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## Greening the Imagination: An Interview with Easterine Kire

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Easterine Kire, poet, short story writer and novelist, was born in Kohima, Nagaland. In 1982, she was the first Naga poet in English to have her poetry published. In 2003, she wrote *A Naga Village Remembered*, the first Naga novel in English.

In 2011, she was awarded the Governor's medal for excellence in Naga literature.

Her novel, *Bitter Wormwood* was shortlisted for the Hindu Lit for Life prize in 2013 and in the same year, she received the *Free Voice* award from Barcelona.

Kire is a member of the Norway-based band, Jazzpoesi, and a founder member of Barkweaver publications which gathers folk tales and people stories. Jazzpoesi released a digital cd in 2013 which topped the Norwegian jazz charts in summer 2013.

In 2016, her novel, *When the River Sleeps* was awarded The Hindu Literature prize.

Kire has also been the first Naga writer to write books for children. She has recently released her fifth children's book entitled, "The Dancing Village." Her latest novella, 'Son of the Thundercloud' which was shortlisted alongside Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, has been declared Book of the Year winner for fiction 2017 at the Tata Literature Live Awards in Mumbai.

Kire holds a PhD in English Literature from Poona University. She performs poetry and holds writing workshops in schools and colleges. Kire has been living in Northern Norway for over ten years now.

**Imsong: How did you become a writer?**

**Easterine:** Long story. To put it briefly, I loved reading as a child and began to write poetry as a teenager. When I was doing my Masters in Literature I was very inspired by the novels of African writers and felt that I could also write a novel about my culture and society the way they did.

**Imsong: When do you feel complete as a writer?**

**Easterine:** I think that can come at different moments and different stages. I feel a sense of having made connection when a reader gets exactly what I was trying to convey. It is what you would call feeling complete I guess. I also feel good in a complete kind of way when I read through a book I have just finished writing and am satisfied with it.

**Imsong: How was *When the River Sleeps* conceived?**

**Easterine:** I think River has been with me a long time, because I used to hear lots of hunter stories from my hunter friends when I was a young adult. Then later in life, my son became a hunter and he and his friends brought home amazing stories too. All those stories were germinating inside me and *When the River Sleeps* was born. I added a lot to it as our hunter's tales are not very long or conclusive. Most novels start with a seed and the hunter's stories were the seeds I started with where this novel was concerned.

**Imsong: What kind of a hero do you see Vilie as? How can we also interpret the mysterious end?**

**Easterine:** I think all of us are ordinary humans with different capacities for the extraordinary, the spiritual. Vilie is one such person. He doesn't start out as a hero. But he does end up making stronger moral choices after the shooting incident. His love of the forest way of life endears him to me. At the same time, the way he grapples with loneliness is something we can all understand deep inside of us. He is ordinary and yet, by virtue of his choice to be open to the spiritual, he is

able to do the extraordinary as in wrestling Ate back from death. I think there is a Vilie within all of us.

The mysterious end means there is a sequel coming. The story is not finished. As my Zimbabwean friend Chenjerai Hove used to say, “*Palaver not finished!*”

**Imsong: In the novel *When the River Sleeps* are we within any time frame?**

**Easterine:** Not really. I didn’t want to be limited by a specific time frame. But Vilie has a gun, and his tools are not prehistoric. Readers are free to make their own conclusions provided they are not way off.

**Imsong: What does the intriguing ‘Heart Stone’ signify? Do stones have any cultural significance?**

**Easterine:** It is what Vilie discovers it is. For hunters, it is a magic stone that can give the owner all that he desires. But Vilie finds out later that the spiritual journey of discovery he is travelling is much more valuable than possessing a heart-stone. So there seems to be some ambiguity there, which actually just makes for great fiction!

Stones are highly significant in Naga culture. Tenyimia culture is a megalithic culture; on different occasions megaliths or monoliths are erected to commemorate an event, a feast of merit, a friendship feast. Some smaller stones were used as charms. There are many stone stories in different villages: in one village, an abandoned woman and her child had turned to stone and are still to be seen to this day. The 'heart stone' is a charm for helping the owner win many things: wealth, women, victory in war etc.

**Imsong: “The forest is my wife”. Can you give author’s take on this statement of affinity made by Vilie in the novel?**

**Easterine:** My son and I knew a man like this. 80 percent of his life was spent in the forest and when he was in the village, he always got tired of the company of humans. For the Angami, there are many levels to this statement. One is that the forest gives him food, meat of animals, herbs, roots, fruits and wood to make a shelter and warm him. On another level, I think Vilie says this because the forest so fully understands him as his fellowmen cannot. But I have to think more

about this. You see Vilie feels a sense of loyalty towards the forest in the same way a man would feel loyal to his wife. He acknowledges that the forest gives him so much and does so much for him by way of shelter and food and as a spiritual sanctuary that he feels disloyal when he feels lonely. The Angami has fear and awe of the forest for it is a place he does not fully understand. At the same time, he feels his responsibility to take care of it, like a shepherd or a husband. Vilie feels the forest accommodates him more than a human society like the village can.

**Imsong: What message did you want to convey through the novel *When the River Sleeps*?**

**Easterine:** Not really a message like a big political message about becoming a green society or anything, but I was writing about something I really enjoy: exploring the wonders that the forest holds and chasing this story of a heart stone and thoroughly enjoying myself whilst I did that. So I hoped the reader would also enjoy reading it in the same way as I enjoyed creating it. I would like youngsters to read it as well so that when they go to the forests they can learn the herbs and forest fruits mentioned in the book, which are all part of our wealth.

**Imsong: Can you comment on the title *A Naga Village Remembered*?**

**Easterine:** In 2001 or 2002, Professor Mohan Ramanan told me about a village that had been completely destroyed either by war or plague and someone wrote of it and called it, 'A Village Remembered.' It was a story very close to what had happened to the glorious past of Khonoma burnt and destroyed by the British in 1879-80, so I used this title, adding the 'Naga.'

**Imsong: Who is your favourite character in the novel *A Naga Village Remembered*?**

**Easterine:** Maybe young Lato, the one who looks after his mother. Or maybe the women, strong and resilient and having to go through such hard times and yet they do it with such dignity. I like most of the characters. Levi is a sort of ideal for most people of his time and he is his own ideal too.

**Imsong: In ANVR, there is a mention that men, tiger and spirits were brothers once upon a time. How do we construe this in terms of identity?**

**Easterine:** This is part of our mythological history. Oral narratives trace the genesis of life for the Tenyimia to a golden age when there was unity between all forces of life, the spiritual, the animal and the world of man. In the myth, the three live together as a family until the tiger

commits the taboo of eating their dead mother, which act breaks up the family. It is the Angami version of the Edenic fall. The Angamis claim that they got all their rituals and no work days from the spirits.

**Imsong: ANVR documents the transition from headhunting towards Christianity. Can we locate any broken chords between man and nature as result of this?**

**Easterine:** I don't see anything of the sort resulting from the conversion of Nagas to Christianity.

**Imsong: What message did you want to convey to the readers through the novel *A Naga Village Remembered*?**

**Easterine:** ANVR is a historical novel. I wanted to recreate the village in that era and present the cultural milieu that was the background of the Battle of Khonoma, and the kind of people that would have lived through it. I especially wanted to show the culture of that time, and the deep love of land and sense of loyalty to it and to each other that helped people resist the British forces. This is an insider novel, taking us through the cultural life of the village that only an insider knows about, and is sometimes misrepresented or belittled in anthropological records.

**Imsong: in your two novels *When the River Sleeps* and *A Naga Village Remembered*, the thematic approach is attuned towards Nature. Was it a conscious author's attempt or the cultural milieu that propelled it?**

**Easterine:** Both novels hark back to our culture which is very close to the natural world. It really is a culture of Respect. Even in head hunting days, we expressed respect for all forms of life. Respect for life growing in the forests, for animal life and human life. I think that when you grow up in such a culture, it is almost automatic that you turn to write about the natural world. The natural world becomes a character, and a very strong character in one's novels, in a sense.

**Imsong: In the spiritual cosmologies of *When the River Sleeps* and ANVR, dreams play a very crucial role. Why is it so?**

**Easterine:** In the Tenyimia or Angami spiritual world, dreams connect us to the spiritual world and we get relevant messages for our lives through dreams. The Angami never starts any big

enterprise in his life, viz, marriage, battle, businesses, without first 'listening to his dreams.' He is guided by his dreams and there is a wide anthology of dream-metaphors to use. For example, black birds indicate death, falling trees can mean failure or death of relatives, losing molars mean losing parents etc.

**Imsong: As a distinct author of traditional spiritual ecology, what are your personal thoughts about the status quo of Man and Nature?**

**Easterine:** I wish schools would teach how important it is for humans to take care of Nature. We take and take, exploit, destroy and there is not enough of giving back to nature. The nurturing of nature is still at such a low percent that we need many more institutions and bodies implementing policies that take care of our natural environment. Not just that, we should spend more time studying what lessons the forest yields for us, both spiritual and otherwise.

**Imsong: If *A Naga Village Remembered* is a historical narrative of how man lived in close proximity with nature, can we see *When the River Sleeps* as the ecological utopia we all envision but have forgotten how to go about?**

**Easterine:** If the reader wants to take it like that, it's fine by me, although there is a lot more to *When the River Sleeps* beyond that. But yes, as a place that offers shelter, food and sanctuary from ill-minded men, and also as a place that can satisfy our longing to experience the mystical and the otherworldly. Vilie travels through the forest for days on end, camps in the heart of the forest but always finds herbs that he can use for food. Wood is available in plenty for him to make a fire and warm himself. He could survive on what the forest offers by way of food and shelter. By mentioning all the names of edible herbs, I guess you can say that the author is giving a nature lesson for folk who don't know how much food is available in the forests. And by going through with Vilie on how to make a camp, another lesson in surviving outdoors is provided. And it hints at something more.

**Imsong: Traditionally the unclean forest as narrated in *A Naga Village Remembered* was shunned, but in *When the River Sleeps* the myth is debunked. Can this be seen as a progressive step towards the shaping of our understanding of Nature?**

**Easterine:** Even in *When the River Sleeps*, the unclean forest is still dangerous. So the myth is not debunked. Man should not assume that he knows. It all comes back to the idea of approaching nature with the respect that she deserves. At the same time, the book does invite the curious to enter the unclean forest and find out what it is all about, so yes we can conclude that more progress is being made to understand Nature.

**Imsong: What role according to you can literature and oral narratives initiate towards the global environmental move? What message would you like to put across to your readers through the retelling of oral narratives and the mythical past grandeur?**

**Easterine:** There is a lot of wisdom in the Folk. I'm trying to glean it for my audience. I hope they can take away from it the fact that they all have a role to play in keeping the natural world in balance. Oral narratives always have different levels to them and to read them only at the first level of story is to miss out on all the great teachings that they offer at the hidden levels. After all, our forefathers used them to teach life lessons so the simplistic stories usually have more to say than what meets you at first glance. Learn to learn from oral narratives. As a creative writer, it is very fulfilling to take from folklore and build upon it. I don't suggest that this is all that Naga literature should do. Definitely not. We have to branch off into so many directions, using so many springboards, (not just the folk) and tell our stories, thereby creating our own literature.

But the global environment movement can learn from our native ways of preserving the earth, and the sense of respect our culture displays towards the natural world. The procedure of leaving the soil fallow for about seven to nine years in jhum cultivation, the practice of saving endangered flora and fauna, forests and forest animals – these are all good practices that we have which others can learn from and we try to reflect in our literature.