

Text as an Archive: A Critical Reading of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

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Abstract

Text plays a vital role in archiving documents sealed with facts, information and knowledge which present the historical importance of a marginalized community. This paper aims to present how a text records the tribal people's lifestyle by providing us insights into their attitudes, behavior, rituals, cultural practices and indigenous knowledge in the eyes of mankind. The study unfolds the fact that when the archive's benefits are fused with the fiction's power, it helps in producing meaningful and historical evidence for reinterpreting the past, reliving in the present and preserving for the future. Kire divulges the Angami community of Nagaland where the tribal life stands in contrast to the common people's lives of mainstream cultures. She unravels the mystical and beautiful world of the Nagas, where nature is presented as a character that nurtures the human characters to portray a wonderful relationship between the two non-identical characters, along with their traditional community knowledge which helps in shaping their unique identity since ages. Archiving the traditions and the way of livelihood in a text protects the marginalized community from the threat of cultural loss which is an ongoing problem in this modern world

Keywords: *culture, archive, oral tradition, identity, myths, memory*

Introduction

The present study seeks to critically explore how a text becomes an archive where much information, facts and knowledge of an ethnic community are recorded for the benefit of future generations. A text acts as a repository of culture and knowledge which opens a doorway to preserve the discourses of a given community and prolong the circulation in the society. Moreover, text as an archive is an umbrella term, but our focus is on how archiving is undertaken in the fields of ecocritical reading and community knowledge in a given text. This paper is divided into four sections: the First section presents the critical analysis and plot overview of the text. The Second section defines the word "archive" and explains how a text can be represented as an archive. The Third section presents an eco-critical reading of my primary text by connecting the man-nature relationship in a community, and the Fourth section unravels the community knowledge system and its cultural practices whirled around a community. This study seeks to examine how Kire's *When the River Sleeps* makes a synthetic study through close examination, with the idea of the text as an archive and how it acts as a powerhouse of a knowledge system. The paper showcases the ability of a text to cultivate numerous ideas and concepts which makes it eligible to be treated as an archive. The novel *When the River Sleeps* is beautifully woven with supernatural elements, folklore and culture, which charms the heart of the readers to the core, and her narrative takes us on a fascinating ride to a mystical world.

Critical Analysis and Plot Overview

This section presents the plot overview and critical analysis of the literary work *When the River Sleeps* (2014). Its author is a Naga writer hailing from the beautiful landscapes of the North-Eastern state, who provides us with glimpses of rich and ethnic Naga folk traditions and an exotic natural environment. The novel portrays a location embedded with nature's wonderment and mystical enchantments, and which presents a blurred line between magic and reality. Kire transports the readers into the exotic world of Angami tribes in the remote blue mountains of Nagaland and their colorful community life. She presents the realities of the Naga people's lives, which are hauntingly beautiful, and the narrative captivates the minds of the readers, exploring a community life that whirls around a traditional tribal lifestyle and their ethnic belief systems. Kire exhibits a tiny world of the Angami tribes by unveiling the laws, cultures and morals of those indigenous people of Nagaland and enchants the minds of readers with her lyrical quality and eloquent narrative technique in the portrayal of the novel. She displays the beauty of the oral traditions, both for the indigenous and non-indigenous readers, who remain airheaded in this contemporary world of noble lifestyle. Kire attempts to preserve the traditional culture of an endangered human race from getting lost in thin lines of air. In the novel, she presents a mystical atmosphere where both the physical and spiritual worlds turn into one entity and hence, blurs the peripheries between magic and reality.

The novel *When the River Sleeps* is a Hindu Prize winner and presents an adventurous journey of a lone hunter, Villie, who is in pursuit of the heart-stone unearths the bed of a mysterious sleeping river, which can grant him boundless powers and abundance. Villie undertakes the epic journey when some unfathomable dreams sway his mind and impel him to risk his precious life for seeking the magical stone. Villie is mesmerized by the power of the mysterious sleeping river:

When the river is asleep, it is completely still. Yet the enchantment of those minutes or hours when it sleeps is so powerful, that it turns the stones in the middle of the river bed into a charm. 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.

(Kire 2014: 12)

In the course of his journey, Villie gives us glimpses of the village and community life of Angami tribes and how nature plays a glaring role in the survival of tribal people. The protagonist encounters widow spirits and weretigers in his dangerous journey of attaining his goal by overpowering all malignant evil forces posited in his trail and hence, he proves himself as a "mythical hero" by showcasing his bravery in the novel. Kire sprinkles the supernatural elements which influence the lives of characters and the natural surroundings of Angami tribes. Villie's beloved, Mechuseno was seized by the wings of death after she caught a mysterious fever when she went into the forest for collecting herbs with her friends. Mechuseno's eyes caught sight of a tall dark man after she plucked orchids from a tree and the man followed her home like a shadow, and surprisingly, no one other than Mechuseno could see him. And soon after that, she left the world. The superstitions of the villagers can be observed here: "Mechuseno was buried outside the village gate because she had died in what were considered 'ominous circumstances.' Any clan member dying after encountering a spirit could not be buried in the village" (15). Villie, the

protagonist, possessed this superstitious mindset as he defended his life from weretigers and spirits by casting off spells foretold by the spirits of his ancestral people. His homecoming journey after gaining the heart-stone was even more challenging, as evil spirits whirled around Villie to snatch it away and misuse the powers of the magical stone. The spirits dwelling in the forests, the spirits in the shape of charming girls, and the widow-spirits who guard the sleeping river play with Villie by causing trouble in his journey. And he also came across the village of *Kirhupfumia* where women possessed magical powers for cursing and even killing people by pointing their fingers. The characters Ate and Zote were descendants of *Kirhupfumia* who were the most feared people in the mountains for their practice of witchcraft. Later on, Villie, after being convinced that Ate was harmless, brings Ate along to his abode, as her ancestral village people have mysteriously fled away and it is unsafe for her to stay in an isolated village. Afterwards, she lives with Villie's family in his village where he hands the heart-stone over to Ate. In the end, Villie is brutally murdered by a man who desired to possess the heart-stone for worldly pleasures. Therefore, the journey which Villie undertakes transforms his soul into a more humane one, as a stream of spiritual knowledge flows through him, and he understands the purpose of the heart-stone which is not for gaining wealth, and instead bestows spiritual knowledge and power over both the world of senses and the world of spirit.

Kire presents the practices and belief systems of Angami tribes which is rooted in their indigenous culture and beautifully weaves the story to present a world of fantasy, magic realism, superstitions, etc. to entice the palpitating heart of the readers. Kire presents the importance of viewing dreams in their cultural belief systems. The Angami people believe dreams to be signs from the creator deity *Kepenuopfu* for channeling messages. The novel is comprised of multiple themes and loads of meaningful indigenous knowledge, well-knitted in a flow of simple language, and provides us with the flavors of the Angami tribe's culture and traditional belief systems.

Reading as an Archive

An archive is the means to restore, cumulate, record the historical knowledge and facts which have been silenced and enshrouded by ravages of time. The archive is fabricated by individuals and groups, as much as by state corporations and institutions, be it in form of verbal, written or visual mediums, which embodies an organized form of documenting facts. According to Merewether (2006: 6), who quotes the *Encyclopedia Universalis* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the term "archive" can be defined in the following way:

In the former, we read, "archives are constituted by the set of documents that result from the activity of an institution or of a physical or moral person". The latter says that "the term archive designates the organized body of records produced or received by a public, semi-public, institutional, business or private entity in the transaction of its affairs and preserved by it, its successors or authorized repository through extension of its original meaning as the repository for such materials".

Archiving documents is significant in this modern era for it opens a doorway to preserving the discourses of a given community or group by preserving and sustenance in circulation through generations. The text produced in relation to culture renders an outlet of repository of knowledge as documents corroborating to their own past, or evidence of an endurable identity, whether it is a

specific group or an individual. As Merewether (2006: 12) writes, “For Paul Ricoeur (‘Archives, Documents, Traces’, 1978) the concept of the archive is synonymous with the trace and the document: in each we are able to measure not only a relation between the past and present, but between the event and evidence of its occurrence, and between the fabric of everyday life and its representation.” The later decades of the twentieth century marked literature participating in full swing for archiving the historical documents by producing creative works. Texts, perhaps, are the most prominent forms which archive the historical facts by using literature’s power, depending on narratives, languages, cultures, ideologies etc., as exhibited by the author. Writing in 2001, Suzanne Keene observed a “proliferation” of late-twentieth-century novels representing a material encounter with archives by scholarly or amateur characters “who seek information in a collection of documents” (Chadwick and Vermeulen 2020: 2). By archiving texts, it opens the doorways to experience the world that administers the appearance of statements as distinctive events.

When the River Sleeps presents the world as a “frame” through which people can communicate with their past history and culture by archiving the events based on past experiences, oral histories, etc., which embodies recording the life stories of Angami tribal people. Kings M. Phiri has demonstrated that this may be of considerable significance in matrilineal societies, where the means of transmission of oral tradition and the content reflects the social structure. Moreover, oral tradition is a vehicle that helps in filling the gap in the archived records that is seldom touched by the written records. At the same time, archiving a text can be accomplished by various fields of study, but the field of our study centers around eco-critical reading and community knowledge of a given text. Therefore, the document produced by archiving the ecocritical arena and community knowledge of the given text reflects the indigenous identity, worldview, belief systems, traditional cultural practices, etc. of the specific community.

Eco-critical Reading

The term “ecocriticism” traces back to William Rueckert’s critical essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. Eco-criticism illuminates an intense relationship between the human and non-human worlds which helps our humanistic intellect to understand the deep connections among self, community, nature and the text. According to Lawrence Buell, the term “ecocriticism” means “the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis” (Buell 1996: 430). Buell pinpointed two waves of ecocriticism: “the first wave ecocritics focused on nature writing, nature poetry, and wilderness fiction” (Buell 1996: 138). They used the philosophy of organism and here, the environment effectively means natural environment (Buell 1996:28). The second wave ecocritics inclined towards environmental justice issues and a “social ecocriticism” that takes a landscape as seriously as “natural landscape” (Buell 1996: 22). Ecocritics regard the environment as inextricable from the clench of human culture, a fact which is predominant in many canonical writings of the times. The traditional or regional literatures put forth the notion of how harmoniously, we, the human beings can weave a beautiful relationship with the wonders of Mother Nature.

The novel is set in the beautiful hills of Nagaland and the characters have a deep connection with the gravity of nature. When Daftuar asks Kire about the inception of *When the River Sleeps* in *The Hindu*, she states:

I have many hunter friends. My own son is 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 acts 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.

(Daftuar 2015)

The novel unfolds a vivid atmosphere for understanding and enhancing the relations between the people, the natural landscape and the notion of ecology in the minds of readers. In the literary history of the times, the man-nature relationship is portrayed as a crucial concept in the branch of literature that forges a bridge for communication between man and nature. From the perspective of literary environmental ethics: “literature should eulogize nature and its harmonious relation with human beings” (Wang 2009: 292). In the novel, Kire provides us glimpses of an adventurous journey of Villie, the protagonist which was undertaken through the dense forests of Naga hills. Kire represents how nature functions as a healer, protector, provider and spouse in the entire journey of Villie’s quest for searching the river of his dreams. The entangled loops between man-nature relationships are well-portrayed in the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Villie personified the forest as a living being, as he says: “the forest is my wife” (7). The forest gave him company in his solitary life after the death of his beloved and hence, he never longed to abandon the forest as “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). Villie took shelter in the heart of the forest when people accused him of murdering a man, though he had committed no crime, and he starts thinking, “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). Joseph Wood Krutch states: “Thoreau’s work is not about plants or animals or birds; it is about his relation to them; one may almost say about himself in connection with nature” (quoted in Mishra 2016: 168). Along with Villie, we find other characters, like a Nepali couple who relies on nature, and when Ville asked their opinion about sending their baby to school, the baby’s father replied that education in school was not for people like them. Villie 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). The sublime relationship between the characters and the forest depicts the wonders of nature, about which people remain ignorant in this era of humiliating nature. As Rachel Carson said, “the more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for the destruction of our race” (Carson 1962: 20).

Kire emphasizes nature as a “healer” in the novel. When Villie, the protagonist wandered in the jungles of *Rahuria*¹ or the unclean forest, he caught a fever and he thought “the seer would give them a drink made of *ginseng* and *tsomhou*², the wild sour seed that grew on trees. Stir in a little honey and the mixture would go easily” (54). In the course of his journey, whenever he was injured, nature healed his wounds as he prepares: “pastes of *ciena*³ for open wounds. That worked for smaller injuries, but for bigger wounds he liked to use pungent *Japan nha*⁴ and rock bee honey. He had tried these on himself, and the healing had been quick, with little scarring” (41). Kire

exhibits the traditional medicinal knowledge which is rich and valuable in natural remedies, helping the people to get cured in a natural way with herbs, plants, seeds, honey etc. In a way, Kire is representing their traditional Angami culture of healing and recovering from the ailments inflicted by the nature, defining their indigenous identity in front of the world.

Kire presents an environment-oriented study of the text to inculcate a sense of nature's consciousness (or ecoconsciousness) among the minds of the people that help in archiving how nature was a crucial part in the lives of Angami tribes through the medium of text discourse. The novel represents the close harmony between the characters and the natural elements of Mother Earth, which fabricates a compact bond which is the premise of ecocriticism: "The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling of balance between human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other" (Mishra 2016: 169). Kire, in a way, rejects the idea of the anthropocentric attitude of human beings as it threatens nature and its serene environment, and rather instills the idea of an ecocentric attitude amidst the people.

Community Knowledge: A Mirror of Society

"Cultural pluralism" is a term used when smaller groups within a larger society maintain their unique cultural identities, and their values and practices are accepted by the wider culture, provided they are consistent with the laws and values of the wider society. Horace M. Kallen coined the term "cultural pluralism" which emerged in the 1910s in America, but became a widely popular term in the 1940s worldwide. In the essay "Horace M. Kallen and Cultural Pluralism", Sidney Ratner states: "Kallen realized how important the dependence of each individual upon his own group's culture was as a basis for that individual achieving his full potential as a distinctive personality. Ruth and other anthropologists have made this fact a commonplace in the last few decades but it was not so widely appreciated before the 1930's" (Ratner 1984: 188). The concept of "cultural pluralism" fits like a globe in our deep-rooted cultural Indian society or community in specific. The North-Eastern states of India where many ethnic groups dwell amidst the green lushes of forests, blue hills, golden valleys and silver streams, conjure up an image of regional ethnic identity. North-East is regarded as a land of "unity in diversity" where multiple ethnic groups reside by diving in the colors of ethnic traditions and cultures of their own ethnic identity. Literature from the North-East India represents the marginalized social groups by archiving the cultural, social, traditional and historical backgrounds of the respective communities. Indigenous literature encompasses narratives of socio-cultural life of the people to rediscover their cultural identity which is fused with folk literature, oral tradition, customary practices, ethnic food habits, etc. Hence, literature is a tool where collective and subjective truths can be voiced by the indigenous writers to pour out their hearts to reflect their ethnic group's identity as "Kallen believes that ethnic minority groups would cherish their cultural traits and feel it desirable to do so, in one way or another" (Ratner 1984: 197).

The idea of "cultural pluralism" has been foregrounded in Kire's literary works by her powerful narratives related to her indigenous community. Nagaland comprises of sixteen tribal communities and Angami is one among the tribal communities which is fused with its own melody of culture. In the novel *When the River Sleeps*, Kire portrays the community life of Angami tribes which provides us glimpses of the traditional community knowledge which is full of spirits,

superstitions, occult practices, heart-stones etc., which provides a unique sense of “mythopoeic imagination”. The writers ranging from this region look at their embedded culture as a process of preservation and continuity of the community, and this concept of continuity is essential, given that the works, which can be placed under the category of “realistic” fiction, re-define permanence of culture and tradition. In an academic lecture titled “The Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India,” Aruni Kashyap concisely tells about the narrative representation of literary texts from the region that is often more than an imaginative story (Menon 2017: 23). The novel unfolds the indigenous way of livelihood of the Angami tribes which defines its rich cultural heritage which is untouched by the pangs of modernization, hence, unbothered by the dominant cultures of India. The novel depicts an adventurous journey by the protagonist, Villie, where Kire blazingly presents the indigenous community knowledge of Angami tribes by her use of cultural narratives as “the writers are cognizant of preserving the rich oral tradition of story-telling technique” (Menon 2017:24). Kire discloses the community belief systems and knowledge throughout her novel which is an act of discovering their cultural roots and shaping them for the future.

The North-East is a base where the community’s belief in supernatural elements is rooted in their indigenous culture. For Angamis, supernaturalism plays a significant role in the everyday lives of people, something which is mysterious in the eyes mainstream cultures. In the encounter of the protagonist Villie with *Tekhumiavi*⁵, “the folk practice of certain men transforming their spirits into tigers” (25) is seen. Villie in his journey where the forest was his shelter, was attacked and he fought with mysterious spirits, “Mine is the greater spirit. I will never submit to you!” (83). When Villie was attacked by weretigers at night, he puts forth the gun to shoot but then he suddenly remembers the ancestral knowledge that he has gained in the age-group house of their village to protect his soul: “*Kuovi! Menuolhoulie!Wetsho!* Is this the way you treat your clansman? I am Villie, son of Kedo, your clansman. I am not here to do you harm. Why are you treating me as a stranger? I come in peace. You owe me your hospitality. I am your guest!”(26).The Angami traditional knowledge system inculcates a wonderful practice of thanksgiving ritual to the creator deity *Ukepenuopfi*⁶ as an act of hospitality, whenever people take firewood from the forest and collect herbs or find an animal in their traps-*Terhuomiapeziemu*.“Thanks be to the spirits”(80).The Angami tribes have native beliefs, like the one that only their creator deity’s name can protect their souls from spirits: “*Kepenuopfu Zanutsie la mhatalie*⁷!”(105).While returning with Ate, Villie’s companion was attacked by a tiger-spirit and he protected her by spelling: “*Kepenuopfu Zanutsielatalie!*” (189). The constant attacks of spirits bestowed him with wisdom and knowledge that: “sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder” (189).

The novel *When the River Sleeps* archives the indigenous belief system which upholds the community’s knowledge which whirls around supernaturalism, mysticism, religious practices etc. defining Angami tribe’s cultural identity. Their indigenous wisdom of knowledge has still not vanished among their culture due to the mainstream cultures. Kallen’s concept of “cultural pluralism” fits well in this exotic Naga literature where Kire presents a wonderful world of an ethnic group which has its unique identity, patterns of belief, different traditional practices, yet dwell a harmonious life by adhering to their own culture without being disrupted by the dominant culture. Cultural pluralism supports small and ethnic communities to survive within the fence of dominant cultures. In the essay “Identity and Globalization Naga Perspective” Temsula Ao puts

forth a similar expression where she talks about the contemporary challenges faced by North-Eastern cultures that are beginning to evolve, stripped off all human significance due to global market (Menon 2017:24)

Conclusion

The present study highlights the essence of the novel in preserving the cultural hub of the indigenous people by the author's keen observation of the cultural practices and lifestyles in their community. The paper provides glimpses of the crude lifestyle of the people with nature and the rich knowledge of traditional practices of a given community, which are archived by the author in the form of fiction for preserving their cultural identity. Hence, a text stores multiple elements, encompassing the knowledge of cultures, lifestyle, traditions, belief systems which reflect the cultural identity of an ethnic community, in contrast to modernization which is spreading in every nook and corner of the world and is wiping away the primitive roots of the people and their ways of ethnic lifestyles. Archiving the history of a community in the form of a written document can resurrect and safeguard the primitive cultures, traditions and belief systems of people. It also provides a sense of security from the threat of cultural loss. Kire, in her novel beautifully presents the Angami community's cultural life which is linked with Mother Nature and whirls around flavors of community knowledge systems, which indicates her attempt to preserve the indigenous culture from getting lost in thin lines of novelty.

Notes:

¹*Rarhuria* : unclean forest, certain spirit-infested places shunned by villagers.

²*Tsomhou* : Nutgall tree , medicinal shrub.

³*Ciena* : Bitter wormwood, a herb used to staunch blood from small cuts, also believed to have supernatural properties.

⁴*Japan nha* : Crofton weed,

⁵*Tekhumiavi* : weretiger, a phenomenon amongst the Tenyimia people where certain members of the tribe transform their spirits into tigers.

⁶*Ukepenuopfii* : The creator deity worshipped in the old religion of the Tenyi people.

⁷*Kepenuopfii zanu tsie la mhatalie* : In the name of the creator, retreat at once.

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