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Prophecy, Kirhupfümia And Sighting Of Spirits As Elements Of Magic Realism In Easterine Kire's *When The River Sleeps*

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Abstract: Easterine Kire Iralu is a prominent voice in Naga literature, and she is admired for her creativity in poetry, novels, and short stories. . Some of her major works includes *A Naga Village Remembered*, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Mari*, *Life on Hold*, *When the River Sleeps*, *Bitter Wormwood*, *Don't Run, My Love*, etc. *When the River Sleeps* was published in 2014 and the novel portrays the Naga culture and traditions, through spirits, witches, were-tigers. Magic realism is a literary genre which weaves fantasy and myth into everyday normal life. The paper will analyze and discuss the elements of Magic Realism and explore how Kire incorporates 'Prophecy' as supernatural element, *Kirhupfümia* (witches) as mythical figures, and multiple 'Spirit' encounters as spectral presence, into the storyline in her novel.

Keywords: Easterine Kire, magic realism, spirits, supernatural, prophecy, faith-based magical realism

Introduction

Easterine Kire Iralu is a renowned novelist and poet from Nagaland. Through her works, she revives the dying cultures, traditions, and roots of Nagas. Her prestigious novel *When the River Sleeps* was published in 2014, which involves various elements of magic realism. It tells the story of Vilie, an Angami man in Nagaland, who is obsessed with the sleeping river and the magical stone it contains beneath its water. The novel *When the River Sleeps* is about the legend of the sleeping river. The novel starts with Vilie having dreams of the sleeping river and the heart stone. It is believed that the heart stone can grant anything one can ask for. Vilie had this continuous dream for two years; hence he decided to venture into the deep forest in search of the sleeping river. Vilie lives in the forest and made forest as his wife, "the forest is my wife" (Kire 9), he takes cares of the rare tragopan and mithuns, "the clan then made him guardian of the gwi" (Kire 4). Through 'Prophecy' as supernatural element, *Kirhupfümia* (witches) as mythical figures, and multiple 'Spirit' encounters as spectral presence, Kire creates a literary landscape where magic realism elements are treated as real aspects of Naga cultural life. She blurs the line between what is considered real and what is considered magical, refusing to dismiss these elements as mere fantasy.

'Magic Realism' is a genre of literature that depicts the real world with an undercurrent of magic or fantasy. Magical realism falls under the genre of realism fiction. As a literary style, magic realism paints a realistic view of the world while also adding magical elements, often dealing with blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality. In literature, it is mostly a term encompassing magical or supernatural phenomena. It is often seen as an amalgamation of real and magical elements that produces a more inclusive writing form than literary realism or fantasy. In Kire's novel, this approach appears through three primary elements: 'Prophecy', *Kirhupfūmia* (witches), and 'Spirit' encounters. These elements are woven naturally into Vilie's journey through Naga territory, treated as ordinary parts of his reality rather than extraordinary events.

Warnes' Theoretical Framework: Between Faith and Irreverence

Christopher Warnes distinguishes between two modes of magical realism based on how they treat supernatural elements. He explains that "The core difference between the approaches I am labelling as irreverence and faith is that the former treats discourse as discourse; the latter frequently translates it into being." (Warnes 14). In irreverent magical realism, magic remains symbolic, a tool for questioning reality. In faith based magical realism, however, supernatural elements 'translate into being' meaning they have actual, material effects within the story world.

This distinction matters for postcolonial writers. During colonialism, Western powers dismissed indigenous beliefs as primitive superstitions. Warnes argues that magical realism can work as "a strategy of resistance" (Warnes 51) by showing that indigenous ways of understanding the world are equally valid to Western scientific rationalism. Instead of explaining away supernatural events, faith-based magical realism presents them as genuinely real. Kire uses this approach in *When the River Sleeps*. She doesn't ask readers to question whether spirits exists or whether prophecy works, she presents them as actual parts of Naga reality that must be taken seriously.

This faith-based approach shapes how Kire handles all three supernatural elements in the novel. Prophetic dreams come true, *Kirhupfūmia* wield actual power, and spirits intervene in physical events, each produces tangible results rather than serving as metaphor or symbol. Through these elements working together, Kire constructs a world where Naga spiritual beliefs operate as real forces, not primitive superstitions to be rationalized or dismissed.

Prophecy as supernatural element

The supernatural encompasses supposed phenomena or entities that are not subject to the laws of nature. The importance of prophecy in the novel is that, only because of this Vilie started his journey to find the heart-stone and through this, he came across *Kirhupfūmia* and sighting of spirits and completing his journey by gaining knowledge and wisdom from the heart-stone. The novel, *When the River Sleeps*, opens with the supernatural concept of 'prophecy'. Vilie had been dreaming the same dream for the past two years about

the sleeping river. In his dream, "Vilie plunged his hand into the river." (Kire 1) and trying to pull out the heart-stone, from the sleeping river. However, after he pulls out the heart-stone, the river has awakened and he struggles to free himself from drowning and when he flings his hand, it hits the edge of bed, realizing that it is the same dream, "He had the same dream every month for the past two years, ever since he had first heard the story of the sleeping river." (Kire 2)

This recurring prophetic dream shows as indigenous "modes of perception" (Warnes 62) that function as legitimate pathways to knowledge. In Western rationalist frameworks, Vilie's dream might be dismissed as psychological phenomenon, coincidence, or wishful thinking. However, Kire refuses this rationalization. The dream is not treated as discourse or symbol- it translates into being through literal fulfilment.

The prophecy functions beyond a mere plot device. It represents an indigenous epistemology where dreams and visions offering the ways of knowing the truth. Vilie sets out on his journey to find the sleeping river which he had been dreaming for so long, "It was more than a story to him. He wanted more than anything to find the mysterious river, and 'catch it' when it went to sleep." (Kire 2) soon he reached the sleeping river with Kani, and they saw that the river is guarded by the widow-spirits.

Significantly, Vilie's prophetic dream proves accurate in every detail, including the dangerous moment when, "Abruptly the water flowed again, in a furious spate this time flooding over him and pushing him under just as it had happened in his dream." (Kire 102) This literal fulfilment is critical to understanding Kire's faith-based approach. The narrative validates the prophecy not metaphorically but materially-the river behaves exactly as foreseen. Through this prophecy's accuracy, Kire shows that Naga dream-based knowledge systems work and provide genuine access to truth. This resists the colonial dismissal of indigenous epistemologies as irrational or inferior, asserting instead that "myths and legends are not fictional, not make-believe, but rather provide a means of recovering psychic and ecological wholeness." (Warnes 59)

While prophecy guides Vilie towards his destiny through dreams and visions, his journey soon brings him face to face with beings who wield tangible supernatural power in the physical world-the *Kirhupfümia*.

***Kirhupfümia* as mythical figures**

Humans who practice magical powers are often called 'witches'. Kire has portrayed the witches in the form of *Kirhupfümia* in her novel *When the River Sleeps* which gives us another element of magic realism in the novel. After plucking the heart-stone, Vilie came across the village of *Kirhupfümia*, and he remembered them as being powerful and feared. Back at his ancestral village, parents warned the children never to neglect to greet the old lady as she was a *Kirhupfümia*.

Ate and Zote were cast out from their ancestral village. The sisters have real supernatural powers. Kire's treatment of the *Kirhupfümia* shows how faith-based magical realism's refusal to rationalize indigenous

spiritual practices. The novel does not suggest that witchcraft is psychological manipulation, herbal knowledge disguised as magic or superstitious belief. Instead, *Kirhupfūmia* possess genuine supernatural abilities that produce material consequences. However, Kire does not present them as purely evil or as mythical figures to be admired. Instead, she shows them as outcasts who must deal with how society both fear and needs them.

After settling in the *Kirhupfūmia* village, the sisters lived independently. Yet, villagers still sought them out for help with healing herbs and other remedies, always bringing offerings. What started as hatred and fear gradually transformed into a more complex relationship. The villagers needed the *Kirhupfūmia* even as they feared them. This dual response shows how the novel treats witchcraft as a real social fear in Naga society, not just a superstition to be dismissed.

The sisters represent opposing uses of spiritual power. They both know that Vilie possess the heart-stone. However, Ate protects him while Zote want the heart-stone for her own benefit. Vilie warns her that if she misuses the stone, she has to pay the price. She did not want the heart-stone for wealth but she wants the power to battle her enemies, "I want nothing more than to wreak havoc upon those who threw me out of my village. To see their young destroyed and their houses in flames, their fields ablaze, that is all I seek. Only then will I be satiated." (Kire135-136)

Soon Zote attacked the ancestral village and set the village on fire destroying everything on her way. As she approached the village council hall, which is forbidden for the women folks, some of the houses are reignited, indicating the arrival of the ancestral spirits. She is defeated by the spirits warriors and nothing was left of her. This confrontation demonstrates how supernatural powers in the novel translate into being with devastating material effects (Warnes 59). Zote's witchcraft actually burns the village. The ancestor spirits actually manifest and destroy her. These are not symbolic events or moral lessons told through metaphor—they are presented as real occurrences within Naga spiritual reality.

The novel works within what Warnes calls 'between faith and irreverence' by exercising moral discernment. While validating that *Kirhupfūmia* powers are ontologically real, Kire distinguishes between righteous and vengeful uses of spiritual authority. After her sister's death, Ate followed Vilie back to his ancestral village and she becomes the new owner of the heart-stone, as Vilie believes that she will use it wisely with her good nature and wisdom as a *Kirhupfūmia*. This moral judgment prevents the text from becoming uncritical celebration of spiritual power while still insisting on its reality and effectiveness.

Beyond these human practitioners of magic, Vilie's path through the forest exposed him to an even more pervasive spiritual reality, the spirits themselves who inhabit the natural world and enforces spiritual justice through direct intervention.

Sighting of Spirits as spectral presence

In Naga culture, spirits are believed to inhabit the natural world- residing in tress, rivers, forests, and sacred spaces. Spirits can be protective or dangerous depending on how human engage with them; and they enforce spiritual laws through tangible consequences. Throughout the novel, Vilie encounters spirits ten different times. Each encounter is presented as a normal event, not something shocking or unbelievable. The encounters vary in nature—some are tragic, like when Mechuseno dies from tree-spirit possession, while others are protective, such as when ancestor spirits destroy Zote for violating sacred laws. This paper will examine several key examples that demonstrate how Kire uses spirit encounters to establish the reality of Naga spiritual beliefs.

These naturalized encounters reveal Kire's faith-based approach. Warnes notes that magical realism's, "most characteristic feature is that it naturalises the supernatural, integrating fantastic or mythical features smoothly into the otherwise realistic momentum of the narrative." (Warnes 151). In *When the River Sleeps*, spirit encounters are woven seamlessly into daily life without explanation, justification, or characters expressing disbelief. This naturalization validates Naga spiritual belief as the operating reality of the text.

The first spirit encounter establishes the stakes of spiritual transgression. When Mechuseno climbs a tree to collect orchid, "a tall, dark man had climbed down the tree and was following them home." (Kire 5). Despite her friends seeing nothing, the spirit pursues her home. She develops a fatal fever and dies on the third day. Crucially, no one in the narrative questions whether the spirit was real or suggests alternative explanations. The death is not metaphorical- it directly results from spiritual violation. This treatment shows how Kire refuses to subject Naga beliefs to Western rationalist judgment, where such an event might be explained as illness, coincidence, or psychological breakdown.

Vilie's multiple encounters with spirits in the 'unclean forest' shows his growing spiritual authority. Initially he was vulnerable to spirit attack, "A dark, indistinguishable shape was sitting on top of him" (Kire 82). Vilie learns to assert spiritual dominance through proper invocations, "Mine is the greater spirit! I will never submit to you!" (Kire 83) Vilie finds his voice again and his voice echoes back to him, he does not use his gun instead he stands up straight, expands his chest and shouts again that his spirit is greater and asks the spirit to depart from him.

The spirit widow-women who guard the sleeping river are among the most important spirit encounters in the novel. They follow specific rituals, appearing with baskets while chanting, and they pose a real threat to Vilie and Kani, (Kire 101). The spirit widow-women were only defeated by using the creator's name, "kepenuopfu zanu tsie la mha talie!" (In the name of the creator, retreat at once) (Kire 105). This moment is critical for understanding how the novel validates indigenous knowledge systems. The invocation works—not symbolically, but actually. The spirits retreat because Vilie employs correct spiritual protocol. This demonstrates that traditional Naga spiritual practices are effective, that they constitute genuine "modes of knowledge formation" (Warnes 51) rather than primitive superstition. The novel asks readers to accept that spiritual authority functions through proper ritual and invocation, just as Naga tradition maintains.

Another important spirit encounter is the ancestor spirits who destroy Zote by enacting supernatural justice with terrifying power. They emerge from flames, “as tall human-like figures with long spears and shields.” (Kire 158) giving the punishment that no human force could execute. Here again, supernatural intervention produces material consequences. Zote is physically destroyed, the village is protected, and spiritual justice is served through spiritual means.

By the end of the novel, Vilie is killed by a mysterious man, who was searching for the heart-stone. Thus, we get to know about Vilie's spirit that Ate and Roko could feel his presence, "Remember the young hunter Roko? He was here some weeks ago. He said he felt a presence in the house which was not frightening but different." (Kire 237). At last, Vilie himself has turned out to be a spirit but a good one.

The accumulation of these spirit encounters throughout the narrative creates what Warnes describes as the translation of discourse into being (Warnes 14). Spirits are not stories told around fires or cultural metaphors—they are active agents in the story's reality, causing death, offering protection, enforcing laws, and ultimately welcoming Vilie himself into their realm.

Conclusion

Kire use of ‘Prophecy’, *Kirhupfūmia*, and ‘Sightings of Spirits’, establishes magic realism as the dominant mode of storytelling in *When the River Sleeps*. These elements are not decorative additions to make the story more interesting. Rather, they are fundamental to how the novel presents Naga reality and a place where the supernatural is part of everyday life.

Through Vilie's journey, Kire shows that Naga ways of knowing the world are valid and meaningful. Prophetic dreams can reveal truth, *Kirhupfūmia* have real power, and spirits exist alongside humans. Yet the novel also exercises critical judgment, distinguishing between spirituality used for justice (Ate, ancestor spirits) and vengeance (Zote). The result is a work that honors Naga traditions while adding to ongoing literary discussion about the nature of reality, belief, and human experience in spaces where the magical and mundane coexist.

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