

**Nature in Easterine Kire's *When The River Sleeps*: An Ecocritical
Reading**

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a slowly yet steadily developing literary theory that gained prevalence in the early 1990s. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship that literature shares with the natural environment. Easterine Kire is a prominent writer from Nagaland, India and her novel, *When the River Sleeps*, narrates the story of Vilie, a lone hunter, who undertakes a dangerous journey in quest of a river that frequently appears in his dreams. This paper is an attempt at an ecocritical reading of this novel which is set in the beautiful hills of Nagaland. The forest is home to a lot of characters in the novel and nature is presented as an empowered, benevolent provider which protects all those who take refuge in it. Nature is also presented as a place of retreat and sanctuary and it becomes almost like a character in the novel as it helps Vilie overcome the fear of not just people but also spirits.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Pastoral, Wilderness, Personification, Sanctuary.

The environmental movement of the 1960s and Rachel Carson's seminal work *Silent Spring* made way for ecocriticism which came into prominence in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Ecocriticism being a broad term accommodates a number of approaches and welcomes inputs from people of various fields including natural scientists, anthropologists, writers, literary

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scholars and the like. The term ecocriticism has been traced to William Rueckert's essay "Literature and ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism"(1978) and M.H. Abrahams explains the etymology of the term thus – it is a term coined “ by combining “criticism” with a shortened form of “ecology”- the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats” (81).

Cheryll Glotfelty has been credited with reviving the term 'ecocriticism' in the 1989 Western Literature Association (WLA) meeting and Peter Barry quotes her in defining ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (239). The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) formed in the 1992 WLA conference and its official journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) has made a significant impact in the field of ecocriticism. Two waves of ecocriticism have been identified and Buell et al. differentiates between the two; “first wave scholarship of the 1990s tended to equate environment with nature; to focus on literary renditions of the natural world in poetry, fiction and nonfiction as means of evoking and promoting contact with it... by contrast second-wave scholarship of the past decade has shown greater interest in literatures pertaining to the metropolis and industrialization” (environment.harvard.edu) .

Ecocriticism evades a specific definition yet over the years many scholars have tried to define the term ecocriticism. A series of sixteen position papers all entitled “What is ecocriticism” has been published as part of the 1994 WLA meeting in Salt Lake City on “Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice”. In this series Christopher Cokinos of Kansas University defines ecocriticism as “the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the non-human world and our relation to it” (www. asle. org); Again according to Thomas K. Dean of Cardinal Stritch College “Ecocriticism is the study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with the human relationship with the natural world... in terms of academy, ecocriticism is... a response to scholarly specialization that has gone out of control; ecocriticism seeks to reattach scholars to each other and scholarship to the real concerns of the world” (www. asle. org); Cheryl Glotfelty states that ecocriticism is “an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (www. asle. org)

Ecocriticism as an academic discipline is still evolving and so it does not have a specific set of theories or approaches in reading texts but Glotfelty proposes a few questions that can be asked by ecocritics in analyzing a literary text and Brizee et al. in their article “Ecocriticism(1960- present)” has compiled it together:

How is nature represented in this text?; How has the concept of nature changed over time?;How is the setting of the play/film/text related to the environment?; What is the influence of metaphors and representations of the land and the environment on how we treat it?; How do we see issues of environmental disaster and crises reflected in popular culture and literary works?;...How do the roles or representations of men and women towards the environment differ in this play/film/text/etc.; Where is the environment placed in the power hierarchy?;How is nature empowered or oppressed in this work?; What parallels can be drawn between the sufferings and oppression of groups of people (women, minorities, immigrants, etc.) and treatment of the land?
(<https://owl.english.purdue.edu>)

Currently settled in northern Norway, Easterine Kire is a poet and author who hails from Nagaland, India. She has authored many novels, poems and children’s books and some of her works have been translated to other languages. She is also credited with translating around 200 oral poems from her native language to English. Her first novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) which is set against the British expedition in India is the first Naga novel to be published in English. Her second novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) is a coming of age novel which was followed by *Mari* (2010), the story of a young girl with the Battle of Kohima as the backdrop. *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) which won the Hindu Prize in 2011 highlights the Naga struggle for freedom from India. *When the River Sleeps* was published in 2014 and it won her the Hindu Literary Prize in 2015 for its mythopoeic imagination. She was also awarded the Governor’s Medal for excellence in Naga literature in 2011.

While talking of the inception of *When the River sleeps* to Swati Daftuar of *The Hindu* Kire says:

I have many hunter friends. My own son is a hunter. They would tell me stories, and in particular this one about rivers that ‘went to sleep’ at a certain time at night. No one knew when the river would fall asleep, but if they were fortunate enough to find

it asleep, they would quickly take out a stone from its depths and it would act as a charm. This story stayed with me a long time and surfaced when it was time for it to be written as a book. (www.thehindu.com)

When the River Sleeps narrates the story of Vilie, a lone hunter, who has made the forest his home. He is constantly awakened by dreams of a certain river which a seer had mentioned to him. The river has a particular stone which has the power to grant its owner any wish. Vilie finally undertakes the arduous and risky journey to ‘catch’ the river while it is sleeping in order to wrench the heart-stone. The journey is almost surreal as Vilie makes his way through the hills of Nagaland and it has an aura of supernaturalism as Vilie encounters weretigers, widow- spirits and demons in his quest of the river of his dreams. As he travels on foot he seeks shelter every now and then and this brings him into contact with villagers who are kind and also ruthless men who try to blame him on a murder that he happened to witness. Through his courage and will power Vilie finally succeeds and takes possession of the stone that he has dreamed about and on his way home he meets a kind- hearted young woman, named Ate, who has settled in a village for outcastes for all the women in that village including her are considered to have magical powers that can bring a curse on anyone by just pointing a finger. Convinced that Ate is harmless and also because all the inhabitants of this village had suddenly fled the village due to some unknown reason, Vilie brings Ate home along with him. Knowing that the forest is unsafe for her she settles her in his ancestral village with his aunts and gives her the heart-stone. Back in his home at the heart of the forest Vilie is brutally murdered by a man who coveted the stone to attain worldly possessions. Ate who is now married visits Vilie’s home every quarter of the year and claims to feel his presence there.

Ecocritics usually observe a duality between rural life and urban life where nature is generally idealized and quite the opposite is attributed to the urban scenario. While discussing the approaches in ecocriticism Brizee et al. borrows from the ecocritic Greg Gerrard who has identified three branches of pastoral:

Classical Pastoral, “characterized by nostalgia” and an appreciation of nature as a place for human relaxation and reflection; Romantic Pastoral, a period after the Industrial Revolution that saw “rural independence” as desirable against the

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expansion of the urban; and American Pastoralism, which “emphasize[d] agrarianism” and represents land as resource to be cultivated, with farmland often creating a boundary between the urban and the wilderness. ([https:// owl. english. purdue.edu](https://owl.english.purdue.edu))

When the River Sleeps is set in the beautiful and scenic hills of Nagaland. Much of the novel takes place inside the forest as the readers travel along with Vilie as he undertakes the epic journey in search of the river of his dreams. As Vilie takes shelter in the villages the readers are also transported to take a glimpse of the lives of Naga people. Kire has exalted the rural life which is untouched by modernity and unadulterated by technology. There is a hint of nostalgia for this ideal life reminiscent of the Classical Pastoral, as categorized by Gerrard, as people invite Vilie, a stranger and a weary traveler, into their homes and gives him food and shelter while expecting nothing in return, as Vilie assumes that the time is two in the noon by looking at the sun in the horizon ,as women gather nettle from the nettle forest to engage in bark weaving- an art passed on from generations to make bark-cloth, as men catch fish from the nearby river to make a hearty meal for the tired Vilie, as people work “under the open skies chanting work-songs in a ‘call-and- response’ way” (8),as people fall asleep listening to the sound of insects, owls hooting, frog calls and jackals in the distance.

In the power hierarchy, in this novel, nature is positioned right at the top rung. Nature is presented as empowered and not oppressed. Nature has the power to endow blessings and grant wishes. The river mentioned in the title of the novel itself is a good example. Vilie narrates, “if you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you. It could be cattle, women, prowess in war, or success in the hunt” (3). Nature has full control and man waits on nature to attain blessings.

Nature is also a benevolent provider almost equivalent to God. It generously provides food, shelter and all amenities necessary for survival to all who seek it. Even though nature poses a number of threats in the form of wild animals, Vilie has made the forest his ‘home’ for the past twenty five years (3). Though his relatives insisted him to return to his ancestral village he decided to stand firm in his decision. Further away from his place a Nepali couple has also made the forest their ‘home’. During a visit he paid to them Vilie asked how he would send their baby

boy to school when he is old enough to which the Nepali man replied “I will teach him my trade and he will grow up and earn an honest living. School is not for the likes of us” (15). Living in the embrace of nature they did not feel the urge to move out and Vilie looking at the face of the baby thought “What could school possibly teach him that his parents could not improve upon? They were rich in their knowledge of the ways of the forest, the herbs one could use for food, the animals and birds one could trap and the bitter herbs to counteract the sting of a poisonous snake” (15). In nature there is abundance, an equilibrium that is maintained, beauty, freedom, order and above all an undeniable wholeness.

Nature is Vilie’s protector and he is nature’s protector. The relationship is thus interlinked and mutual. The forest is home to Vilie and he in turn is the “guardian of the forest”(72). The clan has assigned the duty of guarding the gwi which are great mithuns found in parts of Nagaland and the Forest department has declared him the “official protector of the rare tragopan” which nested in Vilie’s part of the forest (4). Vilie’s fame as the guardian of the forest went far and wide. In his journey many people identified him due to this title attached to him- “Vilie! Surely you are the hunter who lives a solitary life in the forest near Zuzie. We have heard much about you. My people know that you protect the tragopan” (36). His identity helped him earn justice in a murder trial-“this man is known to the community here by reputation. He is the guardian of the forest in the western areas of the tragopan... whereas Hiesa, our clansman, is known to all as a lover of drink and a belligerent, quarrelsome man”(72).Vilie’s death is significant because he died protecting the heart-stone which is that bit of nature he considered sacred and precious.

The healing touch of nature is emphasized by Kire in this novel. Nature provides an antidote and cure for all ailments and the people rely on it heavily for treatment of any kind. When Vilie was stung by nettle plants Idele (a woman Vilie met on the way who knows the art of weaving nettle cloths) “looked around for an antidote. She plucked the leaves off a small bitter wormwood plant and kneaded it to a pulp in her hand...Vilie kept rubbing the paste into his skin and that seemed to ease the smarting” (37). She also gave him rock bee honey stating that it is a “cure-all” (38). For injuries Vilie made “pastes of cien for open wounds. That worked for smaller injuries, but for bigger wounds he liked to use pungent *Japan nha* [crofton weed] and

rock bee honey. He had tried these on himself, and the healing had been quick, with little scarring” (41). In the village for people who caught a fever “the seer would give them a drink made of ginseg and tsohou [nutgall tree], the wild sour seed that grew on trees” (54).

Brizee et al. presents Gerrard’s division of the representation of wilderness in literary works into two main tropes- Old World wilderness “wherein wilderness is treated as a “threat”, a place of “exile”” and New World wilderness which “applies to pastoral trope of the “retreat” to wilderness itself, seeing wilderness not as a place of fear, but as a place to find sanctuary” ([https:// owl. english. purdue.edu](https://owl.english.purdue.edu)). Wilderness in this novel represents the New World wilderness, a place of retreat that Vilie withdraws to and finds sanctuary in. Wilderness plays its role not just in the life of recluse that he has chosen but when people who try to hunt him down pursue him he seeks refuge in the Rarhuria or the unclean forest. “Only when he was at the heart of the rainforest did Vilie feel safe” (48). There he remained till the wound from the bullet he had taken healed. Though innocent he was still a fugitive and he thought gratefully that the wilderness provided “him with sanctuary when he most needed it” (51).

Nature more than providing a backdrop in the novel is almost like a character who is involved in the novel. Nature helps Vilie to conquer fear. When he witnesses the murder in a shelter that he took refuge in the night, his first instinct was to run. He fled for his life and little did he think that there was a chance for them to blame him for the murder, for the other three people present, including the murderer, were brothers. He sought refuge in the forest to escape from the many people who were after him. In the forest his thoughts became clear. The serenity of nature helps him to think clearly and take the right decision which is to walk to the ancestral village and to try to attain justice. Nature helps him not just to conquer the fear of people but also the fear of spirits too. As Vilie reaches the river of his dreams he realizes that the “river is a spirit” (108). Though literally he steps into the river to wrest the heart-stone, the force of the gushing water which almost strangled him made him realize that his fight is against a spirit. He conquers the fear of this spirit by invoking nature as he said “ Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuopfu [creator diety] fights for me, today is my day! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone!” (103).

Personification of nature is done in *When the River Sleeps*. Vilie asserts every now and then that “the forest is my wife”(7). At times the solitary life he leads borders on loneliness. Kire portrays through nature this inner state of mind of the protagonist- “that great loneliness that howled through his being like the wind baying up the valley, relentlessly beating at the wooden house and rudely blasting in through cracks in the walls”(7). Even though at times he is plagued by this terrible loneliness he is unwilling to abandon his forest for “he had the sensation that he was being an unfaithful spouse. He began to think that leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife” (9). During these times he consoled himself by saying that, “the forest is my wife, and perhaps this is what marriage is like; with periods when a chasm of loneliness separates the partners leaving each one alone with their own thoughts, groping for answers”(9). When people who falsely accused him of murder were hot on his trail he again sought refuge in the forest and stretching out in the shelter he thought that, “the forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it; and food when his rations were inadequate. The forest also protected him from the evil in the heart of man. He felt truly wedded to her at that moment” (51).

Nature has shared a close knit relationship with literature. Easterine Kire has presented the readers a truly remarkable novel, *When the River Sleeps*, which has in its narrative the natural and supernatural woven together. An ecocritical reading of the novel reveal that the enchanting backdrop of nature of the picturesque Nagaland cannot be ignored as the readers remain spellbound as Vilie takes us along with him in quest of the river of his dreams.

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