

Indigenous Ecologies and the More-than-Human World: An Ecocritical Exploration of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

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Ecocriticism stands as a pivotal and indispensable lens for examining literary texts in this era marked by global warming and escalating environmental degradation. The term 'ecocriticism' was first coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in which he defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world" (107). Similarly, Cheryll Glotfelty in her seminal work, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). She further explains: "Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (xviii).

Ecocritics analyse literary texts and other artefacts like films to study how they represent nature and the environment, and how they reflect or challenge cultural attitudes towards the natural world. One of the central ideas in ecocriticism is the concept of nature as a living entity, which emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings and their environments. The idea of nature as a living entity has its roots in indigenous and animist cultures, which see the natural world as a complex web of relationships between all living beings, including humans, animals, plants, and the land itself. This worldview

contrasts with the Western view of nature as a resource to be exploited for human use, which has led to environmental destruction and degradation. Talking about this difference of worldview between Western- “Modern” cultures and animist cultures, Christopher Manes writes “Nature *is* silent in our culture (in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (15). In his essay “Nature and Silence”, Manes discusses how nature has transformed in the modern discourses from a voluble subject to a mute object and from an animistic being to a symbolic presence. He argues that we need a viable environmental ethics to break the silence of nature in our contemporary thoughts “for it is within this vast eerie silence that surrounds our garrulous human subjectivity that an ethics of exploitation regarding nature has taken shape and flourished, producing the ecological crisis that now requires the search for an environmental counterethics”(16).

This paper attempts to make an ecocritical reading of Easterine Kire’s novel *When the River Sleeps* in order to explore an “environmental counterethics” as proposed by Manes. Consequently, the paper seeks to examine the unique relationship that the Indigenous Naga community of North East India shares with the more-than-human world, encompassing not only natural but also supernatural entities, as depicted in the novel. To achieve this, the paper conducts a thorough analysis of the portrayal of the forest within the narrative and endeavours to comprehend its interaction with the human inhabitants. The central argument of this paper posits that in the novel, every aspect of nature, including the forest, is depicted as a living entity with its own consciousness and agency. This portrayal serves to deconstruct the traditional binary oppositions such as human/animal, animate/non-animate, and nature/culture.

Easterine Kire is a North-East Indian writer, who hails from Nagaland and presently lives in Norway. Her first novel *A Naga Village Remembered*, published in 2003 is considered the first novel by a Naga writer in English. Till now she has 7 brilliant novels to her credit: *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Mari*, *Bitter Wormwood*, *When the River Sleeps*

, *Son of the Thundercloud* and *Don't Run, My Love*. Being born in Kohima to an Angami Naga family, Kire's works revolve around the lives and experiences of Naga communities living in Naga Hills. She revives in her works the traditional Naga beliefs, their culture, customs and tradition. Originally Animist in belief, the Naga communities live in a close proximity with their natural world. Therefore nature occupies a significant place in Kire's novels. She says in an interview: "... We back in Nagaland, live so close to the natural world and people going to the fields, working in the fields all day surrounded by bird calls, are just using the rhythms of the natural world to guide their agricultural year. ... So it comes naturally to me when I'm writing about these people to use the natural landscape" ("Writers Talk Politics"). Besides, she incorporates in her stories Naga myths and folklores that advocate living in harmony with all forms in nature. Therefore, an ecocritical reading of her novels is destined to offer us an alternate view of the Universe where there is no distinction between the human and the non-human, and animate and inanimate which is quite opposite to the modern western worldview which is hierarchal and places human beings at the top of this hierarchy.

When the River Sleeps transports the readers to a world where, in the words of the writer herself, "the margins are so wide ... and where everything is possible" (Writers Talk Politics). It tells us the adventurous story of Vilie- a hunter of the Angami Naga Community, who has made the forest his home. He has been fascinated by the story of the sleeping-river that he hears from a seer. The mysterious river sleeps only for a very short period. "Yet the enchantment of those minutes or hours when it sleeps is so powerful, that it turns the stones in the middle of the river bed into a charm" (3). If one can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river, it will grant the owner anything he/she wants. "It could be cattle, women, prowess in war, or success in the hunt" (3). Vilie has been dreaming about this river for the past two years and finally sets out in search of the mysterious river. His journey is full of dangerous encounters with were-tigers, spirits and human murderers, but at the same time enriched with meeting warm hearted people who help him

by providing food, shelter and advices, and go out of the ways to help him in finding the sleeping river. His journey that begins as a quest for physical resources ends up bringing him spiritual knowledge. Kire takes the reader along with vilie in this arduous journey that can also be called a journey of ecological awakening for the readers, because it reminds the readers of the intimate bonding between human and the non-human world that has been lost in the modern capitalist society. The story takes us to a world where human beings live as a “plain member” of biotic community and not as a “conqueror” of the natural world, practising the “land ethic” as suggested by Aldo Leopold in his *A Sand County Almanac* (203).

Vilie considers the forest his wife. Earlier, he was in love with a girl, who met an unnatural and untimely death. Vilie leaves the village sometimes after this incident and starts living alone in the forest. When the story begins he has been living in the forest for twenty five of his forty eight years of life. The clan made him the guardian of the gwi-the great mithuns and the Forest Department made him the official protector of the rare tragopan that nest in Vilie’s part of the forest. Sometimes he does go through moments of loneliness and isolation, yet he does not go back to the village because whenever he thinks about going back he has the sensation of being an unfaithful spouse. “He began to think that leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife. Though it was an unsettling thought in his soul, he found he had actually nurtured it for a long time” (9). However, his relationship with the forest cannot be categorised under the traditional patriarchal role of a husband as having the upper-hand. Rather, it is a relationship of respect and gratitude. He is called the guardian of the forest by the villagers, but it is actually the forest that protects him from danger. During his journey, he spends a night with four hunters. But quarrel occurs between two of them at night and one man gets killed. Vilie flees from the scene and enters Rarhuria -the unclean forest, as they call it because they believe that part of the forest is haunted with spirits. Though he would not normally have entered the unclean forest, but he now feels safe and grateful towards the forest: “The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with

sanctuary when he most needed it; and food when his rations were inadequate. The forest also protected him from the evil in the heart of man. He felt truly wedded to her at this moment” (51).

The forest has a great role to play in the lives of the villagers who depend highly on it for their survival. The forest is a living presence for them, it's just like a kinsman. For example, when Vilie resumes his journey after a night's stay in the Nepali settlement in the forest, Krishna -his host warns him: “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). Vilie, Krishna and other villagers have indeed befriended the forest. When Vilie enquires what Krishna will do when it will be time for his baby to go to a school, Krishna replies that school is not for people like them. And Vilie immediately realizes that Krishna is right, the forest will be the best school for the baby: “What could school possibly teach him that his parents could not improve upon? They were rich in their knowledge of the ways of the forest, the herbs one could use for food, the animals and birds one could trap and the bitter herbs to counteract the sting of a poisonous snake” (15). Vilie and the villagers are well versed in the use of different herbs found in the forest for different ailments. When Vilie is stung by nettle while trying his hand in nettle harvesting, Idele applies paste of bitter wormwood plant and rock bee honey on his wound. In the unclean forest, Vilie tries to heal his wounds and bring back his energy by using wild ginseng paste on his wounds and putting its roots in his tea.

Most importantly, though Vilie and other villagers depend highly upon the forest for their food and sustenance, they do not exploit the forest resources; rather they have a sense of gratitude and reverence to the forest. They believe that there are some guardian spirits of the forest whom they must acknowledge. Vilie remembers his mother's way of expressing gratitude to the spirit of the forest:

If he took firewood or gathered herbs from the forest, he should acknowledge the owners. What was it his mother used to say when they had gathered herbs so many years ago? *Terhuomiapeziem*. Thanks be to the spirits. He knew what she meant by that. If he

found an animal in his traps and brought it home, she would repeat that . Terhuomiapezie. It was her way of pronouncing a prayer of thanksgiving to the provider, to Ukepenuopfu. All the Tenyimia worshipped the deity they called Ukepenuopfu, the birth-spirit, the creator of all. (80)

Thus, their idea of nature or their attitude towards the natural world is guided by such beliefs and practices which are essentially ecocentric. Nature is always at the upperhand- the more powerful one in their beliefs. Nature, for them is a powerful force and not a passive object. It has an agency and a will-power which human beings must not defy. Just like the forest, the river is portrayed as a living being with a mind of its own. Ate tells Vilie “The river gives the heart-stone to those who seek its blessing, but denies it to those who will use it for evil purposes . . .” (142). During his encounter with the river to take the heart-stone from its bosom, Vilie himself feels its strength : “The river was almost human as it pushed him down and under, down and under, and the water rushed at him as though it would strangle him (104). And the heart-stone itself is so powerful that it can fulfill the wishes of human beings. Apart from granting cattle, wealth, beautiful women and success in battle, it imparts spiritual knowledge to its owner. In this way every object of nature is portrayed in the novel as powerful beings and are above human understanding.

The novel draws heavily from Naga mysticism that does not separate the natural world from the supernatural one. Regarding the presence of supernatural elements in her novels, Kire says in an interview: “For Naga people of my generation, we have no problem in accepting the co-existence of the spirit world with the natural world. Infact, it is arrogant to presume that there is only one reality- the natural world of the senses . . .” (Interview with Easterine Kire). During his journey to the sleeping river, Vilie encounters weretigers- which were according to their belief, metamorphosis of human spirits. They have the folk practice of men transforming themselves into tigers. Every weretiger began as a lower form of the cat family, possibly a wildcat which eventually grow into a mighty tiger. Among some other tribes men have

been known to transform their spirits into giant snakes, and some women's spirits transformed into monkeys. Though kept as a secret, most of the villagers know who are the men who have transformed themselves into tigers. So when a were tiger tries to attack Vilie, he calls all the three names of men he remembered from his clan, who are known to have transformed into tigers, and invokes words of clans affiliation: "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" (26). And strangely enough the tiger departed after hearing these words. Vilie remembers the story of a young boy who came from a long line of weretigers. One day when he was out for hunting with his father, a wild cat crossed their path. The boy was about to shoot the cat when his father tells him "Son, that cat is you!" and the boy understood that "his spirit was becoming one with the tiger" (27). Hence, the novel blurs the distinction between the human and the non-human world. One can be a human and an animal at the same time. This kind of relationship with the non-human beings creates a sense of "extended clanship" and "points to a different kind of consciousness which no more relies on the human/animal, natural/supernatural binary"(Baruah 11-12). So we can say that the novel suggests a sense of brotherhood which is not restricted to the human society alone; rather it includes the animals, plants, birds, rivers, mountains and even stones to be part of one huge ethical society where everything is connected with everything else.

Moreover, Kire incorporates ecofeminist perspective into the novel, through the episode of Kirhupfumia- the outcaste women who are believed to have evil power. On his return journey after achieving the heart-stone, Vilie enters the village of Kirhupfumia where he meets two Kirhupfumia sisters Ate and Zote. Ate narrates him the story of their arrival to the village of Kirhupfumia:

Back in our ancestral village a woman was very cruel to my sister. She would spit in our direction every time we met her on the village path. . . . My sister was so upset that the next time she crossed our

path, she pointed her finger at the woman's womb which was swollen and pregnant, in that instant her baby died inside her. . . . The next morning we had to leave the village . . .”

She tells him another story of unjust against the Kirhupfumia. Her aunt, she narrates, pointed her finger at a man and blinded him because he was trying to rape her. Her aunt was sent away from the village and they never saw her again. Being outcaste in their ancestral villages, they started living together in the village of Kirhupfumia. They have great knowledge of herbs and healing. They exchange their knowledge of herbal treatment with the villagers who come to them with offering of salt and sugar or other necessary items. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* talks about the close affinity shared by nature and women. She asserts that women have greater knowledge of the natural world. She writes: “Nature, both animate and inanimate, is . . . an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos” (38) and asserts that the death of this feminine principle is the root cause of the present ecological crisis. It is obvious that the Kirhupfumia in the novel, are outcaste because of their exceptional knowledge and power, and because they are beyond the patriarchal control of the society.

From the above discussion, we can say that *When the River Sleeps* demonstrates an unique and ideal kind of relationship of human beings with the non-human world. It dismantles the binary oppositions such as human/animal, animate/non-animate, nature/culture, and suggests an environmental ethic which is all encompassing and inclusive. The story based on traditional Naga beliefs and practices, offers us a worldview which is in stark contrast with the modern worldview of nature as an inanimate object. Their animistic culture that sees every object of nature as a spirit, asks human beings to be respectful towards the other-than human world. Such attitude towards nature if we can incorporate in our contemporary thoughts, will definitely make us more considerate while (over)using natural resources.

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