

## Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*: A Perspective

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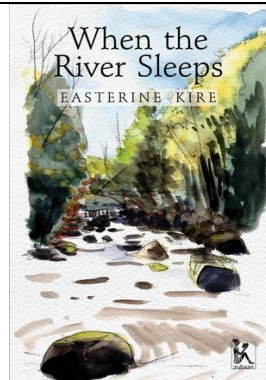
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### ABSTRACT



The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a large scale proliferation of Indian English fiction across continents and cultures. Today, it spread to the North-East India too. Writers from the North-East have gained mainstream recognition. One such writer is Easterine Kire. Her novel "When *the River Sleeps*" wins the 2015 The Hindu Literary prize. It is a great work of art that tells the story of Vilie, an Angari man in Nagaland, who is obsessed with the sleeping river and the magical stone it contains beneath the water. Vilie sets out an epic journey in the quest for the stone, encountering men and spirits.

Kire's aim in the novel is not to narrate an adventure story, but to chart a man's journey from ignorance to experience. What

matters more is inexplicable natural world that hovers at the edge of human experience, where wisdom extracts its cost.

The present article is an attempt to discuss the techniques and other aspects employed by the writer.

In the postmodern era, novel is the most suitable literary medium to express thoughts, feelings, exploitation, agony, violence, and other aspects. It gained much viable and vital form, compared to drama, poetry, and prose, in world literature especially in the Indian Writing in English.

Indian English novel has occupied a unique place in the contemporary literature. It gained much popularity with the solid contribution made by Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, who are popularly known as the Bio Trio. Taking queue from them women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Jai Nimbkar, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur, C.B. Divakaruni, and men writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Manju Kapoor, Aravind Adiga, Amit Chaudhuri, Vikram Swarup, and other literary icons have used the form to express the conditions and the situations of India thereby keeping it in the literary canon of contemporary world literature.

Today, especially in this post-modern period, its influence has fallen on the North East Indian States which were absent from any discourse on Indian literature over the years. Writers hailing from these States are coming out with multiple aspects to bring awareness on the present condition that prevails in those States. They are trying to transform the oral literature to written literature by producing it into English so that the readers across the world recognize their contribution. The English that these writers use is not the same as writers from the mainland use. Easterine Kire is a North-East writer who



Easterine Kire

occupied a significant place in the recent years. She summed up her motivation behind taking up writing as a career. She said in an interview, "I felt we needed to create written Naga Literature. We have so much oral narrative but with oral dying out, it's all going to be lost."<sup>1</sup> She acknowledged that "The 'native individual' is my raw material and I can write with confidence about their context because I have lived it too."<sup>3</sup>

Born on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1959 in a conflict-plagued Nagaland, India, to an Angari Naga family on Easterine Kire (Iralu) translator, poet, novelist, short story writer, writer of children books, and the Nagaland's first writer. She did her schooling from Kohima, graduated from Shillong followed by a course in journalism from Delhi. She won her doctoral scroll from Savitribai Phule Pune University. Later she actively involved in working to create better opportunities for the Naga youth and nurturing and evangelizing the Naga folktales.

Kire was a voracious reader. She was resonated by reading African writers while pursuing at the University. She loved the reading of the poetry of Hans Børli, Dylan Thomas, Matthew Mouse, and the early novels of Chinua Achebe and Thomas Hardy. She began her writing career as a translator from her native language, Tenyidie, into English. She published her first collection of poetry entitled *Kelhoukevira* in 1982 when she was at the age of 22. She then started writing short stories and novels. Soon, she became one of the finest story tellers from the region. She has written six novels, three collections of poetry, and short stories. She has translated over 200 oral poems from Tenyidie into English. Her project on *Narratives Silenced by War: Naga Folktales and People Stories* brought a new life into the literary heritage of the Naga people. Her works have been translated into German and other languages.

Kire's works reflect the realities of Naga people and the complexities around the colonial atrocities and discrimination. They have changed the lives of Naga women. They unveil the fascinating and vibrant Naga culture to the rest of the world. They evoke "a raw appeal of the old age traditions and scintillating folklore from the deepest corners of the mystic state of Nagaland."<sup>2</sup> Her prose is hauntingly beautiful, lyrical, and an example of her effortless hold over words and stories. She was awarded the Governor's Medal (2011), the Catalan PEN International Voice Award (2013), and The Hindu Prize for Best Fiction (2016) for excellent contribution to Naga literature.

Kirs's first novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) is about a battle between the British forces and a Naga hamlet. It "tells the socio-cultural rituals and heroic deeds of a warrior village. It is a historical story of a true village society of Khonoma, wherein ordinary people meddle in everyday affairs of life."<sup>4</sup> *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), Kire's second novel highlights the internal and social strife that grips Nagaland as a state in India. It is a bildungsroman, which follows the growth, emotions and experience of a female child. It exposes the perplexed tribal identity through the story of 'Dielieno' in her quest to overthrow patriarchal position. Her third novel *Mari* (2010) is based on the Japanese invasion of India in 1944 via Nagaland. It is a true story of a mother, who lost her fiancé in the war and made the decision to move ahead and lives her life. It tries to bring to the fore the everyday lives of the people of Nagaland.

Kire's fourth novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) spans from tumultuous period of the 1950s and 60s to the present day. The story revolves around the life and experiences of Mose, whose life spares the entire history of Naga struggle for self-determination. *Life on Hold* (2011), Kire's fifth novel concerns itself with the theme of self-sacrificing love that is central to the emotional relationship between the protagonists of the novel. Apart from bringing a focus on the vibrant Naga culture, the novel discusses the realities which have changed the lives of Naga women.

*When the River Sleeps* (2014), Kire's latest novel runs like a fable, without embellishments, deals with the existence of the novel's mythical hero. Set in the beautiful hills of Nagaland, it narrates the story of Vilie, a forty-eight-year-old lone Anagari hunter, who has made forest his home. Kire narrates Vilie's past and present life. In the past, when he was eighteen years old, he was in love with a bewitching girl named Mechusen and the girl also liked him. Everyone in his village believed that both of them would get married. But a mysterious fever killed her. She got fever when she went to the forest to collect the herbs along with the two of her friends. When she climbed down a tree after plucking a beautiful orchid, she could see a tall, dark man following her but her two friends could not see anything. On that evening, she got fever and soon died. Vilie, after her death, lost interest in his life and left village to make her forest his abode.

In the present, Vilie lives in the forest and hunters visit to stay with him. Even Rokolhoulie, a small boy, visits him along with his uncle and listens his story about the 'sleeping river.'

He tells them that he is constantly awakened by dreams of a certain river which a seer had mentioned to him. The river has a particular stone which has the power to grant its owner any wish. Some do not believe but Rokolhoulie believes that the story of the sleeping river is true. He says that "if you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you. It could be cattle, women, prowess in war, or success in the hunt."<sup>5</sup> He also tells them that he has been getting dreams and nightmares almost every month for the last two years, ever since he had heard about this sleeping river.

The journey is almost surreal because Vilie makes his way through the hills of Nagaland. It also has an aura of supernaturalism as Vilie encounter weretigers, widow-spirits, and demons in his quest of the river of his dreams. As he travels on foot, he seeks shelter every now and then and this brings him into contact with the villagers who are kind and also ruthless men who try to blame him on a murder that he happened to witness.

In chapter 22 only, Vilie comes to know about the real existence of the sleeping river from Kani, Subale's husband. Kani tells him that the river is just beyond the Barak. He further tells him that the sleeping river is guarded by the widow-woman spirits. If Vilie is protected, there would be no harm from them; if not they would tear him into pieces. Kani tells him that the protection is nothing but a good heart and a good conscience. Subale also tells him about the interval between the time and widow-woman who disappear behind the hills. The river would stop flowing and go to sleep when they disappear. Vilie has to use it correctly. He has to plunge into the river when it would go to sleep and get the heart-stone.

Through his courage and will power, Vilie finally succeeds and takes possession of the stone that he has dreamed about. On his way home, he meets a kind-hearted young woman named Ate, who has settled in a village to encourage women. It is believed that she has magical powers that can bring a curse on anyone by just pointing a finger. Convinced that Ate is harmless and also because all the inhabitants of that village had suddenly fled the village due to some unknown reason, Vilie brings Ate home along with him. Knowing that the forest is unsafe for her, she settles in his ancestral village with his aunts and gives her the heart-stone. Back in his home at the heart of the forest, Vilie is brutally murdered by a man who coveted the stone to attain worldly possessions. Ate who is now married with Asakho visits Vilie's home every quarter of the year and claims to feel his presence there. Ate tells Asakho that heart-stone gives Vilie spiritual knowledge but not the wealth as others have taken it wrongly. The wisdom of the stone is more spiritual than physical. Thus, the novel is a book of legend and myths. It also documents the conflicts that arise when an alien ideology is introduced to an indigenous culture. Vilie, like Ulysses who plunges into adventure, leaves us with mysterious at every time.

The title of the novel is highly ironic in the sense that the river never sleeps. It appears to fall into sleep but at once when Vilie gets into it, it becomes alive and active and takes him with its water. The word 'river' symbolically suggests

human mind. Vilie's mind is always active. It never goes to sleep as he is a born hunter. However, he goes to sleep at the end of the novel for no reason at all. His sleep (death) remains a mysterious one to the readers. Hence, the title 'When the River Sleeps' is more apt and more relevant. It suggests a movement rather than stillness.

Much of the novel takes place inside the forest as the readers travel along with Vilie who undertakes the epic journey in search of the river of his dreams. When Vilie takes shelter in the villages, the readers are also transported to take a glimpse of the lives of village people. Vilie's journey is to find the sleeping river and to extract the heart-stone from the heart, river bed, involves narrative recursion. The novelist blends facts and fantasy and makes use of magic spells. There are sudden incursions of fantastic elements. Especially in the beginning of the novel, the novelist narrates Vilie's efforts to extract the heart-stone from the bed of sleeping river as a real one but later it is revealed that it is a dream that persists in the mind of Vilie for the past two years. Secondly, Vilie's love for Mechuseno is a real one but her death is blended with an element of fantasy as she has been haunted by a spirit of a man and has to die in the end. Thirdly, Vilie's encounter with a Weretiger on three instances has a tinge of magic realism. He uttered the names like "kuovil, Menuhoulie, Wetsho". Then the Weretiger fled away. Fourthly, the spirits in "Rahuria", forest spirits, the spirits in the form of beautiful girls in Tuesday Market, and widow-women spirits, who guard the sleep river are the embodiments of magic realism. They appear, threaten, brighten Vilie in his adventure. Fifthly, the story of Ate and her sister, Zote has an element of fantasy. Their power to destroy things in their fingers is an illustration of magic realism. Sixthly, in the end, Vilie's death remains a mysterious one. It has a blend of magic realism. On the whole, the novel, true to magic realism, is narrated in a dream-like mood with forest spirits and their songs. It has Tolkienish touch of magic quality.

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship that literature shares with natural environment / nature. This novel is set in the beautiful hills of Nagaland. The forest is home to many characters in the novel and nature is presented as an empowered, benevolent provider which protects all those who take refuge in it. Vilie, "the guardian of the forest" (72), takes shelter in the villages of the forest. Villages invite Vilie, a stranger and a weary traveller into their homes and gives him food and shelter expecting nothing in return.

Vilie assumes that the time is two in the noon by looking at the Sun in the horizon. Women gather nettle from the forest to engage in bark weaving – an art passed on from generations to make bark-cloth. Men catch fish from the nearby river to make a hearty meal for the tired Vilie. People work under the open skies chanting working songs. People fall asleep listening to the sound of insects, owls hooting, frog calls and jackal in the distance. Thus, Kire, in *When the River Sleeps*, exalted the rural life which is untouched in modernism and unadulterated by technology.

In the power hierarchy, nature is presented as empowered but not oppressed. It has the power to endow blessings and

grant wishes. The river mentioned in the title of the novel itself is a good example. Nature is Vilie's protector and he is nature's protector. The forest is home to Vilie and he is in turn the 'guardian of the forest.' The forest department of Nagaland has declared him the "official protector of the rare tragopan" (36) which nested in Vilie's part of the forest. Vilie's death is significant because he dies protecting the heart-stone which is sacred and precious.

Nature provides an antidote and cure for all ailments and the people rely on it heavily for treatment of any kind. When Vilie is stung by nettle plants, Idele, an old woman in the forest plucks the leaves of a small bitten worm wood plant and kneads it to a pulp in her hand. She also gives him rock bee honey stating that it is a 'cure-all' (38). For injuries and open wounds, Vilie makes plaster of Ciena plant. For bigger wounds, he uses pungent 'Japan nha' (a kind of weed) and rock bee honey.

Nature helps Vilie to conquer fear. When he witnesses the murder in a shelter that he took refuge in the night, his first instinct was torn. He fled for his life and little did he think that there was a chance for culprits to blame him for the murder. He sought refuge in the forest to escape from the many people who were after him. The serenity of nature in the forest helps Vilie to think clearly and take the right decision which is to walk to the ancestral village and to try to attain justice. Nature helps him not just to conquer the fear of the people but also the fear of spirits too. He conquers the fear of gushing water spirit of the river simply by invoking nature as he said, 'sky is my father, earth is my mother, stand aside death!' Heart-stone which belongs to Vilie at the end is the greatest spirit.

Personification of nature is done in *When the River Sleeps*. Vilie asserts every now and then that 'the forest is my life.' Nature consoles him when he is lonely as mother. The forest also protected him from the evil in the heart of man. Nature has shared a close knit relationship with the text. Thus, Kire has woven both natural and supernatural elements together in her narration of the story.

Kire has used conversational style in the novel. The blind intermingling of superstition, rationality and compassion is a hallmark of the novel. The subplot of the novel involves the killing a migrant Nepali family which comprises Krishna and his wife.

Critics say that the novel adopts the technique of magic realism as the most part of it is quite thrilling but still makes the reader realize from time to time that it is not fantasy but rather people's real beliefs. Kire's intention is to narrate an adventurous story and to chant out a man's journey from ignorance to experience.

Few feel that the novel is confused. The writing is too simple and the characters are too immature for this to be an adult book. There are not one but three brutal murders for this to be a children's book. Whatever the comments may be, "*When the River Sleeps* is a tale of very subtle adventure set in the Naga hills. It has culture background of a few of the Naga tribes of Nagaland."<sup>6</sup> Its simple and picturesque story makes

the reader travel places, brings closure to nature, discover one's own roots. The magic realism along with the brevity of narrative style used in the novel reveals the mysteries of the

forest and sustainable outlook of tribes and their relationship with the forests.

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