant humans, and draw them to the unclean forest so they would die and come to live with them there” (Kire 76).

The ecological belonging of human, spirit and nature is shown here. To violate the order of the forest is not only to risk physical harm; it is to risk alienation from the community of living beings — to become, in some fundamental sense, ecologically homeless.

The village of Kirhupfümia reveals a further and a complex attribution of spirit-territory and customary ethics in the forest. Kirhupfümia is the village of outcast women — expelled for possessing extraordinary spirit powers, including the ability to curse just by pointing or spitting. Vilie encounters two such women, the sisters Ate and Zote. Zote, bitter and vengeful, steals Vilie's heart-stone to devastate her ancestral village and is destroyed in the process. Ate, kind-hearted, becomes Vilie's companion and protector on the return journey. When Ate recounts their exile — how a woman in their village cursed them repeatedly, until her sister, driven to the limit, pointed at the woman's pregnant womb and

killed the unborn child — Vilie's response is striking: “But how could they do that? Their relative was at fault!” (Kire 132). Ate thanks him: “You are the first who has said so. We know there are some in the village who think like you too but were afraid to speak up for us” (Kire 133).

This incident reveals the portrayal of customary law and its relationship to ecological and social order. The outcast women of Kirhupfümia are not villains; they are the products of a community that messed up its own customary ethics, punishing the victims of aggression rather than its wrongdoers. This indicates that the customary environmental and social law embedded in Naga ritual is not flawless — it is corrupted by fear, by power and by the human tendency to accuse the unfamiliar.

Vilie as Ecological Learner

Vilie is the fastener of Kire's ecological vision — not as hero in the traditional sense, but as learner. His quest is not a journey toward triumph over nature but a journey toward deeper understanding of his place. By the time Vilie returns from his journey, he is shown as a very different man from the one who began. He is more inclined towards the self-realization path and is no longer fascinated by the worldly wealth the heart-stone promised. The heart-stone served as a test. Vilie believed it would bring wealth, grain, women and victory in battle. But what he discovers throughout the journey of obtaining it is that the promise of material gain is a false measure of value. The real treasure, it is the spiritual wisdom that the creator-deity Kepenuopfü has imparted to him through the course of his journey. Vilie learns that genuine ecological wisdom one can possess is not the collection of information about the forest but a transformation of the self. The Seer, the were-tiger, the spirit widow-women, the river itself — all of these are teachers. Vilie's authority as a hunter and forest guardian derives not from command over the natural world but from his disposition to listen to it. Vilie is portrayed as an exemplary figure of ecological education imparted from the oral traditions, the ritual practices and the daily habits of attention that constitute Naga ecological knowledge.

Conclusion

When the River Sleeps is a novel of significant environmental knowledge, indigenous insights and ecological wisdom. Through the closely observed journey of Vilie into the Naga village, Kire constructs a fully realised Indigenous ecological worldview — one in which forest, river, spirit-territory and customary law together constitute a sustainable way of inhabiting the natural world. The novel's landscape is not background; it is protagonist, teacher and moral authority.

The river at the focal point of the narrative is sentient- sleeping, sovereign,

generous to those that approach it rightly and destructive to those who do not — is Kire's most powerful ecological symbol. It embodies the principle that the natural world possesses its own agency, its own integrity and its own system of accountability; and it insists that human beings can flourish only by recognising and honouring these facts. This is not a primitive or pre-rational understanding of ecology; it is a wisdom hard-won through generations of intimate relationship with a living landscape. To read *When the River Sleeps* is to be initiated into a way of knowing the natural world that is older, deeper and perhaps wiser than any that modernity has yet devised.

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