



When the River Sleeps: An Ecocritical Study of Esterine Kire's Novel

Dr. A. Aruna Sree

Lecturer in English, Government College (A), Ananthapuramu.

Abstract: The present essay is an ecocritical analysis of Esterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps*. It focuses on the portrayal of nature, indigenous ecological knowledge, and also the interdependence of humans and non-human world. The study takes a qualitative ecocritical approach by a close reading of the novel along with relevant sources of Naga folklore, indigenous knowledge, and environmental ethics for analyzing the depiction of nature and human relationship with the nature. The novel is set in the Nagaland highlands, and is highly influenced by Naga folklore, spiritual beliefs and personal experiences. It portrays nature as a living, moral and spiritual presence than as a passive background. The study emphasizes harmony, moral coexistence and harmony with the nature. In this way it challenges anthropocentric worldviews. The protagonists journey serves as a metaphor for a quest for equilibrium between ecological responsibility and human desire. The study also explores the way how the indigenous knowledge systems support environmental sustainability, and provides a counterbalance to contemporary exploitative perspectives.

Keywords: *Ecocritical, anthropocentric, environmental ethic, indigenous knowledge, Naga culture*

The novelist taken for study Esterine Kire is a renowned Indian novelist. She is best known for her writings on Naga history, culture, identity and folklore. She was born in Kohima in the year 1969 and she was the first writer who published a novel in English. Her major works include *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), and *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) and her recent work *The Sky Husband* (2025). The novel taken for the present study *When the River Sleeps* has won The Hindu Literary Prize in 2015. Kire plays an indispensable role in sharing and preserving Naga traditions in oral with the audience across the globe through her storytelling. The major themes of the novel as depicted by the novelist are Colonialism, war, memory, tradition. Apart from these, the novelist also tries to highlight the impact of modernity on indigenous communities are the central themes of the novel.

When the River Sleeps is a novel connected deeply with the Naga folklore and also spirituality. It is all set in the hills of Nagaland. The protagonist, Vilie is a hunter from Naga community. His adventurous journey to find 'sleeping river' makes the story more interesting. He believed that such river showers magical healing powers as he wants to possess that power. His search is driven by love and courage, and he wants to take care of the river in other words the environment. As he travels through forests and remote villages, he happened to encounter spirits, hunters. He also met both the human and supernatural forces.

The novel conveys nature as a living and sacred entity. As it is deeply interlinked with human life and morality, the themes such as indigenous belief systems, harmony between humans and nature can be seen apart from sacrifice, courage and ethical responsibility. The novelist highlights the oral tradition of Naga's in the story. It not only emphasizes the respect for natural world but also gives a warning against greed and exploitation.

of nature. Ultimately, *the novel* celebrates indigenous ecological wisdom, and endorses the spiritual bond between humans and the environment.

In the novel the novelist interlaces the natural environment into the moral and spiritual essence of the story, and it makes the novel apt site for ecocritical study. The central plot of the novel is the river, and is portrayed as conscious and powerful entity. The river's "sleep" and eventual awakening represent the delicate balance that exists between nature and humanity.

Taking its care of the environment is the ethical choice of people. In the novel Vilie treats the river as a living presence. His journey to find and protect it reflects the indigenous belief that nature possesses its own agency and must approach with respect and humility.

The repeated emphasize of the interconnectedness of human and non-humans with the nature shows the novelist's efforts to make the readers to realise it. Expressing the value of the forest, Kire writes, "The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it; and food when his rations were inadequate" (Kire 45). The forests of Nagaland are skilfully twined in the narrative as areas which Vilie travels are presents as sacred places and they give shelter for not humans only but non-humans too. These landscapes even examine the attitude of Vilie. Testing of his moral integrity establishes an opinion that showing irresponsible behaviour toward nature certainly leads to reflections. The repercussions of every action toward nature gives an alarming sign that the humans have to face. The moral involvement of Vilie with the natural world illustrates an indigenous ecological consciousness.

In the narrative the Naga folklore and oral traditions are given importance, and these aspects are the messengers of environmental wisdom. It gives a direction to Vilie to take decisions and at the same time it warns the effects of treating nature with disrespect and exploitation, in a way supports environmental ethic. The novelist, through her narrative, demonstrates how 'the river is a spirit' (Kire 92) which always cares for nature's inherent values. The novel not only challenges anthropocentrism but also emphasizes the necessity of environmental ethic in our lives, the positive role played by environmental knowledge by showing how morally active entities 'the river,' 'the forests,' and 'the spirits' are.

The novel contains several instances which illustrates the narrative's ecocritical perspective. Vilie's encounter with the "sleeping river" underscores that nature is a conscious and moral agent. Also, on his journey thorough forests, his respectful interaction with the nature can be considered as the novelist guiding the humans the way how one should treat the nature. This is an apt instance where the importance of coexistence and moral reciprocity with the environment is presented.

Vilie witnesses the status and consequences of exploiting the environment by the hunters and the villagers. The ramifications of human greed is visible and the emphasize on ecological justice is observed in this context. His confront with the spirits in the hills is also an instance where it highlights the integration of indigenous spiritual beliefs filled with environmental awareness. This presents the ecological wisdom.

Careful observation of the cycles of the season by Vilie is a kind of awareness about the nature that the novelist tries to create on the reader. He also observes the animal behaviour that expresses an indigenous knowledge system. It also promotes sustainability and the need of harmony with nature. His protective behaviour toward the river shows human's moral responsibility. In this way the novelist promotes the moral responsibility of humans towards nature. These instances of encounter Vilie with nature clearly stresses on the novel's central theme of moral integrity of humans with nature which is necessary for human survival and spiritual fulfilment as well.

Various other characters and elements in the novel, apart from Vilie also help in throwing an ecocritical concern in *When the River Sleeps*. Grandfather gives traditional knowledge with moral lessons on forests, rivers, and wildlife — how they are components of a wider ecological system and how disrespect toward nature brings consequences. More from villagers and hunters' ecological ethics: those who utilize resources unscrupulously meet with ill luck or get some supernatural retribution but regulation in the forms of fishing and forest usage demonstrate ethical stewardship to the environment. The use of spirits, supernatural beings

inhabit rivers, hills, forests and the sensitivity to human actions integrates spiritual belief with ecological accountability.

Other major characters are animals who lead, warn, or impede Vilie to demonstrate the web of human and nonhuman life. At last, it is the river which comes forth as the primary ecological agent rewarding nurture while punishing exploitation embodying life, sustainability and nature's moral authority. These human characters and natural elements weave a fabric of ethical and spiritual relations to environment showing Easterine Kire's view of an indigenous ecological consciousness wherein respect, reciprocity and moral responsibility toward nature are crucial for both survival and cultural identity.

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* has been at the center of scholarly interest in its brilliant depiction of indigenous ecological consciousness, while some other works further consolidate its standing in the domain of ecocriticism. As Wedeu Mero and Thokchom Sunanda Devi suggest, by narrating Naga folklore and oral traditions, Kire's text becomes a repository for situating environmental wisdom that emphasizes relations with forests, on one hand, and rivers on the other (Mero and Devi). This novel is centered in an inherently eco-centric view of tribal cultural practice—morally and spiritually respecting nature—as indicated by K. Nithya and Anita Albert (Nithya and Albert). Such scholarship opens up a reading of Vilie's journey not just as personal questing but rather as a search for an ethical relationship between human beings and nature wherein his relation to the sleeping river through forest respect can be read as a meditation on indigenous principle groundedness.

There are authors who accentuate the moral character of Kire's view of nature further. For instance, Pronami Bhattacharyya observes the novel from the perspective of posthumanism. The latter reveals how the borders between humanity and non-human nature are being constructed; the forest, river, and animals became active participants in shaping the moral universe of the novel (Bhattacharyya). Meanwhile, Neena Kishor observes that aside from its passive character, the natural landscape/environments actively function as asylum, source of provision, as well as moral guides for the protagonist as well. These may further prove the ecocritical narrative framework for *When the River Sleeps* since they contribute scholarly weight to the main study of the novel. Thus, the secondary literature offers significant weight as it does have scholarly integrity because of the substantial contribution it makes to environmentalism, indigenous knowledge systems, as well as spiritualism as it projects the relationship between humanity and nature. In fact, the book title itself references how nature is closely linked to humanity as it attempts to raise awareness regarding certain events in nature where "nature," in spite of its dormancy, imparts its own moral and spiritual guidelines.

When the River Sleeps, the title is so powerful that underscores the human relationship with nature. The river seems to be passive as it sleeps but it costs its moral and spiritual power. This is the guiding object of the humanity that unfolds such moments of awakening. Vilie experiences a sense of moral awareness. Also, he learns to respect the agency of nature. This ecological awareness echoes, in particular, with some other literary figures who have grappled similarly with nature as an active moral force. For example, Pi Patel's experiences with nature in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* represent Pi's encounter with nature not simply as a setting but as a morally charged nature where his very survival forces him to learn to respect animals. Santiago's humility and respect for nature as represented by the marlin and the sea in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* represent a sense of awareness about the place of humans in a larger nature.

Vilie's character is related to other literary figures based on indigenous cultural and spiritual beliefs. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*, where the land, river, and forest spirits dictate moral behavior and human engagement with the environment. By locating Vilie among such literary characters, the novel does not only portray the forest and river as having agency but also brings to the fore the ecocentric theme of the importance of the environment in human survival and ethical development. Thus, the "sleeping" river is a feature of the novel that promotes ethical and eco-centric themes.

The novelist expresses through the vivid descriptions of nature and its processes that the human actions are connected with the balance of nature, and the split with nature could lead to moral consequences. Also, the novel does not only laudate ecological awareness but also protests against anthropocentrism, emphasizing the significance of the mutually supportive relationship with nature and the moral responsibility of a human for nature.

The ecocritical consideration of Kire's novel displays a complex understanding of nature-society as well as morality in the narrative's exploration of the world of the character Vilie as he navigates the local forests and rivers with the guidance of what his grandfather taught him and with what he learned from his interaction with local spirits and creatures of the wild. Moreover, the novelist's work *When the River Sleeps* becomes an important contribution to Indian ecocritical literature with the support of other available literature about the value of novels as providing a space for the preservation of ecological values and societal morals with the novelist's display of important components of an indigenous ecological ethic in the context of current Indian ecocritical literature.

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