

“Our Umbilical Cords are Buried Here”: The Feminine Spirit, Land, and Resistance in Easterine Kire’s *When the River Sleeps*

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Abstract

Easterine Kire weaves a tale that transcends mere storytelling, blending the spiritual, ecological, and cultural dimensions of life. The story *When the River Sleeps* revolves around the protagonist Vilie who embarks on a solitary and perilous journey deep into the forest of Nagaland to retrieve the magical heart-stone from the sleeping river. The magical stone is believed to possess immense power, but it requires courage, resilience and spiritual strength to retrieve it. In the course of his journey Vilie encounters several other characters out of which the women characters emerge as pivotal figures, shaping his quest and the novel’s thematic depth. Portrayed as both custodians of ecological wisdom and agents of disruption, these women embody a duality that reflects the tensions of being guardians as well as destroyers.

This duality of representation places the women characters on uncertain grounds. Hence by analysing through the lens of indigenous feminism, will navigate and explore the interconnectedness of women and ecological harmony. The study will also interrogate how Kire subverts traditional portrayals of women in literature, portraying them as complex beings capable of influencing both good and evil in an interconnected spiritual and ecological world.

Keywords: Indigenous feminism, duality, ecological harmony, interconnectedness.

The praxis of feminist theory as a critical framework has reverberated through both academic discourse and social practice. Since its beginning during the nineteenth century, the feminist movement has continued to generate waves of critical thought paving the way for women to articulate their unique narratives within a patriarchal social construct. These waves of critical thoughts are the diverse and interdisciplinary field, encompassing various schools of thought, including liberal, radical, Marxist, ecofeminist, postcolonial, and intersectional feminisms. One of the most pivotal developments within feminist theory has been the rise of intersectionality, the concept introduced in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent American civil rights advocate, and a leading scholar of critical race theory. In a recent interview with Time, Crenshaw states intersectionality as,

“... a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other (Crenshaw).”

The various forms of inequality encompass factors of identity and marginality including colour, class, race, sexual orientation, disability, religion and economic standings that women face. This shift towards intersectionality has prompted deeper engagement with localised and culturally specific forms of feminism, leading to the inclusion and recognition of the concerns of indigenous women. And hence ushering in indigenous feminism as a distinct and essential strand of feminist thought. Despite the critical importance, feminism especially in academia catered and represented the social problems of the white middle class to a certain extent even though there was an active participation of women of colour in the second and third wave feminism (Huhndorf and Suzack 2). This has been a challenge for indigenous women to find a common thread within the feminist movement as the prominent voices represented the plight of the white women. The factors for discourses laid out by indigenous women are the complexities of women's identity which is deeply entrenched at the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender. Adding to the complexity of theorizing within contemporary feminism, tribal women in North East India are largely under represented even in the Indian feminist context. The cultural, historical and community diversity of the North East India remain unnoticed even to mainstream India leave alone the world. Only recently the existence and perspectives about North East India has been known through the efforts taken by the tourism department of their respective states in North East India. Though there are considerable efforts taken by Indian thinkers on women representation like Kamala Markandaya, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Malavika Karlekar, Gayatri Spivak, Arundhati Roy, Neera Desai, Krishna Sobti, Ismat Chughtai and so on, there are only a miniscule portrayal of women in the North East. So, the greatest challenge to the Indian feminist lies in incorporating the various experiences of women from different region, tribe and religion in the broader framework (Vanlalhrui 14). Culture thus becomes a contentious issue within native feminist struggles (Ekka and Giangthandunliu 3).

The North Eastern Region (NER) comprises of eight states i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Sikkim and Tripura. The region covers 7.97% of the country's geographical area and 3.78% of its population. the region covers 255,000 sq. km. and shares international boundaries with Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Bhutan and Nepal. Collectively, there are more than 200 tribal groups in these eight states comprising of around 175 languages and religion such as tribal faiths, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The distinctive terrain, the socio-economic and political condition, historical and cultural factors, conflict over local resources and the international border issues have resulted in the fragile security situation in these states. These issues dominated the forefront topic of discussion pertaining to North Eastern Region but there are no discourses on women issues. So, women in North East still remain as a lacuna in the understanding of women's position in the feminist perspective. Therefore, there is a necessity to represent, theorize and analyse the contemporary realities and marginalities of the lives of indigenous women.

Many Indian tribal women do not identify with the term 'indigenous' and hence prefer the term Adivasi or tribal. The term Adivasi/Tribal feminism as theorised in the article by Ekka and Giangthandunliu states that both the terms are used interchangeably where it is important to understand the heterogeneous overall experiences of tribal women. For Indian tribal communities, their collective experiences, knowledge and memories tied to their territory and land constructs their understanding of the world. So, the feminist notions of tribal communities must be understood in terms of their philosophies of land together with cultural constructions of

gender and gender relations. As rightly pointed out, indigenous feminism or Adivasi/Tribal feminism cannot be framed outside the notion of land to which they belong which is key to their everyday culture and traditions (Ekka and Giangthandunliu 7). Taking this standpoint the study will now move towards examining the text *When the River Sleeps* by Easterine Kire through the lens of indigenous feminism.

Born in Kohima, Nagaland in 1959, Easterine Kire is a poet, short story writer and novelist who is currently settled in Northern Norway. The majority of her writings are drawn from her indigenous Naga culture from which she breathes in a new life to the memories embedded in the oral narratives and myths. She was the first Naga poet to have her poetry published in 1982 and the first Naga novel in English *A Naga Village Remembered* to be published in 2003. Kire is also celebrated as the first Naga writer to write books for children. She is a recipient of various prestigious awards namely, The Governor's medal for excellence in Naga Literature in 2011, the Catalan PEN International Free Voice Award from Barcelona in 2013, The Hindu Lit for Life Prize for her novel *When the River Sleeps* in 2016, the Tata Book of the Year for her novel *Son of the Thundercloud* in 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 *Walking 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.

Though the novel traces the protagonist's search for the heart stone, his journey has been shaped immensely by the female characters that he encounters. These female characters embody and disseminate knowledge about the land, life, the supernatural as well as the complexities of human emotions which eventually shapes Villie and leads him to the path of self-realisation. One of the stark indicators of knowledge about the land including the vegetation and environment is evident in Villie's encounter with the Zeliang women in the village of the Barkweavers. It is to be noted that the identity of the village lies in the skill that the women possess in making yarn from the bark of the nettle plant. Nowhere in the novel does the protagonist mention the name of the village but he only identifies and calls it as the village of Barkweavers. Villie describes the art of barkweaving as a dying art which he appreciates the women for diligently trying to preserve it. During his conversation with Idele, an older woman from the village says,

"I learnt it from my grandmother and I am trying to pass it on to my nieces (Kire 33)."

Years of experience in cultivating nettle plants and barkweaving has endowed the character Idele with profound knowledge about the plant and also its cure if someone got stung by its thorns. In the novel when Villie gets stung by the nettle plant, Idele plucks the leaves off a small bitter wormwood plant which she kneads it to pulp in her hand and hands it to Villie to apply it to the wound which eases off the pain. Her knowledge in using nature as medicine is evident when she offers 'rock bee honey' which she calls it as 'cure-all.'

The tribe's connection with their land addresses the crux of their existence from which Indigenous feminism holds its ground. It resonates with the understanding in which life of the tribe is deeply linked to the life of the soil and the forest. In the novel, after Villie passes through

the unclean forest *Rarhuria* he meets a woman named Subale. As they converse Subale tells him about the younger generation who are moving away to other towns and cities of the state like Dimapur or Peren. Her angst about the younger generation corresponds to the indigenous people's connection to their land where their identity and existence revolves.

"This is our home, do you understand? We cannot abandon it and try to live in another place. Our umbilical cords are buried here, and we would always be restless if we tried to settle elsewhere. (Kire 87)"

Their resistance to live in the mountainous terrain enforces the idea of which they believe their land as an all-encompassing concept where their worldview is based on their identification in relation to their land.

"There were only a few houses. They were built on the slope above which the path ended. Vilie was surprised to see that the houses were built in such a way that they looked as though they were clinging to the slope, and there were steps cut into the rocky surface leading to each house. The path down to the river, which was their only water source, was another flight of steps or footholds carved into the rock."

The life of the village dwellers depicted in the novel are considerably peaceful where Vilie received hospitality and warmth in the household of the villages he came across in the course of his journey. In most of the instances, Vilie was welcomed by women characters like Idele and Subale who live contented lives in their own land. However, such is not with the case of the village of the Kirhupfumia. As Ate describes to Vilie and says,

"Kirhupfumia are outcasts in every village they are born into. (Kire 132)"

The village is resided only by certain females who are believed to possess evil powers and are greatly feared. What lies evident in this situation is that only women are ostracized from their ancestral village. As narrated by Ate, she and her sister Zote were cursed by a certain woman who would spit in a certain way everytime they crossed paths. This left her sister so upset that the next time when they crossed paths she pointed at the woman's bulging belly and caused her to miscarriage and in that instant the baby died inside her. This caused much uproar in their village and they were driven out. Another instance she recounts about her aunt who pointed her finger at a man and blinded him because he tried to rape her.

Kire very subtly reveals the patriarchal underpinnings of the plight of the Kirhupfumia. The reason lies in the fact that those women actually fought to defend themselves and in doing so they challenged the dominant patriarchal conception of femininity. As rightly pointed out the traditional institutions in North East India are transformed in such a manner that patriarchal rules get strengthened. Hence, the case with the Kirhupfumia who are conveniently forced out of their ancestral village who are not subdued and does not fit the patriarchal perception of a woman. The act of ostracization also forcefully strip the women's identity which is so engrained in their native soil as uttered by Subale. Such injustice meted out against the Kirhupfumia has stirred extreme reactions to their plight. Some of the women like Ate accept their plight and calls it as their destiny.

"We never chose to be the way we are. It is the destiny life chose to give us." (Kire 132)

While Zote on the other hand is consumed with anger and betrayal from her own ancestral village and people whom she once called family. In this quest for revenge Zote attempts and eventually succeed in stealing the heart-stone from Vilie. The possession of the heart-stone which is desired by many may perhaps metaphorically represent the dominating patriarchal power which Zote wish to possess to seek out revenge. In doing so, she lashes out her anger by burning down her entire ancestral village. The act of immolating the council hall Zote subverts and destroys the monolith of patriarchy that leaves no space for women.

“Zote walked straight through the village and into the empty hall. The great door was open...It was forbidden for women to enter it, and when the men’s meetings were held, women feared to walk past the house... By entering it, Zote had defied and violated the taboo on women entering the hall.” (Kire 157)

As pointed out women in the North East region:

“Do not have any substantial say practically in all the main decision-making matters whether at home or outside.” (Hmingthanzuali and Pande 146)

In this context the decision to cast out and ostracise the Kirhupfumia as cursed were the decisions taken the male members of the village.

Hence, characters like Idele, Sabule, Zote and Ate embody the complexity and duality of indigenous women’s roles as both nurturers and disruptors. Their ability to challenge male-centered pursuits and assert their autonomy emphasizes women’s ongoing struggle within the patriarchal domain. By portraying women as custodians of spiritual knowledge, agents of resistance, and protectors of ecological balance, Kire subverts traditional patriarchal narratives that often reduce women to passive or binary roles.

Conclusion:

The indigenous feminist lens reveals that women characters in the novel are not simply moral guides or symbolic figures but active agents with a profound connection to the spiritual and natural world. Their ability to mediate between these worlds underscores their vital role as protectors of both cultural heritage and ecological integrity. Unlike western feminist frameworks, which often focus on the dichotomy of oppression and liberation, indigenous feminism highlights relationality and balance as core principles. Women are not simply ‘good’ or ‘evil’ but are dynamic figures who navigate the fluid boundaries between human, spiritual, and natural worlds. Through the portrayal of female characters Easterine Kire reclaims the representation of indigenous women, challenging colonial, patriarchal, and anthropocentric narratives. Ultimately, the novel positions indigenous women as essential figures in maintaining harmony between human ambition and natural law. This analysis affirms the central role of women in indigenous setting, spirituality and ecology, thereby offering a counter-narrative to western patriarchal representations.

To sum up, Easterine Kire’s *When the River Sleeps* is a testament to the transformative potential of indigenous feminism. By depicting women as complex, self-aware figures who bridge the human and natural worlds Kire reclaims indigenous women’s agency, sovereignty, and ecological consciousness. Through the stories of these women, Kire calls for re-examination of gender,

power, and ecology in indigenous narratives, emphasizing the need for balance, relationality, and respect which are essential for both human well-being and ecological sustainability.

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