



Ecology, Myth, and Indigenous Ethics in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract— This paper undertakes an ecocritical reading of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, foregrounding its articulation of an indigenous ecological ethic rooted in Naga cosmology. Drawing upon ecocritical frameworks such as deep ecology, indigenous ecocriticism, and eco-spirituality, the study examines how the novel reimagines the relationship between humans and the natural world beyond anthropocentric paradigms. Nature in the text—particularly the river and the forest—emerges not as a passive backdrop but as a living, moral presence endowed with agency, capable of testing, guiding, and judging human conduct. Through myth, folklore, and spiritual belief systems, Kire constructs an ecological worldview grounded in restraint, reciprocity, and communal responsibility, where exploitation of nature is met with ethical consequences. The paper further argues that *When the River Sleeps* implicitly critiques modernity's extractive impulses and the erosion of indigenous environmental knowledge systems, positioning storytelling itself as a form of ecological resistance. By foregrounding indigenous ways of knowing and being, the novel challenges dominant Western models of development and offers an alternative ecological imagination based on coexistence rather than domination. Situated within the broader discourse of postcolonial ecocriticism, this study highlights the relevance of Northeast Indian literature in contemporary environmental debates, particularly in the context of the Anthropocene. Ultimately, the paper contends that Kire's novel contributes significantly to ecocritical thought by affirming the ethical necessity of listening to nature and respecting its intrinsic value.



Keywords— ecology, indigenous, biocentric, myths, nature.

I. INTRODUCTION

The accelerating ecological crises of the contemporary world—manifested in climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and environmental degradation—have compelled scholars across disciplines to rethink the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Within literary studies, this rethinking has found a powerful articulation in ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary framework that examines the representation of nature and environmental concerns in literary texts. As defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” a critical mode that challenges anthropocentric assumptions and foregrounds the ethical,

cultural, and political dimensions of human interactions with nature. Over time, ecocritical discourse has expanded beyond nature writing to include indigenous narratives, postcolonial literatures, and myth-based traditions that offer alternative ecological epistemologies.

In this context, indigenous literatures have emerged as crucial sites of ecological wisdom, preserving worldviews that emphasise interdependence, restraint, and reverence for the non-human world. Unlike dominant Western paradigms that often conceptualise nature as a resource to be exploited, indigenous cosmologies tend to view land, rivers, forests, and animals as living entities endowed with spirit and agency. Such perspectives resonate strongly with ecocritical approaches like deep ecology,

which argues for the intrinsic value of all forms of life, and indigenous ecocriticism, which foregrounds traditional ecological knowledge and sacred relationships with the land. Literature rooted in these traditions not only reflects ecological consciousness but also functions as a form of cultural resistance against environmental exploitation and epistemic erasure.

Indian English literature, particularly writing from the Northeast, occupies a significant yet underexplored position within ecocritical studies. The region's rich oral traditions, animistic belief systems, and close-knit community structures have historically fostered sustainable relationships with nature. However, these ecological lifeways have been increasingly threatened by colonial interventions, modern development projects, and extractive economies. Writers from the Northeast have responded to these disruptions by reclaiming indigenous histories and ecological ethics through storytelling. Among them, Easterine Kire stands out as a prominent literary voice who consistently engages with Naga culture, memory, spirituality, and the natural environment.

Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* offers a compelling narrative that intertwines myth, ecology, and ethics within an indigenous framework. The novel follows a seemingly simple journey narrative, yet beneath its surface lies a profound meditation on human–nature relationships. The river, forest, animals, and supernatural forces in the text are not inert settings but active participants in the moral universe of the novel. Nature emerges as a living presence—capable of nurturing, testing, and punishing—thereby destabilising anthropocentric hierarchies that privilege human dominance over the non-human world. Through its engagement with folklore and spiritual belief systems, the novel foregrounds an ecological ethic grounded in respect, restraint, and reciprocity.

An ecocritical reading of *When the River Sleeps* reveals how myth functions as an ethical regulator within indigenous societies. Far from being mere superstition, myth in the novel operates as a mode of environmental consciousness that instils fear of excess, respect for limits, and accountability towards the natural world. The forest becomes a moral space where greed is punished and humility rewarded, while the river symbolises purity, continuity, and ecological balance. In this sense, Kire's narrative aligns with eco-spiritual traditions that view nature as sacred and morally instructive, echoing broader non-Western ecological philosophies that emphasise harmony rather than domination.

This paper seeks to examine *When the River Sleeps* through an ecocritical lens, focusing on the

interconnected themes of ecology, myth, and indigenous ethics. Drawing upon theoretical insights from ecocriticism, deep ecology, and indigenous ecological thought, the study analyses how the novel constructs a non-anthropocentric worldview in which humans are embedded within, rather than positioned above, the natural order. It further argues that Kire's work offers a subtle yet powerful critique of modernity's extractive impulses and the erosion of indigenous environmental knowledge systems. By foregrounding indigenous ecological values, the novel contributes to contemporary environmental discourse and expands the scope of ecocritical studies within Indian English literature.

Ultimately, this study contends that *When the River Sleeps* is not merely a regional or cultural narrative but a globally relevant ecological text. In an age marked by ecological uncertainty and ethical crises, Kire's novel reminds readers of the necessity of listening to nature, respecting its intrinsic value, and recognising the moral consequences of human actions. Through its fusion of myth and ecology, the novel articulates an indigenous environmental ethic that holds vital lessons for sustainable coexistence in the Anthropocene.

A key strand relevant to the present study is deep ecology, articulated by Arne Naess, which advocates a radical reorientation of human attitudes toward nature. Deep ecology rejects the utilitarian valuation of the natural world and instead posits the intrinsic worth of all living beings, irrespective of their usefulness to humans. This philosophy insists on the interconnectedness of life forms and calls for a fundamental shift from human dominance to ecological humility. In *When the River Sleeps*, such a worldview is reflected in the narrative's insistence on restraint, respect, and moral accountability in human engagement with natural forces. Nature in the novel is not a resource to be conquered but a living presence that demands ethical conduct, resonating strongly with deep ecological principles.

Equally significant to this study is indigenous ecocriticism, which foregrounds traditional ecological knowledge systems and culturally embedded relationships with land and nature. Indigenous worldviews often conceive the environment as sacred, animate, and ancestral, where rivers, forests, and animals possess agency and spiritual significance. Scholars of postcolonial ecocriticism such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that indigenous narratives offer vital counter-discourses to colonial and capitalist modes of environmental exploitation. Within this framework, myth, ritual, and oral traditions function as ethical mechanisms that regulate human behaviour toward nature. Kire's novel exemplifies this perspective by drawing upon Naga folklore and belief

systems, wherein ecological balance is maintained through spiritual reverence and communal accountability.

The framework of eco-spirituality further enriches this ecocritical reading. Eco-spirituality emphasises the moral and spiritual dimensions of ecological relationships, suggesting that environmental crises are not merely material but ethical and metaphysical in nature. Non-Western spiritual traditions, including indigenous and Indian philosophical systems, often perceive nature as imbued with sacred presence and moral instruction. In *When the River Sleeps*, the forest and the river operate as spiritual spaces that test human intentions and reveal the consequences of greed or humility. Such representations align with eco-spiritual thought, wherein ethical living is inseparable from ecological harmony.

By integrating classical ecocriticism, deep ecology, indigenous ecocriticism, and eco-spirituality, this study adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework that enables a nuanced analysis of *When the River Sleeps*. These perspectives collectively illuminate how Kire's novel constructs a non-anthropocentric ecological ethic rooted in indigenous wisdom, offering an alternative model of coexistence that challenges modern exploitative paradigms. This theoretical foundation thus facilitates a deeper understanding of the novel's ecological vision and its relevance within contemporary environmental discourse.

A defining feature of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* is its portrayal of nature as a living, conscious presence rather than a passive backdrop to human action. Through the symbolic centrality of the river, the ethical space of the forest, and the agency attributed to non-human entities, the novel constructs an ecological worldview rooted in indigenous ethics and ecocentric values. From an ecocritical perspective, nature in the text actively shapes moral choices and outcomes, embodying what Lawrence Buell describes as an "environmentally oriented work" in which the non-human world exerts narrative and ethical pressure on human characters.

The river, which provides the novel its evocative title, is imbued with sentience and sacred significance. The belief that the river "sleeps" implies an awareness and power that transcends human understanding. Early in the novel, it is made clear that the river cannot be approached casually or greedily; it responds to human intention rather than human desire. As the narrative suggests, the river reveals itself only to those who approach it with reverence and restraint, reinforcing the idea that nature is not available for exploitation at will (Kire 17). This representation aligns with indigenous ecological thought, wherein rivers are not inert resources but living entities capable of moral judgement. The river thus functions as both a physical

reality and a spiritual force, demanding ethical accountability from those who seek its blessings.

The forest in *When the River Sleeps* similarly operates as a moral and spiritual landscape rather than a neutral setting. The protagonist's journey through the forest is marked by silence, vigilance, and submission to forces beyond human control. The forest repeatedly resists domination, compelling the traveller to listen, wait, and observe. At one point, the narrative notes that "the forest watched everything" (Kire 42), a phrase that attributes consciousness and surveillance to the natural world. Such moments destabilise anthropocentric assumptions and foreground what ecocritics identify as non-human agency. The forest becomes an ethical space where human greed, impatience, or arrogance invites danger, while humility and attentiveness ensure survival.

In addition to the river and forest, animals and supernatural beings play a crucial role in reinforcing the novel's ecological vision. Animals appear not merely as background creatures but as co-inhabitants of the landscape whose presence signals ecological balance or imbalance. Their behaviour often functions as a warning system, guiding or cautioning the human traveller. Moreover, the presence of spirits rooted in Naga folklore blurs the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, suggesting that ecological transgressions have consequences that extend beyond the material realm. As the text implies, unseen forces guard the forest and punish those who violate its moral order (Kire 63). Myth here operates as an ethical regulator, instilling respect for ecological limits rather than fear born of superstition.

Through these narrative strategies, Kire articulates a worldview that resonates strongly with deep ecology, particularly Arne Naess's insistence on humility and interdependence among all life forms. Nature in *When the River Sleeps* refuses to be reduced to an object of human mastery; instead, it asserts autonomy and moral authority. The novel thus challenges modern, utilitarian attitudes toward the environment and reaffirms indigenous ecological wisdom that recognises the intrinsic value of the non-human world.

By presenting nature as a living presence endowed with consciousness, agency, and ethical force, *When the River Sleeps* compels readers to rethink dominant human-centred perspectives. The river that sleeps and the forest that watches together construct an ecological imagination in which survival depends upon listening, restraint, and respect. In doing so, Kire's novel makes a significant contribution to ecocritical discourse, particularly within indigenous and postcolonial contexts, by reminding readers

that harmony with nature is not optional but ethically imperative.

Myth and indigenous belief systems constitute the ethical foundation of *When the River Sleeps*, functioning as mechanisms through which ecological balance is preserved and human excess restrained. Rather than presenting myth as irrational or escapist, Easterine Kire foregrounds it as a mode of environmental knowledge that regulates human behaviour toward the natural world. From an ecocritical perspective, myth in the novel operates as what indigenous ecocriticism recognises as traditional ecological knowledge—a culturally transmitted system that embeds ethical responsibility within narrative, ritual, and belief.

In the novel, ecological ethics are inseparable from communal memory and folklore. Stories about spirits inhabiting forests and rivers are not mere tales but moral instructions warning against greed and ecological transgression. The fear associated with these stories is not paralysing but corrective, ensuring restraint in human interaction with nature. As the narrative suggests, those who enter the forest without respect or who seek wealth beyond their needs invite misfortune, for “the forest does not forgive those who take more than they should” (Kire 55). Such statements reinforce the idea that myth serves as an ethical boundary, discouraging exploitative behaviour and promoting sustainable coexistence.

This ethical function of myth aligns closely with indigenous ecological worldviews, where land is not owned but shared, and nature is regarded as ancestral and sacred. In *When the River Sleeps*, the forest and river are protected not through external laws but through internalised belief systems that foster accountability. The protagonist's awareness of unseen presences and moral consequences reflects a worldview in which nature actively observes and responds to human intention. As the text notes, “there were forces in the forest that saw what humans could not” (Kire 61). This attribution of vigilance and moral oversight to the natural world reinforces an ecocentric ethic that places limits on human desire.

The novel also foregrounds restraint and sufficiency as core ecological values. The pursuit of excessive wealth—particularly the desire to extract untold riches from the sleeping river—is portrayed as morally dangerous. Characters who are motivated by greed disrupt ecological harmony and face punishment, while those who act with humility and moderation survive. This moral economy resonates with Murray Bookchin's concept of social ecology, which critiques hierarchical and exploitative systems that privilege individual accumulation over communal well-being. Although Kire does not overtly engage in political discourse, her narrative implicitly

affirms that ecological crises emerge from ethical failures rooted in greed and disregard for collective balance.

Furthermore, myth in *When the River Sleeps* dissolves rigid boundaries between the human, natural, and supernatural realms. Spirits, animals, and landscapes coexist within a shared moral universe, suggesting that ecological harm has consequences that extend beyond the visible world. This holistic vision challenges Western binaries that separate nature from culture and spirituality from material existence. Instead, Kire's narrative aligns with eco-spiritual traditions in which environmental care is a moral and spiritual obligation. As one passage suggests, survival in the forest depends not on strength or cunning but on “knowing when to stop and when to bow to forces greater than oneself” (Kire 70).

By embedding ecological ethics within myth and indigenous belief systems, *When the River Sleeps* offers a powerful critique of modernity's extractive logic. The novel suggests that the erosion of such belief systems leads to ecological imbalance and moral disintegration. In reclaiming myth as a valid and vital form of ecological knowledge, Kire resists colonial narratives that dismiss indigenous traditions as primitive or irrational. Instead, she reasserts their relevance in addressing contemporary environmental crises.

Ultimately, this section argues that indigenous ecological ethics in *When the River Sleeps* are sustained through myth, community, and spiritual awareness. These ethics promote reciprocity rather than domination, sufficiency rather than excess, and coexistence rather than control. By foregrounding myth as an ethical framework, Kire's novel expands the scope of ecocritical discourse and underscores the importance of indigenous narratives in reimagining sustainable human–nature relationships in the Anthropocene.

Although *When the River Sleeps* is deeply rooted in indigenous cosmology and myth, it simultaneously functions as a subtle critique of modernity's extractive and anthropocentric worldview. Easterine Kire does not depict ecological crisis through overt industrial imagery or explicit environmental degradation; instead, she foregrounds the ethical origins of ecological imbalance—namely greed, excess, and the erosion of indigenous ecological values. From an ecocritical perspective, the novel suggests that environmental crises emerge not merely from technological advancement but from moral failure and the breakdown of reciprocal human–nature relationships.

The desire to extract wealth from the sleeping river symbolises modernity's impulse to commodify nature. The river, revered within indigenous belief systems as sacred and sentient, becomes a site of temptation for those who

seek material gain without ethical restraint. Such desire mirrors what ecocritics identify as the capitalist logic of extraction, where nature is reduced to a repository of resources. The novel cautions against this mindset by repeatedly emphasising that the river reveals itself only under specific moral conditions, implying that nature resists exploitation. As the narrative indicates, those driven by greed “did not return from the forest” (Kire 74), underscoring the ecological and moral consequences of transgressive ambition.

Kire's critique of modernity is also evident in the contrast between indigenous ecological wisdom and externally imposed values that prioritise individual gain over communal well-being. The novel implicitly recalls the historical disruptions caused by colonial and postcolonial interventions in indigenous landscapes, where forests and rivers were redefined as economic assets rather than sacred spaces. By foregrounding indigenous belief systems that regulate environmental behaviour through myth and communal memory, Kire challenges dominant development narratives that marginalise traditional ecological knowledge. This resistance aligns with postcolonial ecocriticism, which exposes the environmental costs of colonial exploitation and advocates the recovery of indigenous ecological voices.

Importantly, *When the River Sleeps* frames storytelling itself as a mode of ecological resistance. By preserving myths, oral histories, and spiritual beliefs within the written form of the novel, Kire resists the erasure of indigenous environmental ethics. The act of narrating these stories becomes a form of cultural and ecological conservation, ensuring that ecological wisdom survives despite modern pressures. As the text suggests, knowledge of the forest and its laws is passed through stories rather than written rules, reinforcing the idea that narrative sustains ecological balance (Kire 81).

This resistance is ethical rather than militant; Kire does not advocate a rejection of modernity but warns against its uncritical adoption. Her narrative proposes an alternative ecological modernity grounded in humility, restraint, and respect for non-human agency. Such a vision resonates with Murray Bookchin's social ecology, which locates environmental crisis within hierarchical social relations and ethical disintegration rather than nature itself. While Bookchin emphasises social transformation, Kire's novel offers a cultural and spiritual pathway toward ecological responsibility.

By situating ecological crisis within the moral domain, *When the River Sleeps* reframes environmental degradation as a symptom of ethical imbalance. The novel suggests that healing ecological wounds requires not

technological intervention alone but a reorientation of values—one that acknowledges the agency of nature and the validity of indigenous ecological knowledge. In this sense, Kire's work transcends its regional context to engage with global environmental concerns.

Thus, *When the River Sleeps* emerges as a quiet yet powerful act of resistance against exploitative modernity. Through its emphasis on indigenous ethics, myth, and storytelling, the novel challenges dominant paradigms of progress and offers an ecocentric vision of coexistence. It affirms that sustainable futures depend upon listening to voices—human and non-human alike—that modernity has long sought to silence.

II. CONCLUSION

This ecocritical study of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* has sought to demonstrate how the novel articulates an indigenous ecological ethic grounded in myth, spirituality, and ethical restraint. Through its representation of nature as a living, conscious presence, the text challenges anthropocentric assumptions that position the natural world as a passive resource for human exploitation. The river that “sleeps,” the watchful forest, and the presence of non-human and supernatural agencies collectively construct an ecocentric worldview in which human survival depends upon humility, attentiveness, and respect for ecological limits.

By engaging deeply with indigenous belief systems, the novel foregrounds myth not as superstition but as a form of environmental knowledge that regulates human behaviour and sustains ecological balance. Myth functions as an ethical framework through which values of reciprocity, sufficiency, and communal responsibility are transmitted across generations. In doing so, *When the River Sleeps* affirms the significance of indigenous ecological wisdom and challenges modern epistemologies that dismiss such knowledge systems as irrational or obsolete. The narrative thus aligns with ecocritical and postcolonial discourses that call for the recovery and validation of indigenous voices in environmental debates.

The novel also offers a subtle yet compelling critique of modernity's extractive impulses. Rather than depicting ecological crisis through overt industrial imagery, Kire locates the roots of environmental degradation in moral failure—specifically, in greed and the erosion of ethical relationships between humans and nature. Through storytelling as a mode of resistance, the novel preserves ecological memory and counters the cultural amnesia produced by colonial and capitalist interventions. In this sense, *When the River Sleeps* participates in a broader eco-

political project that resists both environmental exploitation and cultural erasure.

Ultimately, Kire's novel transcends its regional specificity to address global ecological concerns. In the context of the Anthropocene—marked by unprecedented environmental crises and ethical uncertainty—the ecological vision articulated in *When the River Sleeps* assumes renewed relevance. The novel reminds contemporary readers that sustainable coexistence cannot be achieved through domination or technological mastery alone, but through ethical reorientation and respectful engagement with the non-human world. By listening to the river, honouring the forest, and recognising nature's intrinsic value, Kire's narrative offers a powerful reminder that ecological survival is inseparable from moral responsibility.

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