

# Journey into the Supernatural: A Brief Study of *When the River Sleeps*

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## Abstract

Literature in English is implicit with the use of horror and supernatural elements. Almost all genres of literature contain these elements to produce a specific effect. Easterine Kire's use of supernatural is far better than any other Indian fiction writer in English. Her most of the novels deal with the themes of the forest life, tribal communities and their rituals, customs, traditions, beliefs in the ghosts, spirits, tiger-spirits, witchcraft and supernatural beings. They mainly concentrate on the tribal life in the distant forests, away from the learned and so called sophisticated society.

The simple life in the forests is always at the threshold of either natural disasters or the supernatural threats. There are many instances of the use of supernatural in the novels of Easterine Kire. The titles of the novels such as *When the River Sleeps*, and *Son of the Thundercloud*, reflect the thematic concerns. The novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) won the Hindu Prize for Fiction in 2016. It is a powerful narrative which exposes lives of the tribal communities of Nagaland on the one hand and their beliefs in the myths, spirits, witchcrafts and supernatural powers on the other. The novel puts forth the journey of the lone hunter Vilie who sets out to find the river of his dreams i.e. the 'Sleeping River'. His journey is full of hurdles both man made and supernatural. In his quest, the protagonist has to overcome the unquiet spirits, vengeful sorceresses and demons of the forest as well as the men armed with guns. The sojourn of Vilie takes the readers into the deep forests and remote mountains of Nagaland. The description of the land with natural beauty and bounty of the forests and the supernatural enchantment opens the treasure of the wonders.

**Key Words:** Supernatural, tiger-spirits, the seer, Angami, Zeliang, Dilhoma, Rarhuria, Sleeping River, spirit widow-women

## Journey into the Supernatural: A Brief Study of *When the River Sleeps*

Literature in English is implicit with the use of horror and supernatural elements. Almost all genres of literature contain these elements to produce a specific effect. William Shakespeare, the British dramatist used ghosts, fairies, witchcrafts, in his grave tragedies like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and the tragi-comedy *The Tempest* and attained the specific purpose of the then theatre. The elements of supernatural used in the poetic creation of Samuel Coleridge and Sir Walter Scott have distinctive features. Supernatural used in the Gothic novel has been

considered its key defining element. Ruskin Bond's short stories dive deep into the natural and supernatural. Indian novels in English are also not exception to the use of supernatural which is basically used to build suspense and produce specific effect. Easterine Kire's use of supernatural is far better than any other Indian fiction writer in English. Her most of the novels deal with the themes of forest life, tribal communities and their rituals, customs, traditions, beliefs in the ghosts, spirits, tiger-spirits, witchcraft and supernatural beings. They mainly concentrate on the tribal life in the distant forests, away from the learned and so called sophisticated society.

The simple life in the forests is always at the threshold of either natural disasters or the supernatural threats. There are many instances of the use of supernatural in the novels of Easterine Kire. The titles of the novels such as *When the River Sleeps*, and *Son of the Thundercloud*, reflect the thematic concerns. The novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) won the Hindu Prize for Fiction in 2016. It is a powerful narrative which exposes lives of the tribal communities of Nagaland on the one hand and their beliefs in the myths, spirits, witchcrafts and supernatural powers on the other. The novel puts forth journey of the lone hunter Vilie who sets out to find the river of his dreams i.e. the 'Sleeping River'. His journey is full of hurdles both man made and supernatural. In his quest, the protagonist has to overcome the unquiet spirits, vengeful sorceresses and demons of the forest as well as the men armed with guns. The sojourn of Vilie takes the readers into the deep forests and remote mountains of Nagaland. The description of the land with natural beauty and bounty of the forests and the supernatural enchantment opens the treasure of the wonders.

On his journey towards the river, Vilie, the protagonist decides to make a halt in the fields belonging to a Zeliang man by the name of Keyireusap. He settles a camp in the shed already made by the owner of the field. However, during the night, he has to encounter a tiger. Kire (2014:22) narrates the encounter thus:

The tiger came at him fearlessly, throwing himself at the outline of the man. At the last second, Vilie sidestepped and the tiger crashed into the door, breaking it, and leaving torn fragments of wood hanging on the hinges. Vilie shot off a bullet above the animal's head. The sound was thunderous and the tiger sprang to its feet and leapt away into the night.

Such thrilling experiences are but natural in the forests. Killing a tiger out of self-protection is an act of reward in the jungles. However, tiger-killing is always not an act of sports in the forests of Nagaland. There are some superstitions related to the myths of tigers among the tribes. As Vilie goes to sleep, the tiger returns back, now more powerful than before. Vilie wakes up and pulls the gun but is reminded of the ritual of tiger-killing. As per the ritual, it was difficult for him to perform tiger-killer ritual because it was not meant for a solitary hunter to fulfill alone in the forest, as it required the presence of many members of the clan. As the tiger was bigger one and Vilie was unable to encounter alone, he quickly remembers the teachings of the *seer*. The names of the persons who turned into tiger-spirits are transferred by *seers* from one generation to another. He rapidly thinks of the men who had their tiger spirits. It was a strong belief in the region that the hunter can utter the name of

the persons who turned into the tiger-spirits and be saved from the probable attack. Vilie surrenders and takes the names of those men to protect himself as Kire (2014:26) writes:

With his rifle cocked, he stepped out of the door and called out, “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!”

This conversation between Vilie and the tiger-spirit expose the strong belief of the tribal into the supernatural. It has been told and retold by the *seers* to the generations together. The tribes men of Vilie not only believe it but also transfer it to the new generation in the form of a specific ritual. When belief turns into the ritual, it continues ahead for ages together. The people belonging to the Angami tribe, practiced this ritual as Kire (2014:27) writes:

Among the Angamis, were-tiger ritual was a closely guarded one. Men whose spirits were turning into were-tigers would begin to behave strangely. They would stop and stare for long periods at an object not visible to anyone else. Some men pounced on cattle and scratched them, all the while making grunting and mewling sounds. Those whose spirits had already become grown tigers gnawed on raw meat when their tigers had had a kill. The village of Dilhoma had the most number of were-tigers at one point of time.

The tribal villages were having specific identities for either existence of the supernatural or the myths related to it. The village *Dilhuma* was known by the most number of were-tigers. *Rarhuria* is known for spirit songs and residence of spirit children. The village *Kirhupfumia* was known after the presence of outcasts who were having evil powers and the sleeping river was identified with the existence of magic stone. These locales, in the novel, are known by the existence of the supernatural powers. Even the plants like Ciena were believed to have supernatural power as Kire (2014:32) writes “While Ciena was good for warding off evil spirits, the other herb was supposed to be good for a number of ailments”.

Another belief among the tribal is that the seers are gifted with extra-ordinary vision and imaginative power. Even in the Hindu scriptures like *Mahabharata*, the character of Sanjay is described to have the extra-vision of visualizing the warfare from battle field of *Kurukshetra* for narrating it to Dhritrashtra who was not having the eyesight, and Gandhari who had covered eyes with piece of a cloth. Likewise, the *seer* to whom Vilie approaches before starting journey towards the sleeping river, has been described as having extra-ordinary vision about the sleeping river. The tribesmen believed the words of the *seers* blindly. They also believed that *seer* was well versed in the things of the spiritual world, and whatever he had prophesied for the village had always come to pass. They even accepted them as a blessing to overcome the hurdles in their way. The *seers* guided them to choose the right path and showed way towards success. The following of the *seer* in terms of having patience in achieving one’s target reflects the universal wisdom. As Kire advice (2014:31) mentions dialogue between the *seer* and Vilie:

“Be very patient my son”, the seer had said. “Only the patient - hearted are granted the blessing of catching the sleeping river. .... Take your gun with you but use it sparingly. Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder”.

Most of the Christians had settled in the forests of Nagaland. They too had some practices which reflect their beliefs in the superpowers, supernatural beings. In the forests of Nagaland, these Christians practiced an age old custom of chicken sacrifice. This custom came in practice as a part of "Life for life". As one knows that every custom of scarification of animals to the deities and practice of rituals came in existence only due to the fear of the superpowers. It's a pity that some of them are still followed by the so called educated too. The tribal life naturally is no more exception to this. As far as the contemporary Christians are concerned, Kire (2014:54) mentions, “But at present, no Christian did it because they taught that their Jesus has sacrificed life for everyone's sickness. Hence there is no need to offer chicken sacrifices again.” However, in the remote forests of Nagaland, the tribal people had not given up the custom of chicken sacrifice set by the Christians and continue to follow it. As Kire (2014:54) states:

Vilie's thoughts lingered on the chicken sacrifice, and he wished he could have some chicken broth to strengthen him. He was very weak from the fever and lack of food. He turned over and fell asleep again, helpless as a baby.

Vilie travels through the unclean forest and comes very close to *Rarhuria* now. The old men and women had warned children not to go close to the unclean forest. Those people believed that it was the place where human children are taken away by the spirit children. They were having some instances of missing children suddenly and then found afterwards. No one could search them. The spirit children released them after they are tired of playing with the human children. Another story related to the supernatural identity of the region is the presence of beautiful long-haired girls who used to play and sing with each other in the forests. They used to sing forest songs. As Kire (2014:76) writes:

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.

Finally Vilie, the protagonist and Kani, the fisherman, reach the river. The description of their entry at the river is very terrific and build element of suspense in the story. Vilie's ears are resounded with the cascade of a mighty waterfall. The atmosphere at the river is strange enough for Vilie as he never experienced such a silence at the bank of the river. Normally one can listen to the cries of the birds and sounds of the trees. But everything seemed to be surprisingly quite. They saw neither birds nor any living creatures across the river. As Kire (2014:101) states:

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.

Vilie and Kani enter the territory of the sleeping river. They experience deafening silence and strange atmosphere. Only their inhalation process made some sounds. They move cautiously towards the middle of the river. After staying for an infinitely long time, they could see the spirit widow-women who they believed to be the guards of the river. The appearance of the spirit of widow-women create terrific atmosphere as their chanting resembled funeral chants. It was strange for Vilie to see that after disappearance of the spirit widow-women, the river stopped flowing and went to sleep. The belief, 'rivers can sleep, is itself a part of superstition leading into supernatural beliefs.

The art of narration used by the author adds to the effectiveness of the supernatural. The struggle between the protagonist and the sleeping river, efforts for dominating the power of each other, and proving superiority of the spirits residing among them, etc. definitely contribute to the richness of the supernatural elements used in the narration. Vilie, the protagonist, before setting for the sleeping river, had learned the spirit words. He believes that he can order death to stand aside as spirit inside him is greater. The narrator (2014:102) explains thus:

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. He was shocked at the violence of the river. At first he flailed his arms helplessly as he had in his nightmare - dreams of the river. But this was terrifyingly real. He would not wake up and cry with relief that it was only a dream. This was as real as real could be. Then he stopped struggling and concentrated instead on the spirit words he had learned: 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!

Finally, the protagonist becomes successful in getting the stone from the sleeping river. The tribal people stick up to the customs, traditions and festivals to be celebrated after any success. This belief is blindly followed. If someone doesn't follow, there is a threat of the evil spirits. The very minds of the tribal have been captured by the thoughts, existence and threatening of the evil spirits, witches, ghosts, etc. On his return journey, Vilie is asked to observe 'genna day' as a part of his successful return from the sleeping river. As per the custom, the villagers will not do any work in their fields on this day. It's only a thanksgiving day for all. It is observed for Vilie to recover his strength before he journeyed back. Such blind beliefs and superstitions are followed by the tribal due to the lack of education.

The curses given by the outcasts in *Kirhufumia* are considered to be the outbreak of evil forces. Vilie comes across the two sisters namely Ate and Zote. Comparatively Zote is more dangerous and evil minded than Ate who seems to be kindhearted to Vilie. He falls in love with Ate who offers him food and saves him from the

probable attack of Zote. Both the sisters are having extraordinary power to see the hidden things with the strangers. Both of them could see the stone hidden by Vilie in his bag. The whole village is afraid of the evil powers of these sisters. The people believed that their pointing towards anything or spitting against will certainly ruin it. Their anger always resulted in destruction. Vilie had heard the story of Kirhufumia, an old lady who was named after the village of the same name which was ill famous for the residence of the outcaste women having evil powers like witchcraft. Vilie recalls the story, as Kire (2014:131) describes, to avoid her curses, "People came to her with the first of their harvests, be it vegetables or fruit or grain and even eggs, chickens and bigger animals. Parents warned their children never to neglect to greet the old woman. She was said to have enormous evil powers".

The tribal people believed that the outcaste women possess evil powers. Their curses proved to be real and they can curse just spitting in the direction of the person to whom they want to curse. Ate narrates the story of a woman who used to spit in a certain way to curse Ate and her sister. She used to spit in their direction every time they met her on the village path. Ate's sister was upset on account of the belief that the woman cursed them every time she saw them for no fault at all. The woman was pregnant. Ate's sister was having more evil power in her fingers which she pointed at the stomach of that woman to avenge the curse, and as a result, they had to leave the village and became *Kirhufumia*, as Ate (2014:132) narrates:

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. You know that when someone spits in a certain way it is a curse, so that woman laid a curse on us every time she saw us. 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, and in that instant her baby died inside her.

Even Ate could not help the woman as she narrates, "I knew the malignant power that there is in my touch. The next morning we had to leave the village, and her relatives followed us until the end of the road, shouting that if we had not left they would have killed us." Vilie feels pity and advocates the act of Ate and Zote, "But how could they do that? Their relative was at fault!" Vilie exclaimed.

These are but the wrong beliefs which turned to be the superstitions in the tribal life which are being followed blindly by generations together. Vilie heard the stories of the witchcraft and the outcaste women from his grandmother. He learned from Ate that those outcaste women did not use their poisonous powers as per their whims. But sometimes they had to use for self-protection. Nobody advocated it except Vilie, as Ate (2014:133) thanks Vilie for showing reason and supporting the use of black magic against evil deeds:

Thank you, 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. In her day my aunt pointed her finger at a man and blinded him because he was trying to rape her. She was sent away from the village and we never saw her again.

The tribal literature focuses on the things beyond nature. It incorporates not only the description of forests, rivers and nature in its miniature but also takes its readers into the world beyond nature. Easterine Kire's novels also take the readers in to the magical atmosphere where one experiences horror, suspense and astonishment. As Arline Nikila Juli (2019:5833) in her research article entitled *Supernatural Elements in When the River Sleeps* states that, "Kire's narration highlights the supernatural and gothic elements presented in the novel. It discusses the existence of the sprits and beautiful girls and also as the stone heart." The protagonist Vilie sets his journey in search of the sleeping river to possess the 'heart-stone' which itself has magic powers. As the story moves deeper, one gets enchanted by the supernatural elements portrayed in the novel. The sojourn of the protagonist takes the readers to the distant lands, adventurous hills, enchanted villages, rivers, prohibited forests, etc. At the same time, the narration takes readers' attention towards traditional beliefs and superstitions of the tribals from the forests of Nagaland related to the spirits, were-tigers, witches, magic powers of the outcaste women, child spirits, etc. It's a kind of journey in the supernatural.

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