



Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*: An Ethno-ecocritical Reading

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Abstract

Easterine Kire who hails from Nagaland, a Northeast Indian state is a prominent writer who explores rich oral traditions, culture and ethnicity of the zone through her writings. Kire's *When the River Sleeps* journeys through different ethno-scapes ventilating readers into their belief systems. It is one of the representative writings from Northeast India where rich oral tradition, ethnic diversity, and culture of the zone find expression. In this writing, Kire has depicted the traditionally embedded belief systems proved to be balancing and grew together creating a strong bondage. The secluded life of ethnic groups moved harmoniously in unison with Nature. They believed that every organ of Nature has soul and they are guided by the spirits. Kire has taken us back to that pristine beauty of Nature where Human and Nature were situated in a perfect balance in an age old traditionally proven ecology. The knowledge system emanated from deeper understanding of Nature and world of the spirits and people who excelled in those fields are widely recognised.

This paper is an attempt to analyse from ecocritical perspectives, how the tribes lived a balanced life with Nature and created a suitable ecology for the survival as depicted in Kire's *When the River Sleeps*.

Key words: Ethnicity, tribal outlook, traditional belief system, Nature, culture, ecology

The story of *When the River Sleeps* is set in present-day Nagaland and the people Kire dealt with were mostly Naga tribes. The tribes of Nagaland had rich oral tradition, full of supernatural enchantment and now being transcreated into creative literature. Kire has beautifully blended oral tradition with her creativity and creates magic realism like García Márquez's and Leslie Marmon Silko.

Vilie, the main character in Kire's *When the River Sleeps* like in the Bildungsroman novel was an ordinary man of a village, but his curiosity for knowledge and power gradually elevated him to a legendary figure. Vilie decided to remain in the forest to protect wildlife and his close connection with Nature and his dedication made him possible to abandon everything and declare forest as his wife. Vilie declined to marry anyone even though his elders brought multiple proposal for him. Vilie's such decision shows tribe's relation to Nature in ancient tribal way of life. Vilie had already spent twenty-five years of his forty-eight years in the forest

protecting the mithuns, tragopans and other wildlife after the death of his beloved girl Mechuseno before he embarked on to his journey to the sleeping river. In his long stay in the forest, he really felt wedded to the forest and no longer felt the need of human wife and children.

The belief on the existence of spirits in the forest is enhanced by Mechuseno's mysterious death. Seno saw a tall dark man climbing down the tree and following them home but remained invisible to other girls. Such kind of incidents convinced the villagers time and again that spirits dwell in trees, rivers, and forest. It shaped their belief systems, and all the elements of Nature were feared, respected and worshipped. The hunters didn't go for hunting without performing rituals, likewise trees were not cut without offering prayers to gods. They used to offer prayers to the owner of the forest before going for hunting for the success as well as thanksgiving prayer was uttered if they got anything in the hunting, "If he found an animal in his traps and brought it home, she would repeat that *Terhuomia pezie*. It was her way of pronouncing a prayer of thanksgiving to the provider, *Ukepenuopfi*" (Kire 80). In Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, some of the spirits are visible and they can change their forms too and become invisible. Another storyteller of Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai also talked about the ominous aubergine plant in her fiction *Legend of Pensam* that had "grown to the size of a tree. It bore small poisonous -looking flowers that grew into long, bloated fruit, menacing and shiny. It was a ghostly tree, and no one dared to cut it" (Dai 31). Dai also talked about the tribes' belief on how spirits can dwell in human body. In the chapter "the silence of adela and kepi" of the same fiction the villagers believed that Kepi's sudden paralysis is due to "the spirit of a snake had coiled around the body" of the boy (Dai 21) and to appease the snake spirit the 'serpent ritual had to be performed'. Fig tree was greatly respected by Zeleang Naga tribes, they considered it as brother-tree, as their folk tale goes a fig tree had "helped to hide a man of their tribe, and saved him from being killed by spirits" (Kire 116).

The food habit of the tribes was healthy, natural and fully organic. They used to take vegetables and herbs, and meats and fishes were roasted in the bamboo poles. They "cut down arm-length sections of bamboo and stuffed their catch inside the bamboo, covered the open end with herbs and slowly cooked the fish over glowing coals" (Kire 116).

The Myth and reality of the existence of weretiger was another instance of ethnic outlook on the existence of spirits. According to such oral tradition which was also recorded by another female writer from Nagaland Temsula Ao in her poem "A Tiger-Woman's Prayer" it was believed that some people either man or woman used to possess familiars or companion spirits in the form of tiger:

Grant me this last prayer

So that when I cross over

...

Like all others of my kind

The iridescent fumes

Of last sunset

Will dissolve my several selves ("A Tiger-Woman's Prayer").

The belief in the existence of weretiger created a sense of bondage with animal worlds where animals got its values. Vilie was aware of the existence of such spirits which can't be killed by gunshots, and he cunningly evaded the attack by such spirits by knocking at their conscience by mentioning their names and introducing himself, "Kuovi! Menuolhoulie! Wetsho! Is this the way to treat your clansman? I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman (Kire 26).

When the villagers had the limited exposure to other worlds, forest was the source of everything. Before the advent of modern day industrial manufactured clothing, the tribes were expert in processing thread from the herbs and plants. In the chapter entitled "Barkweavers" Kire explores how the Zeliang Naga women were expert in collecting the stems of nettle plants and produce yarns for their cloths. The females would strip the nettle plants "for fibre to make into yarn- it was called barkweaving" (Kire 33).

Forest heals the wounds. Some of the tribes were expert in recognising the medicinal values of herbs. Vilie learnt to recognise the plants that have potential medicinal values from the elders and the seers. His knowledge about the medicinal values of herbs helped him in his journey through the forest in great deal. Ciena or bitter wormwood and Tierhutiepfu are some of the important medicinal plants where "Ciena was good for warding off evil spirits, the other herb was supposed to be good for a number of ailments" (Kire 32). A drink made of "ginseng and tsomhou, the sour seed that grew on trees" and "stir in a little honey" (Kire 54) is good for curing malarial fever.

The traditional knowledge system of curing disease by using herbs shows survival tactics in the forest. Trees of the forest served as natural hospital and herbs as modern day pharmacy. Vilie gathered that knowledge from elders and from his practical relation with the forest that helped him effectively during his journey to the sleeping river. Every wound has an antidote. Idele, a Zeliang Naga woman knew how to heal the wound stung by the nettle plant as she "plucked the leaves off a small bitter wormwood plant and kneaded it to pulp in her hand" to apply it to heal Vilie's wound (Kire 37).

The mysterious disappearance of heart-stone from the vilie's shelter in the forest also suggests that the stone as being part of Nature had made its way back to where it originally belonged after giving spiritual lessons to human beings. Ate didn't see the heart-stone where she placed it and was "no longer there" when she "returned the next time." (Kire 240)

The land is considered as home in tribal way of life. They become protective towards the land at any cost. Such kind of beliefs played as central gravity for the tribes and stopped them from displacement. They had the tradition of burying the umbilical cord near the house after childbirth, and once it is buried, they cannot migrate from that place. Subale explained the circumstances to Vilie, why they could not leave the border village even though they were disturbed by the spirits occasionally, "This is our home, do you understand? We cannot abandon it and try to live in another place. Our umbilical cords are buried here, and we would always be restless if we tried to settle elsewhere" (Kire 88).

The heart stone is not only about materiality but more to do with spirituality. The pursuit for knowledge and power is not only for material gain, but for spiritual enlightenment. As Kani's wife Subale explained, spiritual power is the true power that is worth pursuing because it gives power over "both the world of the senses and the world of the spirit":

"If you are grasping at wealth, you are going to lose something that wealth cannot buy for you. You will lose knowledge of the spiritual. And you will lose the power it offers you. That is true power; that is the only power to aspire to because it gives you power over both the world of the senses and the world of the spirit" (Kire 96).

The central focus of the novel is the heart-stone and the sleeping river. The river itself is a spirit which is guided by the widow spirits. The location of the sleeping river was a strange place where the river was guarded by the widow spirits. Vilie and Kani saw the spirit widow-women who guarded the river. They carried "baskets on their backs and walked into the fog and down the river" (Kire 101) and performed strange rituals. Kire's description of the sleeping river creates magic realism with full of dream like elements. Vilie's determination to get the heart stone from the river shows his curiosity and confidence and gradual spiritual enlightenment in his journey. The negative forces that he had to fight against led vilie to his better version. The journey to get the power was difficult, "the past few days had taught him much and he paused to consider the whole adventure" (Kire 96).

Stone plays a very important role in Naga way of life. There are multiple myths connected to Stone and Nagas. Kire in *When the River Sleeps* has also depicted the significance of Stone. In chapter thirty-three Kire has told the story of how stones used to influence Naga tribes. In Zuzie village, which is the ancestral village of Vilie "there were two stones that used to scream in the evening. Mother hid their children when the stones screamed" (Kire 140). The stone worked as alarm. When the two stones screamed it was followed by war, pestilence, and sudden death. The Ao Naga myth of human origin also tells that their ancestors emerged from the stone called Lungterok. According to an Ao-Naga myth of human origin, three males and three females emerged from six stones, at a place called Lungterok:

Lungterok,
The six Stones,
Where the progenitors
And forebears
Of the stone-people
Were born
Out of the womb
Of the earth (Ao 109).

People of the neighbouring areas were scared to go to the unclean forest. It was believed that spirits used to dwell there and such belief kept the forest untreaded that resulted in balanced ecology. As per the oral

traditions, the spirits used to sing melodiously, which was called forest song, to lure the hunters towards unclean forest so that they “would die and come to live with them there”:

“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, draw them to the unclean forest so they would die and come to live with them there” (Kire 76).

Vilie had to fight against the bad spirits representing negative forces in the forest for multiple times, but those fighting enhanced his knowledge and spirits, “Mine is the greater spirit! Depart from me !” (Kire 84).

Even though the villagers didn't have modern judiciary system, the customary laws practiced by the villagers showed natural evolution in the co-existence of Nature. The chapter entitled Jungle Justice shows genuine and unbiased judgement where Vilie could prove his innocence, “If we are to disregard this evidence and lynch this man in spite of his innocence, we will reap the punishment of our wrong actions” (Kire 71).

The heart-stone had the power, and the power can be used either for good or bad purpose. Zote used the power of heart-stone to destroy the village from which she was outcasted. But vilie used the power of heart-stone to fight against the evil spirits and restore the life of Ate when she almost died. Vilie's journey is not only physical but more spiritual as he gradually moves towards spiritual enlightenment. Vilie's quest for knowledge was not cakewalk as he had to overpower unquiet spirits, vengeful sorceresses, demons of the forest, armed men as well as jungle trial.

From the above discussion, it is evident that Kire's *When the River Sleeps* is a canvas where the writer paints beautiful picture of the ethnicity of Naga tribes of Nagaland. Kire has used the myths, legends, culture and tradition of the tribes and mingled them with her skilful creativity to structure the novel. By skilful blending of oral tradition with her creativity, she created a sense of history to fill in the void of unwritten history and asserted the identity of her people. Customary laws and traditional practices depicted in the novel are truly Natural evolved from the natural surroundings. The tribes' bondage to Nature was scientific that resulted in balanced ecology compared to the modern-day institutionalised religion that taught to believe that traditional belief systems were 'primitive nonsense'. Food habits were natural and purely organic. Nature served as the store house of medicine, and the people who mastered in the usage of herbs became saviour of lives. Forest became the provider of shelter, food and clothing. Forests, streams, rivers, animals and all the elements of Nature were believed to have guiding spirits, and they were feared and respected. Spiritual knowledge was expected and respected. Mastery on spiritual knowledge is gained by fighting against negative spirits.

Work Cited

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