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Decolonizing Narrative Forms: Indigenous Cosmology in *When the River Sleeps* and *Carpentaria*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) as examples of indigenous literary sovereignty that challenge Western epistemological frameworks. While critics have often situated indigenous writing within the category of magic realism—a Latin American literary movement rooted in Western modernist aesthetics—this comparative analysis argues that such categorization constitutes a form of epistemological violence. Instead, these novels should be understood as practicing indigenous realism, where rivers possess healing powers, ancestral beings intervene in contemporary lives, and land exercises agency not as metaphor but as lived reality within Naga and Aboriginal cosmologies. Through close textual analysis, this paper explores how both writers reimagine the novel form to accommodate indigenous ways of knowing. Kire's representation of the sacred forest and the weretiger guardian, alongside Wright's depiction of Country as a sentient protagonist, demonstrates how geography functions as history, morality, and political force in indigenous thought.

Keywords: Indigenous literary sovereignty, decolonial aesthetics, indigenous cosmologies, indigenous realism, Alexis Wright, Easterine Kire.

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"The stories of Aboriginal people are similar to those of South America, Europe, Africa, Asia or India. The old storytellers of the Gulf country, or Indigenous storytellers in any other part of Australia, could also be likened to Marquez's grandmother telling incredible stories with a deadpan look on her face. Such stories could be called supernatural and fantastic, but I do not think of them in this way."

- Alexis Wright, "On Writing Carpentaria" (2007)

Indigenous literature across the world is attempting to establish a new framework for understanding reality from a different perspective one that is opposed to the Western-dominated literary canon. Writers are endeavouring to articulate an indigenous way of knowing, challenging the epistemological foundations of Western literary criticism. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) depict the indigenous and Aboriginal worldview of two different parts of the world. Easterine Kire belongs to Nagaland, an Indian state inhabited by Naga tribes whose voices were unheard from their own perspective. Alexis Wright belongs to the Gulf of Carpentaria region in northern Australia, a land inhabited by Indigenous communities for thousands of years and deeply rooted in Aboriginal cultural traditions. Alexis herself belongs to the Waanyi people. Along with other indigenous peoples, they have a deep connection to the land, sea and rivers which generated a history of culture, spirituality, and ancestry. The narratives in the two novels depict the alternative reality of the indigenous people by bringing out the myths, spirituality, and supernatural stories deeply ingrained in their lives. The narratives can be explored through animist, decolonial, indigenous literary and ecocritical perspectives. Frequently, critics describe these narratives as "magic realism", taking into account the roles of nature in a metaphorical sense. But this is a kind of epistemological violence as it misrepresents the lived indigenous reality. Indigenous knowledge system was subordinated by Western aesthetic categories, which fail to realise the relational aspects of natural elements and spiritual elements

of the indigenous people. This paper argues that these two novels provide an alternative epistemology of literary narratives from a holistic perspective of the indigenous people. It argues that the supernatural stories are not literary devices but a continuation of cultural knowledge and spiritual experiences of the indigenous people. The analysis reveals that Kire and Wright reimagine the novel form to represent indigenous epistemologies and assert literary sovereignty. Through the use of nonlinear time, animated landscape, and linguistic experimentation they are resisting the monopoly of the colonizers' ways.

Magic realism, in the Western literary sense, is treated as a literary device to naturalize the supernatural within realistic frameworks. Originating in European art criticism, the concept evolved through Latin American Literature. The term 'magical realism' was coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1923 (Reeds 41). Reeds has defined magic realism as "a combination of the neo-fantastic and the recasting of history" (Reeds 253). The fantastical elements give a sense of construction to the readers. This article proposes an organic approach to the study of indigenous culture taking the events like Dreaming, ancestor spirits, Songlines, and Sacred nature as lived realities of the indigenous people.

The texts will be analysed from a decolonial point of view. Mignolo, a leading Latin American decolonial theorist, has noted in his book, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, written with Catherine E. Walsh, "Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being and doing that began with, but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion" (Mignolo and Walsh 28). It emphasizes an alternative way of understanding the world in opposition to the dominant knowledge structures fostered by capitalism and colonisation. Decolonisation "implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity" (Mignolo and Walsh 28). It proposes an alternative way of knowing the

world and denounces Western epistemology. Alexis Wright wanted to write the stories of their people from an aboriginal perspective. In her "On Writing Carpentaria", she has written, "For a long time while I was exploring how to write Carpentaria, I tried to come to some understanding of two principal questions: firstly, how to understand the idea of Indigenous people living with the stories of all the times of this country, and secondly, how to write from this perspective". Easterine Kire in her *Thoughts after Easter* (2014), argues that indigenous people should have the right to present and protect their identity and culture. She opines that Western anthropologists have misrepresented and misunderstood the indigenous worldviews. She writes, "We were written about for a long time. Western Anthropologists serving as Political Officers in the Naga Hills wrote lengthy books about our customs and cultures, which they did not fully understand and never would" (*Thoughts after Easter* 108). In line with Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Kire also emphasizes a different way of indigenous research by indigenous researchers. A non-indigenous researcher is not a reliable research authority on indigenous culture. According to Kire, "In the name of research, non-Naga scholars are continuing to commit cultural theft. Naga culture needs all the protection it can get so that the next generation is not doomed to having their culture dictated to them by an expert from another state" (*Thoughts after Easter* 106).

Animism is an important aspect of indigenous writings. Indigenous people practiced an animistic worldview. It constitutes the basis of their beliefs and relationships with their surroundings. Graham Harvey, in his book, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (2006), has noted, "Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey xi). Harvey argues that personhood is not limited to humans. Animals, plants, rocks, rivers, places, ancestors, and spirits can all be persons because they have agency. The new animist theorists Irving Hallowell and Nurit Bird-David see animism as practical, ethical, and relational, based on lived

experience, not on mistaken belief. Harvey opines that "Reflection on animist worldviews and practices could contribute to debates about consciousness, environment and ethics" (Harvey xii). According to him, modern Western thought has been structured on harmful separations like human/nature, subject/object, and mind/matter. Animism challenges these dualisms by presenting a relational, participatory world. This study explores these arguments with textual evidence.

Rob Nixon, in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), has argued that the capitalist society is slowly robbing the rights of indigenous people by destroying their habitats in the name of development. Nixon argues that capitalism and colonization fundamentally disrupt indigenous cosmology through the forcible imposition of what he terms "official landscapes" onto "vernacular landscapes" (Nixon 17). This creates a conflict in the way of looking at Nature. Indigenous people mark their landscapes associating spiritual connotations, whereas the colonisers build up maps of the landscapes, renaming landmarks on the basis of extracting and exploiting attitudes. The temporal and spatial ideas are deeply affected by the epistemological violence. Indigenous writings across the world are trying to uphold these identity markers.

This study is a qualitative and comparative analysis of two novels from two different geographical locations connected by an indigenous perspective. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) are two primary sources of information. For secondary sources, the study has depended on information from theoretical books on indigenous literatures, cultures, postcolonialism, environmental studies, and animism. Further, it has also interacted with similar and useful concepts from various journal articles.

Both novels challenge the Western conception of nature as a passive presence or scenic backdrop by presenting the landscape as an active agent contributing to and interacting with

human beings. The landscape in *When the River Sleeps* is a sacred place. Vilie, the protagonist of the novel, considers the forest to be his wife. The forest provides them with food and shelter. The river is presented as a spiritual presence holding stones imbued with spiritual power. These beliefs form the culture of the Nagas. The river and the forest must be informed before anyone takes anything from them. Thus, reciprocity is maintained, and humans also thank nature in the form of protection or by maintaining different types of rituals to respect nature. Following the dream, the protagonist, Vilie, goes to find the river, which has healing powers. The river is here an active agency having the power to influence human minds. This indigenous epistemological framework is alien to Western rationalism. The forest has been imagined as a human being, and considering its role in providing food and shelter to the people, it is declared as similar to a wife by Vilie: "The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it; and food when his rations were inadequate" (Kire, *When the River Sleeps* 51). The belief in forest song also creates a space for interaction between the forest as an animated being and human beings. The indigenous people have a deep faith in the spiritual existence of the forest. Therefore, they can hear the voice of the forest, which Western rationalism denies. Kire writes, "A forest song was a spirit song sung very melodiously and could be heard by a lone hunter…" (76). She further adds that "The old men said that spirits used forest songs to enchant humans, and draw them to the unclean forest so they would die and come to live with them there" (76). The reciprocal relationship between the indigenous people and the forest has been reflected in the novel. Vilie remembers the sayings of his mother, the way they thanked the forest for taking anything from it. Kire writes, "He tried to think of the rules of hospitality. If he took firewood or gathered herbs from the forest, he should acknowledge the owners" (80). In the origin tales of Naga tribes, animals, spirits, and man were inseparable and bound by togetherness. Kire writes in her book *Walking the Roadless Road* (2019), "Each tribe has its own origin tales but the origin narrative of a golden age when Man, Spirit and Tiger lived as

one family with their human mother is shared by many tribes" (Kire, *Walking* 51). This shows that the indigenous worldview is based on interconnection and interdependence. According to Roderick Wijunamai, in this novel, Kire "introduces her readers to the many other-than-human beings Vilie encounters on his journey, who are the same other-than-human beings that Nagas routinely encountered and acknowledged in their lifeworld in pre-Christian days" (Wijunamai 30-31). It is a decolonial attempt on the part of the writer to present an indigenous perspective of relationships between human beings and other-than-human beings.

A particular area of landscape called "Rarhuria", which means unclean forest, has been presented as an active agent of nature. This is a sacred area where the soul of sacred nature resides. Anybody trying to enter the area is caught by illness. Vilie, the protagonist, "thought of the people from his village who used to fall sick when they wandered into the Rarhuria while out hunting or cutting wood" (Kire, *When the River Sleeps* 53). The stones in the river bed are taken as having active power to bring blessings for human beings: "Certainly, if you can catch it while it is sleeping, you can take out a stone from the river and use it to grant you blessings of wealth and cattle, but there is more to it than that" (95). The river is a storehouse of spiritual knowledge, not just a passive presence. Anyone can achieve it by connecting to the river: "But most of all, he wanted the spiritual knowledge that the sleeping river would give him if they found it" (Kire, *When the River Sleeps*, 96). Vilie's interaction with the river also brings out the ethical aspects of environmental conservation. Nature has the power to strike back if lucratively approached without any internal organic attachment to it. The river tried to strike back at Vilie as he wanted to steal a stone from it. "Vilie was flung back like a bit of driftwood by the inrushing waters" (103). The violent energy of the river is enacted thus in the description of the writer: "The river was almost human as it pushed him down and under, down and under, and the water rushed at him as though it would strangle him. He was shocked at the violence of the river" (103). Indigenous people live in a raw natural environment, and they admit both

the evil and auspicious forces inherent in the natural elements of their surrounding environment. The novel, *When the River Sleeps,* presents a landscape with rivers, hills and forests which are inhabited by spirits who interact with humans in many ways. Kire writes, "Spirits use guile. They will appear to be good and beautiful so long as they can deceive you with appearances" (112). People are blessed and deceived by the spirits, depending on the spiritual knowledge they have to deal with these forces. Trees are looked at as brothers: "The Zeliangs did not like to cut down the fig tree. They called it their brother-tree because one of their folk tales told them of a fig tree that had helped to hide a man of their tribe, and saved him from being killed by spirits" (116). In Kire's works, Sky is presented as father and Earth as mother. River spirits are described as beautiful girls in the novel: "A flurry of human activity such as the market always attracts the river spirits. They are beautiful female spirits" (122). The spirits can mix with human beings in the market place by the side of the river: "They appear as beautiful young girls and mingle with the market people" (122). These are not magical but organic beliefs of the indigenous people. These may sound supernatural and magical, but these obviously constitute the reality of the people who do not believe in any boundary line between human and the natural world. They look at reality through such stories handed down from generation to generation. Stones have also been endowed with human attributes and spiritual power. There are many folk stories in Naga cultural history that tell of the stone-human connection. In the novel, one story tells that in "ancestral village of Zuzie, there were two stones that used to scream in the evening. Mothers hid their children when the stones screamed" (140).

In the same way, in *Carpentaria,* land is seen as speaking to the humans, and the country is responding to humans. Wright's *Carpentaria* depicts how ancestral law, spirituality, and the natural world coexist seamlessly with political history and everyday life. The novel is set in the outskirts of the imaginary town Desperance, where the family of Normal Phantom

lives in stark opposition to the white people's exploitation of nature, as the activities of the Gurfurrit mining company show. The purpose of the novel is to present the indigenous worldview, as Alexis Wright has put it: "The overall aim of the novel was to create a memory of what is believed, experienced and imagined in the contemporary world of Indigenous people in the Gulf of Carpentaria" (Wright, "On Writing Carpentaria"). Dreaming has been presented as reality itself. Paul Sharrad has explained the term "Dreaming" as a set of cultural and spiritual beliefs held by Aboriginal peoples, encompassing stories about the creation and working of the universe, codes of living in and interacting with the world, and related concepts and attitudes" (Sharrad 272). The novel opens with the ancestral serpent, a creation being who shapes rivers, landforms and spiritual life. This cosmology is not symbolic but ontological. The land breathes, remembers, and acts. Rivers shift course deliberately, spirits inhabit the country and the past continually intrudes with the present. Human lives are inseparable from land and ancestral forces (Wright, *Carpentaria* 1-2). Characters such as Norman Phantom and Mozzie Fishman embody this worldview. His deep connection with the river, sea, fish, and stars demonstrates indigenous ecological knowledge. The river is depicted as a living being: "This tidal river snake of flowing mud takes in breaths of a size that is difficult to comprehend. Imagine the serpent's breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland, edging towards the spring waters nestled deeply in the gorges of an ancient limestone plateau covered with rattling grasses dried yellow from the prevailing winds" (2). The relation between the Aboriginal people and the river has been a close one, as exemplified by the statement: "The Pricklebush mob say that Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's father did before him" (6). Wright's narrative mode demonstrates indigenous realism that restores Aboriginal ways of knowing, where myth, law, ecology and history are indivisible. Supernaturalism is not an intrusion into realism here; rather, it is the foundation of reality itself. Debora Bird Rose, in her book *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of*

Landscape and Wilderness, has pointed out the essence of indigenous realism: "For many Aboriginal people, everything in the world is alive: animals, trees, rains, sun, moon, some rocks and hills, and people are all conscious. So too are other beings such as the Rainbow Snake, the Hairy People and the Stumpy Men" (23).

Both writers depict the relational ontology between the human and the non-human beings. No one is superior or inferior; rather, both of them are tied in the networks of obligation to each other. Supernatural stories are lived realities projecting the indigenous ways of counting time in a cyclical pattern, and perceiving places as inhabited by ancestor spirits. In *Carpentaria,* Norm tells the story of a fish making a journey to the sky during the summer season, which reflects the seasonal breeding, migration and patterns of activities of the animals in that region. Indigenous cosmology is based on community feelings, ties, spiritual connection, sustainability, mutuality in relation to Nature, land and other forms of life. These are lived, enacted realities rather than imaginative fantasies — a distinction that lies at the heart of both Kire's and Wright's literary works.

Literary features of both novels assert the identity of the Aboriginal or indigenous people. The Western method of recording history and culture is exposed as unreliable and reductive. Language used is deviated from standard English. Narratives have used local tone and terms, emphasizing the oral storytelling tradition. Easterine Kire has used Tenyidie terms like 'ketsaga', 'gwi', 'Tierhutiepfu', 'Tekhumiavi', 'Rarhuria', 'Japan nha', 'Ciena', 'Kepenuopfu', 'Tathu', 'Genna', etc. Use of myths, folk wisdom and spirit-driven activities tells the essence of indigenous cosmology. Memory plays an important role in challenging the Western written method of human history. Vilie remembers the legend of weretiger: "Legend said that every weretiger began as a smaller animal, possibly a wildcat. He then remembered the story of a young boy who came from a long line of weretigers" (Kire, *When the River Sleeps* 27). Stories in memory are the essence of indigenous narratives. In *Carpentaria*, Wright has

used Waanyi language terms and phrases like ‘kangolgi’ (257), ‘jayi’, ‘barrba’, ‘yurrngi-jbangka’ (466), ‘Ngamiri’, ‘warawara yanja ngawu ninyu lajib’ (467) and the narrative voices are held by indigenous elderly people. She has used oral tones throughout the novel and the narrative voice is communal rather than individualistic. In this novel, Wright’s purpose “is to portray a sovereign Aboriginal mindset in an authentically Indigenous storytelling mode” (Rodoreda 10).

So, the indigenous cosmological beliefs should not be taken as equal to magic realist representations in the Western sense of literary category. These are lived realities and organic to the people. The novels show the indigenous ways of seeing the world, which have been suppressed by history for a long time. Indigenous people are marginal voices because of their alienation due to the oral culture, limited movements and interactions with the outside world. Their stories are connected to their lives and not just fantasies. Kire and Wright have used indigenous perspectives of narration with aboriginal protagonists moving through the natural landscapes. This shows the deep connection with nature. Inevitably, spirits, ancestors and natural elements are attributed with living quality and spiritual qualities found in the narratives. This indicates the environmental concerns of the present-day world and we need to look at nature not as a material for exploitation but as a being to be protected by mutual caring. Literary sovereignty of the writers involves the challenging of the western narrations and rationalities in the story. Local linguistic features and cultural connotations make the literary representation unique to the people. An inevitable part of indigenous writing is the conflict with the colonisers. Wright’s *Carpentaria* depicts the approach and attachment to indigenous people’s culture and landscape through the capitalistic presence of a mining company. The novels show the struggle of the indigenous people to preserve their identity by depicting a different epistemology and cosmology.

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