



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

A Discourse On Constructing Cultural Identity Through Myth In Easterine Kire's *When The River Sleeps*

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Abstract: This paper explores Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* as a rich narrative that draws from Naga myths to preserve cultural heritage, shape indigenous identity, and resist external misrepresentations. Set in the hills of Nagaland, the novel follows the spiritual journey of Vilie, a hunter in search of the mythical heart-stone, a quest that unfolds within a landscape shaped by ancestral stories, spiritual beliefs, and ecological wisdom. Through close reading and contextual analysis, the paper examines how myths such as the Tiger-Man and the heart-stone act as moral and cultural guides, reflecting the values, fears, and hopes of the Naga people. The study also applies theoretical insights from scholars like Barthes and Eliade to understand the symbolic power of myth in traditional societies. By reclaiming oral traditions and sacred narratives, Kire's novel offers an indigenous response to cultural erosion, giving voice to a community often silenced or stereotyped. The paper argues that literature from Northeast India, particularly when grounded in myth, becomes a powerful medium for asserting identity, preserving memory, and resisting marginalization.

Key words: Naga Literature, Myth, Identity, Cultural Preservation, Resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Naga Writings in English has over the years, emerged as a distinct and powerful body of literature in the broader landscape of Indian English writing, offering unique insights into the lives, histories, and cultural identities of the Naga people of Northeast India. Rooted in oral traditions and shaped by a complex colonial and postcolonial history, Naga literature explores themes such as memory, identity, indigenous spirituality, armed conflict, and the negotiation between tradition and modernity. This body of work represents not only a creative expression but also a political and cultural assertion, a reclaiming of narratives that have long been marginalized or misrepresented (Pou, 2015)

Among the pioneering voices in Naga English literature, Easterine Kire stands out as the most prominent and internationally recognized figure. Her works are deeply anchored in the oral storytelling traditions of the Nagas, and her fiction weaves together folklore, history, and contemporary realities to foreground indigenous experiences. In the words of Mero (2023), "Kire has undertaken the noble task of documenting and safeguarding the wealth of untold stories and indigenous knowledge that faces the threat of fading into

obscurity". With novels such as *A Naga Village Remembered*, *Bitter Wormwood*, and *When the River Sleeps*, Kire has not only brought the stories of Nagaland to a wider readership but has also created a literary space where Naga cosmology, beliefs, and everyday life are treated with dignity and depth.

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) is a lyrical narrative set in the highlands of Nagaland, following the journey of a lone hunter, Vilie, who seeks a mystical river believed to grant power to those who find it while it sleeps. Through this spiritual quest, Kire not only tells a story of personal transformation but also brings alive the myths, customs, and moral codes of her indigenous heritage. This paper focuses on her novel *When the River Sleeps* to explore how myths are used to rebuild and strengthen Naga identity. The story draws from Naga folklore and traditional beliefs to show how cultural values and spiritual knowledge, once passed down through oral stories, can help preserve and renew a sense of who the Naga people are. Through the journey of the main character, the novel highlights how returning to one's roots and traditional stories can be a way of reconnecting with a lost or changing identity. It presents the argument that the novel uses Naga myths, oral traditions, and spiritual beliefs to construct and affirm a unique cultural identity rooted in indigenous worldviews.

UNDERSTANDING MYTH AND IDENTITY IN NAGA CONTEXT

Nagaland, located in the northeastern region of India, is home to several tribal communities, each with distinct customs, dialects, and belief systems. It is home to 17 officially recognized Naga tribes, including the Angami, Ao, Sumi, and Konyak, each with distinct traditions, attire, and languages, reflecting the state's rich cultural diversity (Asthana, 2018; Nagaland Statehood Day, 2023). Despite their diversity, what unites these communities is a deeply rooted oral tradition that preserves their collective memory and cultural values. In the absence of early written records, oral storytelling, through folktales, legends, songs, and myths, has played a central role in transmitting knowledge, social norms, and spiritual beliefs from one generation to the next.

Myth, in the cultural setting of Nagaland is not merely a fictional or symbolic tale but a living source of wisdom. It carries historical memory, moral guidance, and spiritual insight. Through myth, communities make sense of the unknown, validate cultural practices, and sustain their identity. In a state where oral traditions play a central role, myths and legends are key to shaping cultural identity. Within this context, myths may be seen as the "eyes of a culture" (Meyieho, 2012). Shikhu(2007) also notes that, cultural, traditional, and religious myths have significantly shaped Naga society through oral histories and rituals, offering insights into the mysteries of the Supreme Being, creation, the universe, the animal world, and the Naga worldview (as cited in Sebastian, 2012). Mircea Eliade supports this view through his concept of the "living myth" (1963), suggesting that myths do not die out but continue to guide and influence the lives of those who believe in them, remaining active within the cultural consciousness of a community.

As asserted by Priyadarshini and Padmanabhan (2022), Indigenous tribal communities primarily rely on oral narratives and diverse storytelling traditions to pass down their social histories and cultural identities from one generation to the next. Oral narratives such as the myths play a central role in the construction of identity, particularly in indigenous societies like that of the Nagas. It provides a symbolic framework through which a community understands its origins, values, and place in the world. In the Naga context, myths are not merely tales of the past but active cultural resources that inform collective identity, social norms, and spiritual beliefs. They help define relationships within the community, between tribes, and with the natural and supernatural realms. As vehicles of memory and meaning, myths contribute to a sense of continuity, especially in societies that have historically relied on oral transmission. In constructing identity, myths offer both a foundation for belonging and a means of resistance against cultural erasure, making them crucial tools in navigating tradition and change.

The connection between myth and identity is affirmed by Easterine Kire herself, who emphasizes that Naga reality is deeply rooted in folktales and the supernatural. She explains that these traditional narratives shape how Nagas understand their world, serving as a foundation for their cultural identity. Kire also points out that while the Northeast is often portrayed in terms of political conflict, there exists a largely unexplored world of ordinary people whose lives are shaped by extraordinary beliefs and experiences. These stories, she argues, are not mere entertainment but powerful expressions of deeper truths, particularly the ongoing struggle between good and evil (Daftuar, 2015).

Buragohain (2017) notes, “*Literature plays a vital role in rebuilding identity and giving expression to voices that have long been suppressed. In a region that has endured decades of conflict, it becomes a powerful means of sharing its stories with the wider world.*” In this light, literature from the North-East emerges not only as a creative expression but as a form of cultural resistance, preserving oral traditions, revitalizing native languages, and challenging the forces of erasure and misrepresentation. Liezietsu (2023) also affirms that it becomes a means of affirming the region’s authentic identity and cultural continuity. Myths, deeply embedded in these literary traditions, thus serve as powerful tools in asserting agency, reclaiming heritage, and reimagining indigenous identity from within. Building upon such a premise, this paper then explores how Easterine Kire draws from the rich mythic traditions of the Naga past to reclaim a lost heritage. Through a close reading of her novel *When the River Sleeps*, the paper examines how myth becomes a narrative tool for cultural preservation, resistance, and identity formation.

MYTH AS A TOOL FOR CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Myth, in indigenous societies, is more than a story, it is a living archive of cultural memory, spiritual belief, and social instruction. As Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies* (1957), myth operates as a second-order semiological system: it transforms cultural signs into naturalized truths, embedding values and worldviews into collective consciousness. In this way, myths preserve and transmit meaning across generations, particularly in oral societies like that of the Nagas, where myth is central to how the world is understood and navigated. Easterine Kire’s *When the River Sleeps* exemplifies this role of myth as a tool for cultural preservation. The novel embeds Naga oral traditions, animistic cosmologies, and ritual practices within the narrative of the protagonist Vilie’s journey, transforming them into literary artifacts that safeguard cultural knowledge.

One prominent example is the belief in the spirit world and the invocation of *Kepenuopfu*, the Naga Creator deity. When Vilie faces threats from malevolent spirits, he invokes the deity’s name, “*Kepenuopfu zanutsie la mhatalie*”, as a form of spiritual protection. Although he carries a gun, it is rendered useless against supernatural forces: “*Your gun is useless against the things of the spirits for these are not flesh and blood*” (Kire, 2014). This moment reveals the deep cultural logic that governs the relationship between the physical and spiritual realms in Naga cosmology. The invocation of the supreme being is not an act of irrationality, but an affirmation of spiritual order and ancestral belief.

This belief aligns with Mircea Eliade’s concept of origin myths, which he defines as sacred narratives that explain how a reality or practice came to be. These myths are not open to question, because they involve the intervention of a supernatural being, thus, they hold exemplary value. In the Naga context, the actions and decisions of *Terhoumia* or *Kepenuopfu* provide models for behavior, social customs, and spiritual understanding. Practices are often followed without question because they imitate the divine. Eliade explains that the primary role of myth is to “*reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities—diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom*” (1963, p. 8). In this sense, myth becomes a guiding force that informs not only beliefs but daily life, reinforcing cultural identity across generations.

MYTH AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

In postcolonial literary discourse, myths serve not only as cultural memory but also as powerful tools of resistance. Writers from marginalized or colonized communities often use myth to challenge dominant narratives, correct cultural misrepresentations, and assert indigenous epistemologies. As Thiong'o (1986) argues, reclaiming native storytelling traditions is an act of resistance against cultural imperialism and linguistic domination. In this light, myth becomes a narrative site for reclaiming agency and redefining identity from within the community's own symbolic framework. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* exemplifies this form of narrative resistance by reimagining and restoring mythic elements that have often been distorted or exoticized by outsiders. One such myth is the *Tekhumiavi*, or the Tiger-Man myth, a deeply rooted belief among several Naga tribes that a man can share his soul with a tiger, transforming into the animal in spirit or form. This myth, often misunderstood or sensationalized, has contributed to colonial-era stereotypes of the Naga people as "savage," "untamed," or "closer to beasts than humans" (Heneise, 2016).

Kire resists these reductive portrayals by reframing the Tiger-Man myth not as a mark of wildness but as a story of spiritual kinship, moral complexity, and ecological interconnectedness. According to traditional versions, the tiger, the spirit, and the man were once brothers, born of the same parents. Upon their father's death, the responsibility of caring for their mother led to a split: the tiger went into the forest, the spirit merged with nature, and the man stayed to tend to the mother (Roy, 2020). This tale reflects a worldview where man and nature are not oppositional but relational, interconnected parts of a moral and spiritual cosmos. Kire uses this myth to challenge dominant binaries of human/animal, civilized/uncivilized, and natural/supernatural. As Sebastian (2012) points out, the myth collapses the boundary between human and non-human: "...there is no longer any convincing boundary between human and animals... we're all connected, people to people and people to nature."

Kire's narrative thus resists modernist and colonial ideologies that view nature as something to be dominated, and indigenous spirituality as irrational. Instead, she asserts an indigenous philosophy of coexistence and respect for all life forms. Furthermore, Kire shows that such myths served not only cosmological purposes but also social and psychological functions. In traditional Naga society, especially within a patriarchal context, the Tiger-Man myth was a way of instilling values of bravery, spiritual sensitivity, and endurance in young men. It trained them to navigate both the physical and metaphysical challenges of life. By highlighting this aspect, Kire reclaims the myth as a source of strength and identity, rather than as a symbol of backwardness or superstition. She articulates this philosophy clearly in the novel:

"We do not recommend these practices but we are telling you about them because knowledge is always powerful. That is what the age-group houses are for, to impart knowledge of the natural and the supernatural to you so that you go out into the world with knowledge of both, and not disrespectful of either world as some people are..." (When the River Sleeps, p. 28)

As Roy (2020) observes, Kire portrays Naga storytellers as cultural guardians and healers, preserving indigenous values and countering the erasure brought by external forces. In bringing the Tiger-Man myth into her narrative, she does not merely preserve a cultural memory, she activates it as a mode of cultural resistance. Her writing reclaims the right to self-representation, challenging both historical misreadings and contemporary indifference to indigenous worldviews. In this way, myth in *When the River Sleeps* becomes a powerful tool of resistance, resisting erasure, resisting misrepresentation, and resisting the fragmentation of indigenous identity in the face of external pressures. Through myth, Kire reclaims narrative authority and asserts the legitimacy of Naga ways of knowing, being, and believing. In the words of Liezietsu (2023), the novel demonstrates how literature can serve as a powerful tool for resistance and self-assertion.

MYTH AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY

In indigenous societies, identity is often shaped not by written codes or external systems but by myths, oral narratives, and symbolic traditions that define a community's relationship with the world. Myths serve as blueprints for personal conduct, communal ethics, and cosmological understanding. As Eliade (1963) argues, myths are not merely stories from the past but "exemplary models" that offer frameworks for how to live meaningfully in the present. In *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire draws on this mythic function to construct a narrative in which identity is formed through moral alignment with ancestral values, ecological balance, and spiritual humility. The myth of the heart-stone becomes a central symbol through which this formation of identity unfolds.

The novel's protagonist, Vilie, embarks on a journey to retrieve the heart-stone, a legendary object said to hold immense power over both human and spiritual realms. However, the stone is not simply a source of magical power; it is a moral test. It cannot be taken by force or claimed by ambition. Only those who possess a "large-hearted and teachable spirit" (Kire, 2014) are deemed worthy. Through this framework, Kire redefines power not as dominance, but as spiritual responsibility, and identity as something forged not through conquest, but through humility and ethical conduct.

Vilie's desire to find the heart-stone is not driven by greed or self-interest, but by a dream-guided sense of duty to protect it. His journey becomes a metaphorical rite of passage, through which he discovers and reaffirms his identity, not as a master over nature, but as its guardian. In contrast, characters like Zote represent the dangers of unchecked ambition. Her attempt to use the heart-stone to exact revenge leads to her downfall, punished by ancestral spirits. The narrative makes clear that power without moral grounding leads to destruction, while spiritual integrity aligns one with the greater harmony of nature and the community.

The myth of the heart-stone thus mirrors a key aspect of Naga identity: a deep spiritual and ecological interconnectedness. As Mishra (2018) observes, the Nagas do not see nature as an object to be tamed but as a sacred partner in existence. Forests are seen as dwelling places of spirits, and the land is revered as both provider and protector. The myth articulates this philosophy, access to nature's abundance is conditional upon inner virtues like humility, reverence, and teachability. In this sense, Kire counters colonial narratives that depict the Naga people as "primitive" or "wild" for their closeness to nature (Tzudir, 2014). On the contrary, this affinity reflects a refined ethical system, in which identity is defined by one's ability to live in balance with the natural and spiritual worlds.

The heart-stone resists those who approach it with greed, reinforcing the belief that true power must serve a higher purpose. It becomes a metaphor for the ideal self: one who has mastered not nature, but the self, who holds power not as a weapon, but as a trust. Vilie's identity, formed in dialogue with the myth, stands as an example of how traditional values shape personal and communal being. He embodies the idea that the individual's journey is not isolated but is always in relation to the land, the ancestors, and the stories that define the culture. Thus, the myth of the heart-stone in *When the River Sleeps* is not merely a fantastical element of the plot, it is a narrative device that shapes and reveals identity. It teaches that the self is not built through dominance or ambition, but through alignment with ancestral wisdom, spiritual humility, and ecological harmony. Kire's novel affirms that identity, in the Naga context, is a continuous act of living out the values embedded in myth.

CONCLUSION

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* powerfully demonstrates how myth functions as a key element in constructing and affirming Naga cultural identity. Through the journey of Vilie and his encounters with spiritual forces, ancestral wisdom, and sacred landscapes, the novel illustrates how myths are deeply woven into the daily lives, values, and worldviews of the Naga people. These stories not only connect individuals to their roots but also define their sense of belonging within a larger cultural framework. The novel highlights the importance of indigenous narratives in contemporary literature, offering a voice to communities often marginalized or misunderstood in mainstream discourse. By drawing on oral traditions, animistic beliefs, and sacred symbols, Kire reclaims a cultural space where indigenous perspectives are centered and celebrated. Ultimately, *When the River Sleeps* serves as both a literary and cultural preservation project. It keeps Naga myths alive in written form, ensuring they remain relevant for new generations. At the same time, it invites readers to appreciate the depth and dignity of indigenous knowledge systems. In doing so, Kire affirms that myths are not relics of the past, but vital forces that continue to shape identity, guide action, and enrich the human experience.

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