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Figurative Ecologies in Northeast India: Reading Easterine Kire's Novel *When the River Sleeps*

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Abstract
English writings from Northeast India have created a space of their own in the literary landscape of contemporary times. Easterine Kire is a noted fiction writer and poet from the Northeast Indian state of Nagaland. Her writings emerge from her nuanced understanding of the lived realities of the people of Nagaland and, interestingly, have a deep resonance of the folklore and oral narratives of Nagaland. This article explores the construction of ecologies in her novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) from the perspective of metaphorization and ecological ethics. It examines how the narrative employs ethnic eco-spatial symbolism, which not only accentuates ecological-ethical issues but also foregrounds more meaningful ways to imagine and live with ecologies.

Keywords
ecology, orality, myth, imagination, folklore, metaphors, Northeast India

There is a marked rise in scholarly interest in the role of metaphors in discourses of ecology, its crisis and resolution (see Keulartz; Simus). This upsurge makes it imperative, for scholars in the environmental humanities, to redefine and revisit the use and politics of metaphors in literary and cultural texts with obvious or potential ecological implications. A further justification of such a project can also be found in the growing concern over the inadequacy of conventional theoretical frames for an effective intellectual focus. The emerging scholarship on ecological metaphors is but a part of the ongoing search for alternative frames to examine the role of narratives—literary, cultural and otherwise—in understanding ecological crisis. Taking this as a point of departure, this article explores the role of ecological metaphors, or what will be called *figurative ecology*, in Northeast Indian writer Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* published in 2016.

Before we move on, it is useful to briefly look at some of the key insights that come from different scholars and which form the theoretical backdrop of this analysis. The overall framework derives from an ecological, or more precisely, ecocritical approach. As rightly

pointed out by Greg Garrard in his well-known book *Ecocriticism*, the ecocritical approach is marked by a certain kind of trans- or multi-disciplinarity. The inherent hybridity of the approach is, by and large, a consequence of the centrality of ecology to forms of life as well as the ongoing search, most evidently in scholarly and activist circles, for an ecocentric mode of being. As Garrard observes, both the literary-cultural approach of ecocriticism along with the ecocentric worldview that underlies it have emerged through an untroubled integration between apparently incompatible genres such as scientific documentaries and parables in environmental texts (2–5). It is important to note that the whole analysis of ecocriticism that Garrard offers is founded on a set of tropes such as sublime, pastoral, apocalypse, etc., which brings to the fore the trade-off between the factual and fictional in sustaining a fuller ecocentric consciousness.

This thesis finds corroboration in others as well. For instance, in his essay "Using Metaphors in Restoring Nature," environmental thinker Josef Keulartz highlights how narratives and metaphors shape our perceptions of, and attitude towards, ecologies (27–28). He also highlights how ecological metaphors—symbols used to frame nature—serve not only as a decisive cognitive tool to understand ecologies but, more importantly, as a valuable heuristic device leading to new ecological imaginations. To this extent, literary, cultural and ecological metaphors emerge as central to the 'restoration' of ecologies—the key aim of contemporary ecological thinking. Exploring the cognitive, discursive and normative possibilities of metaphors, Keulartz traces how Western ecological thinking and perceptions have been shaped by 'organistic' and 'mechanistic' metaphoric frames (30). Interestingly, he also reiterates the need to create a more flexible and accommodative vision of these metaphors (29). In fact, no ecocritical discourse can be viewed as complete if it does not pay heed to the role of ecological metaphor.

This shift in focus derives from the debate regarding the environmental humanities as inter- or trans-disciplinarity. As John C. Ryan observes in his paper "Cultural Botany: Toward a Model of Transdisciplinary, Embodied and Poetic Research into Plants," the increasing mechanization and technologization of our view of the natural world, the ensuing divide between the humanities and natural sciences, and the a certain kind of plant-to-human sensory disjunction underlies the schism between objective (technical, scientific, reductionist) and subjective (emotive, artistic, relational, multi-sensory) forms of knowledge (123). Due to its technical orientation, mainstream ethnobotany offers limited theoretical promise for embodied and poetic research into human-plant interactions. As a variant of "taxonomic

botany" (125), ethnobotany is undergirded by universalizing, sensory limited, visual structuring of the natural world. Referring to the German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ryan reiterates the need of a fuller integration of "plant poetics" and botanical science, so to say, a synthesis of "poetic and scientific sensibilities that would provide a way of experiencing nature both symbolically and scientifically simultaneously" (124–125). Ryan proposes "cultural botany" as a potential transdisciplinary approach to re-explore the interactions between humans and flora as an "everyday" and "embodied" performance (123). This foregrounds other overlooked aspects of ethnic plant-use—the embodied cultural engagements with flora and the many interdependencies between plants and humans from multi-sensorial perspectives (123). The limitations of existing ethnobotanical approaches have also been brought to the fore by Kay E. Lewis-Jones in her article "People and Plants." Jones observes how plants as subjects are always on the margins of institutional knowledge-production regimes. Drawing attention to the role plants play in "world-making" (1), that is, in sustaining both ecological and social worlds, Lewis-Jones calls for an immediate rediscovery of plants as agents in our world. The ethnobotany of the future must recognize that plants are world-making, dynamic, life forms. In fact, as pointed out by Lewis-Jones, instead of being viewed as passive and peripheral, plants should be viewed as "plant-beings" with "plant subjectivity" (3), as they are more entangled in symbolic and material interactions with humans. Despite the fact that scholars such as Ryan and Lewis-Jones write from different disciplinary viewpoints, it in no way dilutes the larger ecocentric importance of their views. This article draws from their views on nature-subjectivity, nature-being as well as the material-symbolic transactions between humans and nature.

The need to rethink the potential of established theoretical perspectives for an effective engagement with the ecological crisis is also asserted by other scholars. For instance, Marilia Coutinho's paper "Ecological Metaphors and Environmental Rhetoric: An Analysis of The Ecologist and Our Common Future" reiterates the urgency of alternative models of nature representation (179), a model that is inclusive and non-anthropocentric. This frame, as pointed out by Coutinho, would be of a heteroglossic kind, incorporative of both mainstream and overlooked ecological precepts as well as environmental consciousness. Interestingly, Coutinho draws attention to the ways ecological behaviors such as those belonging to pre-capitalist or tribal eco-scapes continue to be marginalized in mainstream environmental rhetoric. Some of the potentially restorative metaphors, as pointed out by Coutinho, are holism and mysticism (185).

Similarly, Jason Simus in the essay "Metaphors and Metaphysics in Ecology" traces ecological metaphors from both metaphysical and cultural perspective—a transition from a belief in structural natural order to a belief in conceptual natural order. He, however, points out that even the metaphysical allegiance of ecological theories are markedly shaped by aesthetic considerations (185). The key epistemological frames used to order nature are structural and conceptual, which could be viewed to correspond to the objective and subjective views of the same. The conceptual natural order is contingent upon cultural codes and metaphors (186). The metaphysical perspective presumes there is a necessary structural order in nature for us to discover and make intelligible. The cultural perspective presumes that making natural order intelligible requires metaphorical and contingent language. For the most part, metaphors for nature function as background assumptions that are not made explicitly yet continue to guide our perception of the natural world (187). The historical roots of contemporary ecology are grounded in a succession of metaphors (188) from theistic and animistic to organicist and mechanistic. In each case, the dominant cultural paradigm offers a useful and unique way to model and understand the natural world via metaphorical concepts. This corroborates the indispensability of metaphors—as conceptual and discursive frames—in ecological discourse. The view that contemporary ecological discourse marks a greater reliance on metaphorical perspectives rather than structural or metaphysical frames underscores the ways in which the environmental humanities looks for potential metaphors with ecocentric bearing.

Certain metaphors—literary and otherwise—have become deeply ingrained in our ecological consciousness and behavior. Any search for a more meaningful ecological discourse begins with a recognition of the metaphorical imagination that informs our ecological sense, which in its turn is largely culturally constructed and disseminated. This assumes further significance in the light of the view of nature and ecology as comprising cultural and, by extension, symbolic naratives. Arturo Escobar in his essay "After Nature: Steps to an Antiessentialist Political Ecology" views the crisis of nature as a crisis of nature's identity. Escobar reiterates the need to move away from the discursive-metaphorical pigeonholing of nature and ecology into long-standing anthropomorphic binaries toward positions that view nature in its plurality—that is, as multiform and hybrid. These, he terms anti-essentialist frameworks of nature regimes (2). To draw attention to the plurality of nature regimes as well as representations, Escobar distinguishes between "organic" and "capitalist" constitutions of nature (4). Whereas the first is conspicuous in pre-capitalist, tribal social

ecologies, the second corresponds to different forms of "instrumental rationality" (5). Interestingly, a much-needed shift in focus within ecological studies from capitalist to organic frames takes us toward multiple "local models of nature" (8). Unlike modern constructions with their separation between the biophysical, human and the supernatural worlds, local models of nature are predicated on links between these three domains. This continuity is culturally established through rituals and practices embedded in social relations. In other words, what marks local models of nature is fluidity between the three domains of human, biophysical and the sacred or supernatural. This fluidity, as seen in local models of nature, sustains itself through culturally constructed symbols. Keith G. Tidball's paper "Seeing the Forest for the Trees: Hybridity and Social-Ecological Symbols, Rituals and Resilience in Postdisaster Contexts," although written with a different focus, throws sufficient light on the role of social-ecological symbols in creating a more integrationist ecological imagination. Interestingly, setting out to discuss the therapeutic and restorative function of trees and arboreal landscapes in negotiating the emotional-psychological aftershocks of disasters, Tidball reiterates the centrality of nature in sustaining a much-needed sense of self, especially in situations of crisis. The central argument of the paper derives from a nuanced view of the material and metaphoric role of trees and nature more generally in offering material-ontological resilience to crisis.

What links up the different threads of the foregoing discussion is the search for a viable "ecological ethics." In one of the pioneering discussions of ecology and ethics, "Is There an Ecological Ethic," Holmes Rolston III, noted environmental philosopher, identifies an ecological ethic as the potential mainstay of all form of human-environment transactions. Thus, Rolston adds a fresh perspective to this discussion, that is, the construction of ecological ethics in literary texts. Some of the important ideas discussed by him include "ecological morality," "ecological obedience" and "ecological nature" (94–98). As observed by Rolston, every form of moral value-system must emerge from an understanding of humankind's place in nature (93). As he rightly points out, ecological morality corresponds to the discovery of a moral ought inherent in recognition of the holistic character of the ecosystem, in the form of an ethic that is primarily ecological (94). In other words, ecological morality accrues from an integration of human physical and moral necessities with a "life promoting ought" (95). One can say ecological morality implies a kind of "enlightened obedience" (95) to certain eco-ethical principles and values. Rolston highlights the convergence between the ecological and the ethical, a "life-promoting obligation" (96)—the

prioritization of nature, ecology and other over one's ego or self-interest. Nature and ecology emerge as normative, grounding all human values within this worldview. Taking this as a point of departure, this article now moves on to examine how material, metaphorical and moral ecologies intersect with, but also mutate into, the others.

Easterine Kire (b. 1959) was born to an Angami Naga family in Nagaland, India. She is a major Anglophone poet and novelist from Northeast India and most of her writings are based in the lived realities of the ethnic tribal groups of her region. Her first book of poetry *Kelhoukevira* came out in 1982. Her novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* from 2003 is acclaimed as the first novel by a Naga writer in English. It was followed by the novels *A Terrible Matriarchy* from 2007, *Mari* from 2010, *Bitter Wormwood* from 2010 and *Don't Run, My Love* from 2017. These writings explore and bring to the fore exciting areas of the collective past and present of the Nagas. As narratives deeply rooted in the Naga ethnic worldview, they celebrate a kind of ecological approach which is integrationist and organic.

Kire's writings have been studied from a variety of perspectives, one of which is the representation of nature and ecologies. However, most of these studies have focused on more obvious aspects of human and nature interaction as they supposedly manifest in an ethnic or tribal context. This article, in contrast, focuses on a relatively underexplored dimension of Naga ethno-social or ethno-ecological lifeway—that is, the symbolic or figurative construction of nature in Naga society. This symbolism, as the article argues, is not to be viewed in isolation from the eco-ethical priorities of the tribe. The text under review is better viewed as a literary reconstruction of the essentially ecocentric or eco-ethical worldview of the Nagas.

The novel *When the River Sleeps* from 2014 deals with the life and sensational adventures of Vilie, a forty-eight-year-old unmarried hunter who lives a solitary life in his forest-hut far away from his native village. Spread across fifty-one chapters, the novel begins with "Waking Dreams" presenting Vilie in his restlessness to journey out to a mysterious river and his quest to get hold of stones from its bosom when the river goes to sleep for a very short time. After hearing the story of the river from a seer, Vilie is desperate to visit it and collect the magical "heart-stone" from its bosom, which is possible only if one is able to catch the uncanny river asleep. In a state of obsession, Vilie decides to travel to the magical river and pluck out its heart-stone to satisfy his wishes. He sets out on this exciting but challenging quest for the sleeping river, sheltered and helped by friends, kinsmen and sympathizers and successfully returns with the heart-stone. His passage, both to the river and

homewards, however, is not easy. Vilie not only has to pass through fatal encounters with hostile men, weretigers and spirits, but also through a far more dangerous enemy that lies within his own self—fear, malice and selfishness. Overcoming all challenges he comes across the village of the Kirhupfumia (tabooed women), where he meets the sisters Ate and Zote. These tabooed women are believed to have poisonous powers and are greatly feared. As the more revengeful and contemptuous elder sister tries to seize Vilie's heart-stone, even at the cost of his life, so that she can take revenge on the villagers who are responsible for her outcast existence, he is saved by the timely intervention of Ate.

Zote becomes a victim of her own vengeance and dies a tragic death while Vilie sets out for his village with a grief-stricken Ate. However, they are attacked by the angry widow-women who protects the sleeping river and the heart-stone, and Ate is almost killed. It is only by summoning all his knowledge of the supernatural as well as invoking the creator deity Kepenupfu that Vile saves her life. "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, Kepenuopfu fights for me! Take your hands off her" (193). As an exhausted Vilie and Ate reach the forest—dwellings of Krishna and his wife, the Gorkha woodcutters and all-weather friend of Vilie—they are shocked to see the blood-drenched dead-bodies of a recently-murdered couple. However, their trauma is slightly ameliorated by the sight of a surviving life, that is the baby of the unfortunate couple. Bolting the door of Krishna's house, the three quietly sleep outside a Nepali settlement and head for Vilie's forest home, and eventually to his village-home where the baby, now christened as Vibou, and Ate, his foster mother, are left in the custody of Vilie's old aunts. Vilie returns to his forest-cabin, only to be intercepted and attacked by a white-skinned assailant trying to seize the heart-stone. The scuffle comes to a mysterious end when the intruder is knocked down to the ground by the tremendous blow of a tiger, leaping from the jungle. As the village search party arrives at the site the next day, they are shocked to see a blackened mass of dried blood on the walls of Vilie's cottage forcing them to wonder if the hunter-guardian Vilie is really dead. The narrative ends with the scene of a visit to Vilie's cabin, now serving to shelter weird travellers and hunters, by a toddler Vibou, a pregnant Ate and her husband Asakho, five years after the disappearance of Vilie. Ate reveals to Asakho how she kept the heart-stone given to her by Vilie in his forest-cabin immediately after his disappearance only to be told in her dreams that she did the right thing and how visitors to the cabin feel a companionable presence when there. The narrative comes to an end with Ate telling Asakho that their new-born will be a boy who she will make a hunter to protect the heart-stone from evil men.

Set in the borderland between the real and the unreal, *When the River Sleeps* uniquely fuses natural wonder and supernatural occurrences. The novel invites readers into the lives and hearts of the Tenyimia people comprising the Angami, Chakheseng, Rengma, Zeliang, Maram and other Naga tribes in the Naga hinterlands. Their rituals, beliefs, their reverence for the land and their close-knit communitarian social life provide the rhythms of life lived in a meaningful symbiosis with their ecological setting. This mutualism, unlike elsewhere, however, does not remain limited to the immediate material domain. As a closer reading suggests, the human-nature reciprocity regularly extends to the extramundane world. The ecocentric message of the text comes from this pervasive trade-off between the material/human, natural/ecological, and the spiritual/supernatural. It is in this intermediate space between the real and the unreal, the credible and the incredible, that the most intricate ecological-ethical exchanges in the novel take place. The subsequent sections of this article will examine the dynamics of these transactions, but with a focus on the figurative dimensions of it.

As already suggested, the eco-ethical import of the text lies in multiple layers, stretching from the immediate to the most inconspicuous. It will be useful to begin by briefly looking at the most immediate first and then move on to the deeper intricacies of the human-nature-supernatural interchanges in the text. Journey or passage has conventionally been the most apt metaphor of self-discovery. Kire's narrative draws on it to construct what could be viewed as a powerful eco-ethical narrative landscape. This is evident in the construction of the magical river journey which forms the main part of the narrative. Vilie is told about the river by a seer (1). The seer not only tells him of the magical properties of this living river but also about the strengthening of one's inner spiritual being to be worthy of the heart-stone. Both the river and its heart-stone inhabit the intermediate space between natural and supernatural. Their material actuality in the narrative rests on a ethical-spiritual and, by extension, ecological heedfulness of their seeker. As the seer warns Vilie, the fuller realization of the stone comes to only those with a pure heart and cleansed mind. Thus, the river and the stone, the two foremost tropes in the narrative, assume a larger eco-ethical resonance through the underlying correspondence between the heart of the (super)-natural and the human. The narrative rests on this underlying agreement between the ecological and human consciousness. To Vilie, the journey into the heart of nature becomes a journey towards wisdom and selflessness. The desired stone is named heart-stone and comes to only

those with a clean heart. The transformative potential of the stone surfaces in the novel through a series of psycho-spiritual encounters faced by the protagonist:

> 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. It could be 'cattle, women, prowess in war, or success in the hunt. That is what is meant by catching the river when it is asleep. That way you can make its magic yours. The retrieved stone is a powerful charm called a heart-stone. (Kire 3)

However, a fuller actuation of the stone is subject to the selflessness of its handler and, as the story develops, Vile emerges as a selfless and ethical figure. His pursuit of the heart-stone is not a materialistic one like the mysterious assailant of the Nepali couple to be killed by a tiger. One could view this as a figurative conflict between exploitative and altruistic views of ecologies. Vilie's ethics does not remain confined to a generous disposition toward his fellow men, but more importanty, extends to his view of the forest as his home:

> The forest was home to Vilie. He had spent twenty-five of his forty-eight years here. He had no thought of returning to the village now…The clan then made him guardian of the *gwi*, the great mithuns that walked these regions…The Forest department asked if he would like to become the official protector of the rare tragopan that liked to nest in Vilie's part of the forest. He agreed to this as well. (Kire 4)

Vilie's transactions, with both society and nature, are marked by a strong feeling of collegiality. He is rightly called the guardian of the forest. In those hours of loneliness when the sense of isolation almost causes Vilie to abandon his life in the forest and return to the village, this deep collegiality sustains him. "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). This deeply entrenched sense of being rooted in the local ecology sustains an otherwise troubled sense of self:

> Strangely, these thoughts calmed him. He felt clearer in his head. He had strived so hard after something that was still elusive. Perhaps the answer lay not in striving but in being. In simply accepting that the loneliness would never be eliminated fully, but that one could deal with it by learning to treat it like a companion and no longer an adversary. (Kire 10)

As subsequent passages illustrate, it is one's transformation from striving to being that corresponds to a fuller existence. As the seer warns him, "Take your gun with you but use it sparingly. Sometimes, the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder" (31). In the narrative, Vilie strives no more for anything but wants to actualize his true self. Vilie views the forest as the best school, available to anyone and full of meaning (15). Vilie's reaction to Krishna's question as to what else other than the forest could be a better school for their child re-elaborates the key idea of the narrative, that is, the centrality of ecology in forming what could be termed eco-symbiotic subjectivities and consciousness. "Krishna was probably right what could school possibly teach him that his parents could not improve upon? He did not have a map but hunters in these parts did not use maps…They had mapped out the land in their heads" (15–16). The same eco-ethical consciousness resonates in Krishna's advice to Vilie. "Travel carefully Saab, the forest is dangerous to those who don't know it, but it can be kind to those who befriend it" (20). This view of their forest-habitus is an illustration of a consciousness that not only emerges from but is sustained through local ecologies, physical as well as symbolic.

However, this mutuality with nature is not marred by selfish concerns nor does it remain limited to the domain of the physical only. The forest not only provides material support to Vilie but also directs his life otherwise as well, that is, in shaping his spatial and temporal sense. "Vilie, looked at the sun in the horizon. It was probably two o'clock in the afternoon. He saw that the leaves on the plantain were already holding little pearls of moisture condensed from the heat. If he set out now, it would be dark before he could find a good place to spend the night" (16). As he moves on, he sleeps on treetops, drinks from forest streams, heals his wounds with forest herbs (41, 49), and also relies on herbs such as bitter wormwood to ward off evil spirits (32). The text also corroborates the centrality of natural ecologies in sustaining people elsewhere. For instance, Chapter 7 entitled "The Nettle Forest"

deals with Vilie's meeting with the bark weavers who weave nettle clothes, highlighting the embeddedness of the people in local ecologies.

Another dimension of the ecocentric orientation of the text comes from the way it constructs natural ecology not as a mere physical backdrop, but an interface between the corporeal and the extramundane. This accentuates the eco-ethical stance of the text. For instance, Vilie's passage is interrupted on several occasion by encounters with "weretigers." As the story reveals, weretigers are his own clansmen who have metamorphosed into spirits. They can easily mutate from their human shape into that of a tiger and otherwise. This constitutes an extended clanship, transactions with which again are subject to customarily inherited and transmitted eco-ethical protocols. It is interesting that while Vilie is attacked by such a tiger, he not only fights it with a gun but by speaking to it and evoking clan affiliations which accomplishes what a gunshot could not (26). This is evident in Chapter 6 of the novel titled "Speaking to the Tiger." The encounter with the tiger brings to the fore some very important points. To begin with, it illustrates the aptness of Vilie being called, throughout the novel, "the Guardian of the Forest" (41). To him, the forest does not consist of only the trees and grasses but also of the mysterious. His transactions with both is modulated by a deeply-entrenched sense of eco-ethical propriety. For instance, he refrains from shooting the tiger at the first instance as he lacks a justification for doing so. The tiger could not be used for food (25). He also is pleased that the first shot had missed the tigers' head, as he did not want to kill it (24). The episode also highlights how Tenyimia folk imagination serves as an interesting symbolic space to accommodate the co-residence of and border-crossing between the human, natural and supernatural, thereby offering itself as a fresh ecocentric imaginary:

> Ville was quite sure by now that it was a weretiger. The folk practice of certain men transforming their spirits into tigers was a closely guarded art. Despite the secrecy, most of the villagers knew who were the men who had become weretigers were. He rapidly thought of the names of those men who had their tiger spirits in this region. Three names came to mind and he decided to use them all rather than use only the one in case it was the wrong name. (Kire 26)

Vile shouts the names out with absolute faith that they were being listened to and heeded. The animal retreats for the second time, but not before it makes a call like a warrior's ululating cry. This human-faunal metamorphosis is a nuanced and intricate exercise:

> He remembered being told that it was by a long process that they reached their final stage of weretigerhood. Legend said that every weretiger began as a smaller animal, possibly a wildcat. He then remembered the story of a young boy who came from a long line of weretigers. When he and his father were out hunting, a wildcat crossed their path. The boy raised his slingshot and took aim at the cat but his father knocked the slingshot from his hand. When the boy wordlessly looked at him, his father simply said, 'Son, that cat is you!' that was all that the boy needed to understand that his spirit was becoming one with the tiger. (Kire 27)

This points to a different kind of consciousness which no more relies on the human/animal, natural/supernatural binary. Both the text and the worldview it offers serve to subvert this dichotomy. The human becomes not only a tiger, but a snake and a monkey (28). This illustrates the ecocentric import of the narrative as expressing a fuller and more integrated view of ecologies. To this extent, Kire's novel adds a new dimension to the ongoing search for new ecological imaginaries.

The role of the forest in Vilie's life goes much beyond the fulfilment of material needs. It has profound emotive bearings for him. "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 this moment" (51). This feeling of affinity becomes stronger in moments of crisis. One such moment is when Vilie flees the scene where he encounters a band of hunters, and after a quarrel one of them gets killed, Vilie being the sole surviving witness. As he flees for safety, he ends up in the unclean forest which people avoid. Here, Vilie encounters spirits who make the forest their home:

> Vilie fetched water and walked back to his shelter-his head full of thoughts. It was true then what the old people said of the unclean forest. There were others who made it their home. He tried to think of the rules of hospitality. If he took firewood or gathered herbs from the forest, he should acknowledge the owners…Thanks be to the spirits. (Kire 80)

This passage reinforces the eco-ethical principle of reverent reciprocity, which the entire text foregrounds.

As Vilie plods along, a series of encounters takes place, which put to test his ethicality. As he overcomes the spirit challenge encountered in the unclean forest, he meets Kani, the fisherman who guides him to the sleeping river but also tutors his ethical being, something required for getting hold of the heart stone. Kani says:

> Remember, when we are out at the sleeping river, there can be no room for fear. If you harbour fear, you are a dead man. If you came here after committing something terrible…your spirit will not be able to outwrestle their spirits. *Any evil action of yours will weigh on your conscience*, and make you vulnerable to their onslaught...*So your protection is your own good heart and your clear conscience. Harbour no evil against any man when you are going on this trip*. (Kire 93, emphasis added)

Kani's words encapsulate the eco-ethical stance foregrounded in the text. Subsequently, Kani also explains to him the proper or ethical use of the heart stone:

> What joy will wealth afford you when you do not know the secret of living with peace and faith in your fellow men? It is not wrong to have wealth but your relationship to your wealth defines everything else. If you are grasping at wealth, you are going to lose something that wealth cannot buy for you. You will lose knowledge of the spiritual. And you will lose the power it offers you. That is true power; that is the only power to aspire to because it gives you power over both the world of the senses and the world of the spirit. (Kire 96)

Kani's words make Vilie feel that he had come very far from the man who had left his forest home to go on a quest for the sleeping river. They also make him realize how throughout his passage, he has always been favored and treated mercifully. This awareness induces a sudden transformation in Vilie. The meaning of his life and the pursuit of the stone assumes a much stronger altruistic focus. When he began his journey, he was driven by adventurist impulses. Although Vilie's was never self-interested, he wanted to catch the sleeping river to experience the thrill of it. To this extent, he was ultimately driven by his self-considerations.

However, the encounter with Kani cleanses his heart of these residual traces of egocentrism and takes him to a state of selflessness. Now onwards, Vilie does not chase the stone merely to excite himself, but for others such as Kani (96).

The final leg of Vilie's journey to the river, together with Kani, accentuates the principle of eco-ethical mutuality that the text celebrates. As he struggles to pluck out the stone from the river-bed and is attacked by the widow-women guarding it, this ecological-moral consciousness sustains him. "Then he stopped struggling and concentrated instead on the spirit words he had learnt: "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuopfu 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). The struggle is not directed against the external river, but at Vilie's own self. As Vilie and Kani return, they do so with a renewed sense of self that synergizes with broader, or (extra)-mundane, spiritual-material ecologies. Thus, the encounter with the heart-stone is full of metaphorical resonance.

Vilie's return passage can be viewed as an extension of this metamorphosis when he is made to face a series of trying circumstances yet adheres to the ecological-ethical values inherent to him and acquired during the journey. That Vilie is the best keeper of the heart-stone resonates in Kani's view of him. "Because your spirit is large-hearted and teachable, and because, I sensed you would be more amenable to spirit things than the others were. Perhaps there is a deeper reason why you felt so drawn to seek the heart-stone" (109). Vilie is viewed as the "wise one" by Kani now. His wisdom comes not from any book or teacher, but from the forest itself, as he rightly pointed out to Krisha before he set out on his voyage.

Thus, Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* fuses ecological-ethical concerns and symbolic rhetoric. The larger ecocentric appeal of the text comes from the specific manner in which it integrates the themes of place, ethicality and the search for a fuller ecological being. These emphases become evident in relation to the burgeoning of the the environmental humanities in Northeast India.

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End Notes

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