



# Nagaland's Cultural Roots And Environmental Consciousness In Easterine Kire's *When The River Sleeps* And *Son Of The Thundercloud*

Lavanya Upadhyay

Student , Amity Institute of English Studies and Research

**Abstract:** For years, nature has been considered integral to human existence. The world has looked at nature from all perspectives, as a savior, as a destroyer, and even as a divine being. In India, nature has been worshiped profusely; natural elements have been seen as manifestations of legends, myths, and folktales that have been ingrained in the mindset of the Indian population. For instance, rivers like the Brahmaputra, Ganga, and Yamuna all have religious connotations attached to them, apart from being water sources. Similarly, mountains and forests are often associated with stories of divine beings. This research paper aims to look at the representation of nature in north-east Indian literature, specifically the Nagaland region as depicted in Easterine Kire's novels *When the river sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*, through an ecocritical lens.

**Keywords** - ecocriticism, nature, folk narratives, environment.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Easterine Kire, a poet, novelist, and doctorate holder in English literature from Pune, born in Nagaland in 1959, is one of the most influential literary voices coming from northeast India. She has contributed immensely to the mainstream Canon of Indian English writing, representing the northeastern region. She has not only collected 200 oral poems in her native language, Tenyidie, but also translated them into English. She is the first ever writer from Nagaland to publish and write in English. She has opened up the vast culture of Nagaland for the world to see. She has been awarded the governor's medal for excellence in Naga literature, and along with it, she has been nominated for the Indian Life Prize. Her writings have been translated into a number of languages, including Croatian, Uzbek, Norwegian, German, Catalan, and Nepali.

The Northeast has been isolated politically and socially for centuries, which has led to its complete absence from the literary sphere of India. It is one such region that has been in constant debate due to its troublesome history. Like many tribal communities, tribes residing in the northeast region promoted their culture through oral traditions. They passed down their stories from one generation to another in the form of folk tales, folk music, folk dance, myths, and legends. But constant violence and political upheaval led to the complete elimination of these stories; today, unfortunately, numerous stories have been lost as the result of constant displacement, migration, wars, and violence that troubled the region for many years. It is only recently that writers from the northeast have started voicing and presenting their culture to the world.

The culture of north-east India cannot be generalized as one particular tradition, custom, folklore, or belief. The north-east region has numerous tribes with their own unique cultures. These tribes may appear to be very similar, but not enough studies and investigations have been conducted to clearly differentiate them. However, Easterine Kire has now voiced her concerns regarding the endangered oral stories of these tribes, which face a threat of complete elimination from the face of the earth due to a lack of documentation in the area. Thus, it becomes important to preserve these oral stories, cultures, traditions, and beliefs. The little history that is

available to the world is heavily influenced by the constant change of power in the region; hence, there is little to no documentation of myths, legends, and folk stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. Another drawback of not having proper documentation is that, with time, the stories have evolved a lot, losing their original essence. It is impossible to know whether the stories that have survived until now are completely original or have changed with time. Kire has documented Naga culture beautifully in her novels. Her novels touch upon various issues of the Naga community, some of which are cultural identity, political upheavals, displacement and wars, and loss of home and self, but above all, nature persists throughout her novels. When the river sleeps and *Son of the Thundercloud*, beautifully captures the life of the Angami tribe of Nagaland and their culture along with myths and folktales.

Nature is an integral part of the north-eastern Indian lifestyle. Nature comes alive in Kire's works, with mentions of supernatural beings. Kire has incorporated creatures from Naga folklore and myths that signify the importance of nature. For the Naga community, nature is a provider and healer; these mythical creatures reside in these natural spaces, like the forest. Nature is more than just a resource; it is their means of survival, which makes the tribal communities highly protective of nature. Therefore, preserving nature and ensuring its revival are extremely important for them. The novel *When the River Sleeps* has multiple elements weaved into it that delves into the themes of nature preservation and revivalism. As mentioned already, documenting oral heritage is one way of ensuring the revival and preservation of nature. The novel introduces the readers to various myths of the Naga community. A concern that is reflected in Kire's writing is the lack of knowledge among the youth regarding the north-eastern lifestyle. It is evident through her novel that the older generation fears that the youth of today are not too concerned with the degradation of their surroundings. In the opening of the novel itself, Kire highlights the gap between nature and youth. For instance, Pele's parents are concerned that he will leave his land and home and wander, looking for a place better than his own. This fear of Pele's parents can be looked at as a collective concern of the people of these tribal communities, especially the younger generation, who are not aware of their culture and heritage and will have no connection to the natural world. Thus, it becomes important to make the younger generation familiar with the custom, culture, and tradition to ensure cultural preservation.

## II. ENVIRONMENTAL AWAKENING AND BRIDGING GENERATIONS

Symbolism is prevalent in Easterine Kire's novels. Intervening elements of culture, nature, and spirituality that emphasize and convey deeper meanings and concerns. Through symbolism, Kire explores complex ideas that are significant in enhancing the narrative. The sleeping river in *When the River Sleeps* is one such symbol; the river can have multiple interpretations. One is that the sleeping river represents a spiritual connection to the protagonist's journey. The magical heart stone symbolizes power and reflects the rich tradition in the culture of Nagaland. Vilie hopes to possess the stone that can provide him with power; this signifies the constant urge of human beings to attain power. The mention of the weretigers in the novel symbolizes the strength of nature and reflects the multifaceted aspects of natural elements; it also symbolizes the resilience of the community. Interestingly, the use of anthropomorphic beings in Kire's novels can also symbolize the outcasts and the marginalization of northeastern identities. For centuries, the northeast Indian region has remained isolated politically and socially. All these symbols further acknowledge and sustain the interconnectedness between the natural and human worlds. The use of symbolism adds multiple layers to her narratives, providing insight into history, culture, and tradition. Some other examples of mythical symbols in her novels are the rain, archetypal heroes, the sleeping river, and the creation myth.

Kire effectively communicates the everlasting importance of the symbiotic relationship that exists between humans and environment via the use of folklore and magical realism. Kire emphasizes how important nature is to the Naga people's daily existence. The story highlights the mutual reliance between humans and environment through the inclusion of mythical beings such as sleeping rivers, weretigers, spirits, and so on. This aids in the preservation of the Naga community's mythology. The everyday activities of the Naga community are intricately linked to these supernatural components, mirroring the deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and customs of the populace.

As the title indicates, the tale of the son of the thundercloud is crucial to the story. The fable revolves around a woman and her tragic destiny after her husband and three sons were slain by a tiger. The prophecy indicates that the lady will conceive and give birth to a son who will exact retribution, kill the tiger, and become the people's savior by restoring prosperity and joy to their hamlet. The people had to wait hundreds of years until she gave birth to a son. The fundamental beliefs of faith and optimism are upheld by this idea. This myth also

highlights how narrative has the ability to influence how the younger generation perceives the world. Because the story's title is derived from the tale, the reader is drawn in and reminded of the story's legendary undertone, which emphasizes the importance of oral tradition and folklore in Naga society. The same is true in *When the River Sleeps*, when myth and nature are once more interwoven. The story's central myth is the sleeping river, which drives the protagonist to embark on an adventure that informs the reader about the myths of the area, the Angami tribe's way of life, and the region of Nagaland. The mystical stone at the center of the sleeping river story has great power and wisdom. The main character, Vilie, wants to own the stone. The idea that a river is alive and can sleep while shielding the stone emphasizes that nature is a living entity that has to be conserved rather than exploited.

Kire emphasizes the connection between environment and culture in Vilie's Journey by painting a stunning depiction of the Beautiful hills and breathtaking landscapes, integrating mythical creatures like spirits as a part of nature. Each of these components gives the story more depth, complexity, and significance.

In both her novels, faith and hope are continuous ideas throughout. The narratives contain the loss and revival of faith and hope. In *Son of the Thundercloud*, when Pele is born, his grandmother names him Pelevotso, which means wanderer; his parents shorten it to Pele, thinking that he must not leave his home and land to explore other lands. Later in the story, when Pele's entire family dies due to a famine, he has no other option but to wander, and his name becomes his destiny. loss of home, family, and land crushes Pele, and he decides to leave his village as there is no motive for him to stay any longer. The story soon shifts to a more optimistic tone as he reaches the village of weavers. In this village, he manages to regain some faith as the village experiences rain for the first time in many years. The story almost becomes a rollercoaster for the reader as Pele struggles to navigate his relationship with nature. In *When the River Sleeps*, Vilie embarks on a journey to possess the magical stone. In his quest, he faces many challenges in the form of nature's manifestations, like spirits, dremons, and mythical creatures who create hindrance in his path. At times, Vilie feels disheartened but pulls himself back to overcome the challenges and achieve his goal, which signifies spiritual growth and personal development, establishing a rooted relationship with nature. The theme of loss of hope and faith is exemplified through the depiction of the exploitation of nature, performing unsustainable practices like not looking after crop fields, and clashing among clans. These practices resulted in extreme climate change, displacement, the elimination of basic survival needs like food and shelter, and the drastic effects of socio-cultural practices.

Kire uses the allegorical storytelling technique to portray the consequences of the actions by the characters in their natural surroundings; for instance, the battle between the *Son of the Thundercloud*, Rhalie, and the spirit tiger is a symbol of human nature interaction and relationship. This battle also highlights the various emotions of evilness, jealousy, and exploitative traits that humans possess that lead them to over exploit and degrade the very environment that sustains them. When the river sleeps, the three villages that faced drastic consequences due to their negligence towards nature also imply the careless behavior of humans that landed them in survival crisis, forcing them to leave everything behind.

### III. TALES OF TURMOIL AND MAN-NATURE CONFLICT

The son of the thundercloud, Rhalie, is a symbol of the interconnectedness between nature and humans. He kills the spirit tiger, but in the process, he loses his life too. He sacrifices himself for the safety and development of the villagers. Growing up, Ralie faced many challenges. Many kids were jealous of him, but he never took it to heart. His purity and selfless nature are reflected in his actions. There is a stark difference between Ralie and other villagers. The entire village does not believe in the capabilities of Ralie; they are full of greed and jealousy. Rhalie, on the other side, represents peace, harmony, and selflessness. This conflict ultimately results in Rhalie's death. Rhalie's mother, Mesanou, is one of the three divine sisters; her story is narrated in the prologue of the novella. Her husband and sons were killed by a spirit tiger, after which she lost everything that she had. As the myth suggests, it was destined that Mesanou would conjure a son from the first drop of the rain who would kill the spirit tiger to take revenge and retain prosperity and happiness for the land. The son that she gave birth to fulfills the prophecy but loses his life. Mesanou is the one who has to bear the consequences of this conflict; her son dies in the battle with the spirit tiger. She fell into extreme guilt for involving his son in the prophecy, which ended in death. As a consequence, she decides to leave and reside on a mountain where the three sisters once used to live. She ultimately dies in the mountains. Her son was betrayed by the villagers, signifying the jealous and greedy nature of human beings. They failed to respect

and preserve the prosperity that came with Ralie's birth; instead, they became overly jealous, which led them to betray Ralie and Mesanuo.

The villagers heavily lack an understanding of the interconnectedness between the natural and human worlds. This gap contributes to the man-nature conflict. Villagers are driven by greed and jealousy. They refuse to believe in the regeneration power of nature; they exploit nature after the prophecy is fulfilled. They do not care to preserve and protect nature, despite living in adverse conditions before Ralie's birth. As a result of their extreme greed and negligence towards nature, they betray Ralie, who was their savior. This negligence and exploitative behavior imply the negative impact of human-nature conflict. Nature's transformative power is highlighted through Pele's encounter with the three divine sisters. He starts his journey deprived of any hope or faith, but as he moves further, his perspective changes. When he learns of the prophecy and sees if it is fulfilled before his eyes, his spiritual growth is evident as the narrative progresses. Pele is a witness to every action that occurs in the story. Through his interactions with nature and humans, readers experience the story coming to life. Pele's character is harmonious with nature and the natural elements; he sympathizes with Mensanuo and is a witness to human-nature conflict.

The human-nature conflict is a serious concern that is highlighted in the thundercloud. His conflict deals with broader themes of exploitation of nature, degradation of the environment, and the consequences of human actions. The relationship between man and nature should be mutually beneficial, but with time, humans have grown to be less caring about the environment and more exploitative. The interaction of the characters and nature in the narrative reflects the intricate relationship between the two. The concerns highlighted in the story are thought-provoking, which compels the reader to look at and interpret nature as more than just a resource for your survival. Nature is a being that requires care. The consequences of exploiting nature are destructive and painful. The human-nature conflict persists, and it has only grown bigger in recent times; hence, it is crucial for human civilization to maintain a harmonious relationship, acknowledge the impact of human behavior on nature, and take appropriate measures to ensure sustainable preservation of natural resources for future generations.

In her novel *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire has, through her characters, embodied the consequences of humans' greedy intentions towards nature through various interactions between Vilie and supernatural entities. Kire has represented the culture of Nagaland and the Angami tribe exceptionally through the incorporation of these mythical beings, but along with that, these entities pose another motive as well. These entities and their interactions with the protagonist are an indication of the challenges that will unfold if human exploitative behavior continues. Vilie, throughout his journey, has encountered many supernatural beings, for instance, Zote and Ate, the spirit widow, and other tribal beliefs.

Vilie's desire to possess the magical heart stone from the sleeping river highlights the struggle between mystical powers and human fancies. His actions showcase his determination, resilience, and connection to nature. He establishes his relationship with nature as that of a companion. He considers nature to be his wife. However, the consequences of messing with nature are highlighted through his encounter with Zote and Ate, the Kirhupfumis sisters; they were extremely powerful. This interaction showcases the destructive outcomes of disrupting the balance between the human world and nature. The sisters are extremely powerful, and their actions signify the dangers of creating disbalance in the environment. The Spirit-widow guards the sleeping river. She is presented as a protector of the river when it sleeps. The spirit woman is a supernatural entity that adds layers to the story. Her presence symbolizes the supernatural forces that exist in nature as a whole; their presence throughout the story reminds the readers and the characters of the consequences of intervening with the environment. Supernatural entities play a significant role in Kire's novels. The amalgamation of Naga traditional beliefs and superstitions with nature is manifested in the forms of spirits, divine beings, weretigers, and magical powers. All these entities and their tales are ingrained in Naga folklore. The actions of the characters are heavily influenced by these supernatural beings.

Through the human-nature conflict, Kire underscores the need to awaken people and make them aware of the consequences of their actions. The emphasis of the story is to highlight the significance of nature and how important it is to respect and maintain a harmonious relationship with it. The characters experience the consequences of disrupting nature as they encounter supernatural beings. The mystical landscapes of Nagaland are beautifully depicted in Kire's writing, making the reading surreal and magical. The interaction between humans and the environment establishes a complex relationship between man and nature. In the narrative, Kire has explored both the beauty and dangers of nature.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Easterine Kire, in her novels *Son of the Thundercloud* and *When the River Sleeps*, deals with environmental concerns by weaving supernatural elements with human-man conflict. She beautifully narrates the tales of Pele and Vilie. Through their journeys, she provides insight into the cultures and traditions of the Angami tribe. The characters undergo spiritual growth, regaining hope and faith. Kire, through her exceptional storytelling, highlights the intricate balance between human and natural worlds, with supernatural beings at play. She underscores the themes of love, sacrifice, environmental degradation, and revenge, all while signifying the tradition of Nagaland. Pele and Vilie also witness the transformative power of nature as they face challenges and overcome them. Kire also highlights the serious environmental concerns that need attention. Through her allegorical writing, she reflects on natural and societal issues. She depicts nature and humans as interconnected, as well as the consequences of human actions on the environment. Kire's work stands as a profound literary creation that amalgamates nature, culture, spirituality, tradition, and human actions.

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