

Reviving the Oral Tradition and Exploring the Traditional and Spiritual World of the Nagas: Reading Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

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Abstract:

The north eastern region of India comprising of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, is home to diverse cultural and linguistic communities. However, this part of India has been known as one of the most conflict ridden and militarized region since independence and writings from this region is said to have been filled with elements of violence and insurgency. For the writers who have grown up in a region marred by insurgency and violence, it is indeed inevitable to incorporate such issues in their writings. However, there are also many pieces of beautiful and magnificent writing coming out of North east India that engage with love and life, culture and tradition and various other interesting issues. If violence and insurgency is one of the recurrent themes in the literature from this region, portraying the culture and tradition of the indigenous people would be another. Going back to the vibrant oral literature and representing the unique culture of the communities living in this region seems to be another feature in the literature from North east. This paper attempts to read the novel *When the River Sleeps* by Easterine Kire as an attempt to revitalize the oral tradition and to represent the traditional and spiritual life of native Naga people.

Keywords: oral literature, north- east, culture, tradition, spiritual, orality.

The term North east was first used by the British colonizers as a political or administrative construct. But it stayed on to become the identity of the people and anything belonging to this region. There are also contestations regarding this use as it not only overlooks the differences the states share but also stereotypes its people. North eastern states have witnessed insurgency and secessionist movements, denial of the authority of the nation and demand of autonomy. These movements or demands were, however, not without any reason; problems like lack of

development, neglecting and hegemonic behaviour of the centre and mainland India, exploitation of the resources, conflict regarding accession of the states to independent India provided ample ground for them. Literature shares a close and dialectical relationship with reality, with the history of a society or a region. It is a medium of reporting the unseen, voicing the voiceless and expressing multidimensional perspectives. And the writings from North east, specially those written in English in the recent times are greatly affected by the recent historical events. Violence, insurgency, conflict figure prominently in the writings of this region which leads to generalisations such as “literature that is too conflict- ridden”, or “literature that depicts violence and rage”, or sometimes as “violence as thematic concern.” But it is important to note that although marred by violence and insurgency, the literature from this region also depicts an urge for peace, for representation and preservation of the native culture and tradition, engages in eco critical concerns and other universal themes. There are many brilliant writers coming out of North east who explore the reality of the people of this region with all the vibrant cultures and traditions, myths and legends they possess. Novels like *When the River Sleeps* actually dismantles the stereotypes that characterize the literature from this region being filled with the political concerns or violence. They show how people and literature from this region have many more beautiful things to tell. They also bring to the centre the people, their culture and knowledge which have long been side-lined.

Easterine Kire, born in Nagaland is one of the prominent voices from North east India. Her works enliven the life of native Naga people, their life style, society, political experiences with all its uniqueness. Her works invoke the landscape to which she belongs with its eventful history and fascinating culture. She is the pioneer of English writing in Nagaland. Easterine Kire's works include poetry, novels, short stories and children's books. In 2003, She wrote the first English novel from Nagaland, entitled, *A Naga Village Remembered*. In 2013, she was awarded the 'Free Word' prize by Catalan PEN, Barcelona. Her novel, *When the River Sleeps*, won the Hindu Prize for Best Fiction in 2015, and the next novel, *Son of the Thundercloud*, won the Tata Book of the Year (2017) and the Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2018. Her latest novel, *A Respectable Woman* was awarded Printed Book of the Year by Publishing Next in 2019. Her other novels include *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Don't Run, My Love* (2017). Her latest book *Waling the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland* (2019) is a comprehensive history of the Naga tribes. She has a number of poetry collections to her credit, the first being

Kelhoukevira. She has also translated 200 Naga oral poems to English and has also contributed towards children literature.

Tilottoma Mishra starts her introduction to the *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* referring to an “intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery” (Misra xi) which is a recurrent theme in the literature from North eastern states. Most of the communities from North east India can pride themselves for having a vibrant storytelling tradition. It is through this tradition of storytelling the cultural, spiritual and historical knowledge are transferred to posterity. Nagaland, home to vibrant and colourful cultures of as many as sixteen tribal groups living in the land, is rich in cultural heritage. It is a place of diverse tradition, belief and rituals shared by these tribal groups of which Angami is one. Besides, the scribal tradition is a recent one amongst the Nagas and before the development of a script for the Naga languages through the efforts of the American Baptist missionaries, literature was confined only to the oral form. The print culture and modernisation helped the oral narratives to be preserved and recreated in various forms. But it also created an encounter between old and new and native and foreign. The rich oral tradition of the Nagas constitutes the whole of its history, culture and belief and so adaptation and transcreation of oral literature constitute a significant part of the modern print literature. The poetry and fiction from Nagaland are filled with the colours of oral tradition as it encompasses the reality of the people of the land and they heavily rely on them. This tendency to go back to the past, to the oral narratives does not only imply their bearings upon the lives of people but also an urge to recover and preserve them. Moreover, most of the writers from North east have an acute sense of the place to which they belong and of their unique identity and they use writing as a vehicle to introduce their world to the outsiders who most of the times see them as exotic. The works of writers like Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Esther Syiem, Mamang Dai, Rong Bong Terang, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi to name a few are not only exploring the rich oral tradition and the unique culture, belief system, myths, rituals the people of the North eastern region have but also dismantling the stereotypes that are prevalent regarding the literature of this region. As Preeti Gill says “Life in the Northeast (as elsewhere) is not all bleak, tragic or violent. There is love and hope in the indomitable human spirit. In much of the writing there is the serenity and mysticism that is so much a part of the landscape of the region. Each writer from the region is closely rooted within his/her own culture, tradition and history and this is something that provides depth and substance to their writing”. (Gill)

The novel *When the River Sleeps* is about the legend of the sleeping river, which Kire has come to know about from her hunter friends, as she says in her interviews. Thus the novel itself comes into being from the knowledge gathered through storytelling. It tells the story of a lone hunter named Villie and his journey to the sleeping river to collect the heart stone which can grant him untold powers. But the novel, while describing the journey of Villie to get the heart stone from the river when it is asleep, does not only document many of the Naga oral narratives but also allow us to peep through their beliefs and their spiritual life. It integrates the Angami Naga socio cultural tradition with the narrative while highlighting the oral literature lineage and folklore as a way of life. The novel is full of Naga folktales, rituals, tradition and myths. The folktales or myths are the foundation of Naga lifestyle and their culture and tradition. They are transmitted from the ancestors to the next generation in the form of oral narratives through the tradition of storytelling, a practice exemplified in the novel too. As these oral narratives are present in the form of myths, legends, folklores that are passed on to the next generation through the process of storytelling only, now there is a need to document and preserve them. With the coming of people to the contact of modernisation and other foreign cultures, these narratives are fading out. Sensing this attempt have been made to preserve them in the forms of music, plays and other forms of literature. Kire, in an interview, has also acknowledged that she has been “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”. *When the River Sleeps* can be read as an attempt to both revive and preserve the oral heritage and to introduce the young generation and people outside to it. The novel starts with Villie dreaming of the sleeping river and the heart stone which itself is a legend. It is believed that the heart stone can grant anything one asks for, it can be cattle, prowess in war, or success in the hunt. As the novel progresses, we are introduced to various deities, spirits, rituals and beliefs, which together affect the thoughts and actions of the Naga people. There was a girl whom Villie liked once, named Mechuseno. She died due to some supernatural causes, that is, after encountering a spirit and she was buried outside the village gate because the circumstances in which she died was considered ominous. We can see Villie treating the forest as his refuge, “the forest is my wife” (Kire 7), he often said and it was indeed the forest that not only sustained him but also saved him from every danger. Here Villie represents what forest means to the indigenous people. The relationship they share becomes more evident when we come to know about the ritual of thanksgiving or showing gratitude towards nature and the birth spirit for everything it gives us. As he starts his journey to

the sleeping river through the forest, we can witness various interesting events taking place which seem impossible or unnatural. But they constitute an important part of Naga life and their belief system. One among such event is the appearance of weretiger. While Villie was asleep under a shed he found in the forest after covering a good distance, he wakes up to a sound of an animal. Knowing that the tiger has crashed into the door he shoots off a bullet and it escapes but only to return later. Now Villie knows that it is not a normal tiger but a weretiger. He remembers the closely guarded folk practice of men transforming their spirits into tigers. He then calls out the names of those people he knew were transformed into tigers and introduces himself and sees the tiger retreating. Those men whose spirits were metamorphosed into tigers, known as 'tekhumavi' or weretiger, goes through a long process starting as a smaller animal before reaching their final stage of weretiger. It was a closely guarded ritual of the Angami Nagas. Then Villie's journey takes us to the unclean forest or 'Rarhuria', which was believed to be spirit infested place and was avoided by people. People fall sick when they wander into these unclean forests and to cure them the seer gives a drink of ginseng and nutgall tree. Villie also falls sick while in the unclean forest and becomes very weak. In another unclean forest Villie witnesses a reflection of a young girl's face in a pool of water, which he is sure is not a human but a spirit dwelling in the forest. Next, he meets a spirit which attacks him. He feels his end near him but remembers the words of the seer who once advised him to be the bigger spirit, to assert himself as the great one so that the evil spirits submit. He does that, crying "mine is the greater spirit! I will never submit to you!" (Kire 83) and the spirit gets smaller and could not injure him. Another interesting episode of the novel is when he finally reaches the sleeping river accompanied by Kani. There they saw spirit women who guarded the river. They saw the women walking down to the river, and coming back to the bank. And then they walked back chanting, which Villie feels was haunting and resembled the funeral chants. Then the widow women spirits disappeared behind the hills and the river went to sleep and this is when Villie goes into the river and grabs the heart stone. However, it was not easy to come out of the river as he had to fight for a long time to come back alive and even when he was out of it both he and Kani was chased by the widow spirits. Again, his journey back with the heart stone to his home was another adventure. Now he meets spirit women in the market whom he successfully avoids as advised by an old man. Then comes to a village of 'Kirhupfumia', certain females believed to have poisonous powers. There he meets a beautiful and kind girl named Ate who was considered to be a kirhupfumia. But she was rather a normal girl manipulated by her

sister Zote who was really a kirhupfumia to believe that Ate also has evil powers. Ate saves Villie from her sister who wants to steal the heart stone from Villie. Villie makes her believe that she is but a normal girl and starts his journey back with her when they face the evil powers of Zote, the wrath of a weretiger which attacks Ate and severely injures her, and the wrath of other evil spirits. Ate almost died but fortunately Villie saves her fighting bravely against all the evil powers. Back in his village Villie tries his best to make Ate feel at home at his place and after some days leaves for his home amidst the forest where we see him encountering a stranger who tries to take the heart stone from Villie. After this although we don't meet him again, the novel ends with Ate hoping that he is still alive somewhere and the heart stone being in safe hands.

When the River Sleeps won The Hindu Prize in 2015 for its 'mythopoeic imagination'. The narrative of the novel transports us to a magical world full of super natural beings and unbelievable things. The novel, indeed, is a blend of natural and super natural, real and mythical. It can be read as a work of magic realism. However, though it may seem implausible or unrealistic, they are all part of traditional life of Naga people. They grow up with these stories and these stories are the foundation of their lifestyle. Folktales and the supernatural go to form the basis of Naga reality, as Kire herself says in an interview. We can often see Villie remembering the words of the seer, of his elders and other stories that he has grown up listening to. There are instances of children asking their elders about the sleeping river, the seer telling people how to get rid of the spirits, how to fight them and elders teaching younger ones the mysteries of life and nature. Rokolhoulie, a young boy often asks Villie about the sleeping river and absorbs every detail Villie gives him with astonishment. This is how their life goes on. Knowledge is imparted to the posterity through the process of story telling and the stories act as the force behind their action. It is mentioned in the novel that they have Age group houses which are social institution into which children are initiated after puberty and taught the ways of village by an elder. These elders who are store house of the folklore, legend, history transfers their knowledge to the younger generation. The novel, with all the real and super natural elements provide a realistic picture of the life of native Naga people. It is full of the myths, legends, proverbs, beliefs, that play an important role in their day-to-day life. It has not been many days since they have started documenting their history or the knowledge they share. All these were in oral form and transmitted to the younger generation in the forms of stories, myths and legends. With the coming of the missionaries began the conversion to Christianity, change in beliefs, and writing and translation also came with it. Native oral literature made a

progress to written form. Villie says how earlier they used to sacrifice chicken which they do not do now as Christianity has taught them that “*Jisu* had been sacrificed for everyone’s sickness.” (Kire 54) Although things like weretiger, unclean forest, kirhupfumia seem unnatural or impossible they form the basis of the belief system of the native Naga people. We can see Villie pondering over the miraculous phenomena of the transformation of men into tigers, but there is no trace of doubt about it in his mind. He already believes it to be true and his encounter with it and what happened after made him more certain about it.

Besides being a documentation of the traditional life or the faiths and beliefs or rituals of the native Naga people, the novel has some other important concerns too; its eco critical concern being certainly one of them, for example. Through the portrayal of the life of native Naga people, their customs and rituals, faiths and beliefs in the form of magic realism *When the River Sleeps* also allows us to take a look at their spiritual life. It explores the relationship among human world, nature and spiritual world and shows how all of them are intricately connected. The novel begins as a material or physical quest, but as we proceed, we notice that more than physical it is a spiritual journey, a journey inward. Villie starts his journey to the sleeping river to collect the precious heart stone which can grant a person many untold powers, however, he ends up not only with the heart stone but gaining more and more spiritual knowledge and wisdom. Throughout the journey, he attains spiritual wisdom which guides him to win over the evil spirits by using the perception of the ultimate power of his soul and to grab the heart stone. It is not merely about the heart stone but the spiritual knowledge and power that Villie achieves during his journey is what becomes more significant. With Villie we also learn that “The wisdom of the stone is more spiritual than physical. It helps us discover the spiritual identity that is within us, so we can use it to combat the dark forces that are always trying to control and suppress us.” (Kire 238) Thus *When the River Sleeps* is not merely the description of Villie’s journey to the sleeping river but it also endows us with the knowledge of the spiritual world which is an important part of Naga world view. Most of the novel covers Villie’s journey but as we go with him, we are enlightened not only about their way of life or faiths but also about their spiritual knowledge. We learn how the gun can not always help a person, or how a pure and great spirit can defeat anything. Villie’s journey tells us that in the battles against spirits one does not need a gun but spiritual strength. It also tells us that while one keeps one’s spirit pure and believes it to be the greatest of all one can easily defeat the evil powers. Villie often reminds himself what his elders and the seer had taught him. He remembers on his way how

the seer told him that only patient hearted are granted the blessing of catching the sleeping river. He reminisces the words where the seer told him that not every fight is against flesh and blood, while it comes to the spiritual world it is not gunpowder but the willpower, courage and patience that work. These lessons are relevant not only to the journey of Villie to the sleeping river but to the journey of life itself and this is where we can see the importance of the knowledge forwarded by the elders about the mysterious ways of nature or spiritual world, or the knowledge imparted by the stories, folklore and legends. There are also some proverbs which impart knowledge for life. For example, the older hunters often warn the young ones that “you can eat yourself dead”, which means they should eat slowly when they find food after along period of starvation. We also come to know about the forest etiquettes and hunter etiquettes, being grateful towards the good spirits, towards nature. The novel can also be seen as what we know as writing orality. Oral narratives play an important role in the lives of Naga people and storytelling is an important aspect of their culture which grows a wealth of knowledge within their spirits. The knowledge they gather through the oral literature is always alive in them. Kire in one of her interviews says how for the people of her generation from Nagaland it is easy to accept the co-existence of the natural and the spirit world and how she embraces both the worlds which actually enriches her. Yet in another interview she reiterates that there is no dividing line between spiritual and physical world in their worldview.

The novel thus unfolds before us the treasures of the Naga world and this world is full of universal wisdom. Dr. Payel Dutta Choudhury in the article “Myths, Rituals, And Belief: Portrayal Of the ‘Angami’ Society in Easterine Kire’s *When The River Sleeps*” says that “*When the River Sleeps* paves the path in understanding the Angami society portrayed authentically by someone who has known and experienced it and is thus able to bring out the true picture of society in a folk tale like manner.” (Choudhury) Initially the novel appears as a physical quest but at the end it brings one close to the knowledge of Naga people and their identity. Kire recreates the Naga identity that has continued to exist on its oral tradition and its myths and stories. This reminds us of Temsula Ao who rightly puts it in the essay “Writing Orality” that there is “a subtle conceptual shift” in the writings from this part of the region because they borrow a lot of the “elements from the oral traditions.”(Ao 107-8) She notes that North eastern writers look back to their cultural roots to reassess the marginalization of “orality” against the “written” and to find “a new literature of their own” by reinventing the oral traditions in the light of the present realities. The same thing is

reiterated by Tilottoma Misra in the essay “Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in North East India”, when she ends the essay asserting “orality is now being seen as the strength of the communities.” (Misra 24)She opines that drawing analogies from other oral cultures of other societies like that of native American and African, the North east writers have discovered the value of fusing the oral with written or of “writing orality”. Thus, oral traditions, far from being a handicap, empower them by offering new avenues of creativity and new language of expression, it becomes for the writers the repertoire of the legacy of their unique culture and identity.

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