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Easterine Kire's When The River Sleeps: The Psychological Realm Of Spirits and Dreams

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Abstract: Literature employs a variety of tools for exploring the hidden nature of ambiguity, providing different understandings of the same text. One such tool is the “Psychoanalytic Theory”, aimed at understanding the writer's mindset and primarily the character's inner self. The study of the Human Psyche done by various psychoanalysts, Freud, Jung, Lacan, de Kolk, McFarlane, and more, is of great importance in understanding the ‘Conscious’ and ‘Subconscious’. Freud focused on the divisions more in terms of dream interpretation while, the three orders of Lacan, collective unconsciousness and archetypes of Jungian Psychology, must have paved the way for de Kolk and McFarlane's Black Hole of Trauma, all leading to the fact that human is not the centre of the world, but his mind.

While the novel “When the River Sleeps” (2014) by ‘Eastrine Kire’ has been abundantly looked upon with the perspectives of Ecocriticism, Magical Realism, Gothic literature and other viewpoints, psychoanalytic criticism of the same is scarce. Kire has not only transported her readers to the remote regions of Nagaland full of enchantments and mysteries but also vividly explored the power of the human mind, from repression to hysteria, which governs his life and future. The protagonist ‘Vilie’, his dreams, and his journey provide an understanding of one such realm with other supporting characters and concepts like Ate, Zote, Weretiger, Sleeping River, and Heart-Stone. This reflects the excellent imagination and craftsmanship of the author with some typical archetypes but uncommon derivation of the mind.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Easterine Kire, Weretiger, Unconscious, Dream, Heart-Stone, Sleeping River, Vilie, Trauma

Nagaland, one of the smallest states of India with over 1,980,602 population, according to the 2011 census, comes in more than 200 tribal communities, 17 of which are major tribes, and are so well known for its diversity that the word itself is profaned. However, the richness in culture, tradition, customs, and dress, leading all to a societal and communal experience, is not so uncommon if one compares it to the rest of the Northern-east population. During the colonization period when the Britishers and the natives were focusing on the central part of India, the injustice held in Nagaland remained ignored, even after independence, till Zaphu Phizo decided to lead the Naga National Council, leading it to be recognized as the 16th state of India in 1963. The ashes of the past and the hunger of the present led the Naga to find solace in their mind through their made-up belief which they later added to stories and framed in myths, thus repressing their unwanted desire into a projection over culture and tradition. These cultures and traditions were transferred orally until a few writers

like Kire, Pariat, and Aao decided to script the traumatized and blurry experience, from individual to communal, through their short stories and novels.

Easterine Kire is a writer of lived experiences who highlights the realities of Nagaland mystically and magically, well defined by Franz Roh as *magischer realismus* (Zamora and Faris 33). Her way of telling a story grabs the tone of allegory but more in an individual way, rather than the general, as she defines the same things as the head and tail of the same coin. Apart from gaining a lot of first category in her literary career, the writer of the first Naga poetry book and novel written in English, she also was one of the earliest who defined the spiritual realm of Naga's belief in the written format after being passed from many generations in oral. The tale remained a part of their daily lives, from childhood and adulthood, which Kire herself defined in an interview given to Watitula Longkumer for *Return of the Spirit* "There is so much of the spiritual and supernatural to be explored and we have that in our culture. One only has to go deep inside oneself, back into childhood or young adulthood and draw out all those wonderful stories" (Longkumer 9). The development from childhood to adulthood marks the experiences one gains from family and society which are filled with the culture and traditions defined in norms. In terms of Naga, it is more about the growth and development of the person in a community with their folktales, taken as reality in their culture as a habit of living style that consists of "dreams, aspirations, beliefs, suffering, agony, stories, songs and myths too" (Babar 3).

Defining all these realities, Kire wrote 'When The River Sleeps' while keeping in her mind the realities of all these tales and myths, thus crafted realistically and mystically. The realism and the mysticism of the work were more reflected through the uncommon realm of psyche present in the protagonist Vilie and supporting characters Ate and Zote, unlike the common one of the spiritual world. The proven spirits, accepted by the community, were nothing but the conditioned draft present in the characters' minds. The mind according to Locke is white paper (Locke 87) and gaining knowledge through experiences, is also the one that shaped the unnatural realities of adulthood. Vilie, a man 48 years old, motherless, loveless, childless, unmarried, and not having any reputed job, defines himself as familyless, proving that society must have been hard on him in present ways while ignoring his childhood and youth. Due to the same, he declared the forest, his job, as his home and wife, displacing all the definition of family while associating with it. "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." (Kire 51)

Apart from the visions defined through the ecological aspect that was the wrapper of his unfulfilled desire or need, the whole story of him dreaming the same dream for the past 2 years, the craving for Heart Stone (3), finding ways for it, reaching Sleeping River (3), and then giving it to Ate, have reflected the plays of unconscious, conscious, and defence mechanism, as defined by Freud. All these also reflected that his reality of the spiritual world and myth is nothing but an awakened dream.

1. Vilie's Dream: The Social Neglect

Analysing dreams and their meanings is central in understanding the 'Inner desires' or the 'Subconscious' of any character. Freud has detailed the study of dreams in his work 'The Interpretations of Dreams (1990)'. He described dreams as the "**royal road**" to the unconscious, arguing that dreams provide us with the best understanding of the repressed desires in us (Nayar 67). True to our protagonist 'Vilie', his dream serves as an expression of his inner desire, as Aristotle reflected in his 'On Dream': "the faculty by which, in waking hours, we are subject to illusion when affected by disease, is identical with that which produces illusory effects in sleep" (Aristotle 2). He has been dreaming of the "Sleeping River" and the "Heart Stone", however waking up restless realizing his vain efforts of getting the stone. These continual failures are nothing but his inability to adjust with the society for which he turned to the forest. Vilie time and again remarks: "The Forest is my Wife", this underscores his escapism which he is not aware of. The desire to get the 'Heart Stone' is nothing but his desire to establish a social life, his family, and the desire for a companion. He describes the Heart Stone as –

"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" (Kire 3)

The above lines as spoken by the protagonist himself show his fascination for the 'Heart Stone'. Freud has described that "dreams are codes, presenting themselves as complex images so that the repressing force is bypassed" (Nayar 67). Considering this in the case of the protagonist, we see how he has always been refusing

marriage or living in human society. But pursuing this escape, he becomes unaware of his need for companionship. In the stage of 'Secondary Revision', where the dreamer interprets his dream, the conscious mind organizes the elements of the dream into recognizable and acceptable themes or images and ignores the rest (68). This is what led Vilie in his pursuit of the stone. He consciously remembers what the 'Seer' preached him about getting the stone and Subale said about the very brief interval between the time that the widow-women disappeared behind the hills, and the river stopped flowing and went to sleep, (Kire 99). Remembering these, he plunges into the sleeping river, shocked at the violence of the river just as he had always dreamt Vilie however says: "I'm going to get out of this alive!". (103)

Another critic 'Maud Ellmann' also describes the unconscious as consisting of "repressed desires, anxieties, fears and paranoias" (Nayar 69). Truly, it can now be inferred that Vilie's dream is his inner desires, repressed in the unconscious and appearing in the dreams.

2. Preconscious Mind: A Realm of Thoughts Preceding the Consciousness

The term 'Preconscious' was first introduced by none other but the famed psychologist Sigmund Freud. In his work 'Interpretation of Dreams' (1900), he describes Unconsciousness as not merely the opposite of Consciousness but consisting of two other divisions: 'Unconscious' and 'Preconscious'. While the Unconscious comprises the thoughts, feelings, and memories that are outside the awareness of our Consciousness; the 'Preconscious' consists of anything that could potentially be brought into the Conscious Mind. Freud explains it as :

"... two kinds of unconscious—one which is easy, under frequently occurring circumstances, transformed into something conscious, and another with which this transformation is difficult and takes place only subject to a considerable expenditure of effort or possibly never at all. [...] We call the unconscious which is only latent, and thus easily becomes conscious, the 'preconscious', and retain the term 'unconscious' for the other". (Freud, *Lectures On Psycho-Analysis* Lecture 31)

In the given novel, 'When The River Sleeps', the concept of the 'Preconscious Mind' is depicted through the character of our protagonist 'Vilie'. Vilie's journey to the 'Sleeping River' is strongly affected by his past experiences and cultural values which are often not consciously present in his character but surfaced when needed. Kire has drawn the character of Vilie with a special focus on his unfulfilled desires, dreams, determination and mindfulness which is depicted throughout his journey, reflecting his active Preconsciousness. Our Preconscious Mind acts as a 'Memory Storage' that guides us with immediate reflexes when needed. The same is seen in the novel during Vilie's stay in the forest in several ways like the encounters with the 'spirits' and 'Weretigers' (Kire 26), his struggles with the turmoil of the Sleeping River the way he had in his dreams etc.

The other character exploring 'Preconscious' is 'Mechuseno' who reflects the concept of 'Preconsciousness' through her death. She was hallucinated by the image of a big dark man she saw behind the tree to be following her all the way home. Mechuseno caught a fever as she was way too scared and kept crying: "Send him away Mother, he is staring at me!" (Kire 5). Her assumptions and the belief of actually seeing the image of the man was nothing but the folk tales of spirits which overpowered her 'Preconsciousness' eventually hampering her sanity to distinguish between illusion and reality.

3. The States of Trauma: A Threat to the Future.

Trauma is a "history is written in blood" (Rivkin and Ryan 506) that cannot be forgotten, thus remaining haunted and gothic for the people suffering it. Vilie, being the very conscious person and the one who is always haunted by the spirits in the novel, was nothing but a man driven or crafted by trauma. He believed that the concept of marriage was arbitrary, unlike the rest of the villagers, and thus remained unmarried, showing his silent revolt against this societal norm. Despite burying all the painful memories somewhere deep down his mind, the trauma came in the form of myth, archetypes, and tales, whose definition was driven by his unconscious mind in terms of the sleeping river, heart-stone, and weretiger. His traumatic experience altered his psychological order in such a way that his buried memory started fluctuating, displacing, and regressing. The control of the past, through unfulfilled love, remained unmarried, not following societal norms, and not having an association with family and job, hampered the present psychological health of not just Vilie, but Ate

and Zote too. Vilie was suffering from PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, “a diagnosis that has created an organised framework for understanding how people's biology, conceptions of the world, and personalities are inextricably intertwined and shaped by experience” (488). Now, what makes these three characters different from the rest is that these “people who develop PTSD from people who are merely temporarily stressed is that they start organising their lives around the trauma.” (489)

Trauma like this can lead to neglect daily life activity, thus becoming dead to the world (495). Vilie neglected the structure of society and his maternal family, remembered only when he wanted to protect Ate, his visualised daughter. On the other hand, Ate and Zote also neglected or detached themselves from the worldly world, their native village, and the rest of the human population, except for the widows or unmarried women who suffered the same. This case is not different from what Eugen Bleuler defined as schizophrenia (Bleuler 9), through which Vilie suffered and hallucinated about the things that gave him trauma, thus his buried memory in an unconscious state started coming front in the form of multiple spirits he saw. The same was with the case of Zote who hallucinated the spirits that were nothing but buried pain.

While defining trauma through the concept of the ‘black hole of trauma’, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane categorised it into three forms: Harm to others, Self-destruction, and Revictimization (Rivkin and Ryan 494). In the context of the novel, the first and last fit well through Zote, who was harmed by others and decided to take vengeance, resulting in harming the villagers after getting the heartstone. On the other hand, Ate was the latter one who was the victim of a patriarchal society and its stereotype, along with her sisters, was again victimised when her sister decided to abandon her, well defined as a betrayal. Vilie, whose life was later surrounded by the life of Ate, was once a victim of society and was later killed by a man who killed Krishna and his family. The killer nonetheless falls in the first category by harming others because he must have been the victim and decided to victimise others by harming them.

The trauma of all the characters came together to define the intrusions (492) that formed different shapes and intense emotions with rage. The moment when Zote gets to know about the owner of the heart-stone, Vilie's rage activates and thus she decides to take revenge. The ghost of vengeance took over Zote and intoxicated her with her bleakness, resulting in attacking Vilie and Ate, own blood. After snatching the heart-stone, Zote reached the village and burned down every house and people. She entered the assembly hall meant for men to make decisions, thus becoming the first woman to not just enter but also to reach the same level of psyche and control, as those men wanted to. Soon after, the spirits of the dead residing in the village surrounded Zote and killed her. After the death, the spirit of Zote burst her pain with a loud cry. These spirits were nothing but mere hallucinations, coming out of her and the witness's mind, i.e. Vilie. He, on the other hand, decided to protect Ate but the need for the heart-stone made him follow Zote. Unaware of the paths, Ate guided him to take every left at turning, denoting the taking of the brain's left, responsible for identifying familiar objects through sensory inputs. The differences between the sisters and the protagonist are beyond a finger's count but similarities can be easily highlighted. The first one is their consciousness that needs healing from their painful past, or else either revenge or ignorance becomes the only solution for them. The revenge taken by Zote was ignorance for Ate. Ate was the revictimized one, rather than the one who harmed others. Her way of getting out of her trauma associated with the village was the pretension of forgetting memory, a pretension of amnesia. It is not something that can be easily dealt with but serves the gravest symptoms of having been overwhelmed by a traumatic experience (493). The revenge process or projection may liberate the buried pain or thought of the mind but ignorance may lead to ignorance from daily life.

While defining many trauma, cause and effect, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane also talked about different hyperarousal, from anxiety to freezing, all of which “represent complex psychological and biological processes, in which the continued anticipation of overwhelming threat seems to cause difficulties with attention and concentration” (496). “Children and adults with such hyperarousal tend to experience sleep problems, both because they are unable to quiet themselves sufficiently to go to sleep, and because they deliberately wake themselves up to avoid having traumatic nightmares.” (497) Vilie with such hyperarousal was facing the same nightmare for the past two years. His mind was collected with many unconscious thoughts that were coming in front only through his dreams and leading to different hyperarousals like sleep paralysis, anxiety, and freezing. In one of the scenes of the novel, the thoughts are reflected as heavy and dead, leading

to sleep paralysis where he encounters a spirit taking over his body and soul. Thus, the only solution left to him was to wake up.

4. Defence Mechanism: The Unconscious Protection Provided by the Ego

The concept of 'Defence Mechanism' was first described by Freud in his Psychoanalytic Theory. Defence Mechanisms are unconscious psychological responses that protect people from feelings of anxiety, threats to self-esteem, and things that they don't want to think about or deal with. There are several defence mechanisms provided by the ego like the 'Displacement' (Anna Freud 49) which involves taking feelings out on others, other ways of defence are 'Denial' (93), 'Repression' (89), 'Suppression' (32) etc. True to Vilie, he had his dreams and imaginary visions of 'Mechuseno', the only girl he ever felt affectionate towards. Vilie has always been subconsciously visiting Mechuseno in his memories. During his journey, when he stayed in the Rarhuria Village (Kire 79); he had visions of a girl whom he couldn't figure out to be real or if his mind was deceiving him, he felt the girl to be 'sympathetically' looking at him. Later when he heads to sleep, his inner stress, turmoil and need for companionship are 'displaced' in his visualisation and encounter with the spirits, especially with that of the leader of the spirits who appeared to him as a "hair-covered old man was in a terrible rage" (82). He felt the weight of a dark, indistinguishable shape sitting on him, this feeling was actually the 'Projection' of his defence, providing an outlet. The other mechanisms we see working in Vilie are his 'Intellectualization' (Anna Freud 164) and 'Rationalization' (21) as we see how he started to think about these figures with logic. He remembers his Seer's words and shouted out to the spirit:

"Mine is the greater spirit! I will never submit to you!" (83)

There are other mechanisms implied by Vilie's ego, like the 'Regression' (Anna Freud 50) as he reverts to his earlier actions: shouting at the spirits and threatening them. He saw the spirit thing getting smaller and then barely visible and eventually found no interest in the spirit. 'Regression' along with 'Reaction Formation' (8) are the last stages coming in the Defence Mechanism (43). Reaction Formation includes replacing the unwanted feeling with an opposite feeling. Similarly, in the case of Vilie, he starts a new day after his encounter with the spirits, going to the pool and washing his face. There he again saw the girl's figure with the same kind look on her face which was actually just his mind working up unconsciously to comfort him. However, Vilie saw that all that was to her was her face and hair and no body attached to that beautiful face (Kire 84). This vision of just the face and not the complete physical body is nothing but his active 'Defence Mechanism' providing him comfort with the memories of 'Mechuseno'.

4. Animism: Elevation to Spirituality

'Animism' is a metaphysical concept first described by E.B. Tylor in his work 'Primitive Culture' (1871). Animism perceives all things – animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems, etc as being animated, having agency and free will. It involves ascribing personal agency to inanimate objects and using spirits, souls, or gods to explain phenomena in the world. Tylor phrases it as follows:

"I propose here, under the name of Animism, to investigate the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings, which embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy" (Tylor 384).

Having understood 'Animism', the novel 'When The River Sleeps' can be looked upon with the same. The title itself addresses the concept of the 'Sleeping River' which is animated and personified throughout the story. Kire has employed the idea of the Sleeping River in her novel in a way a writer could have drawn and treated the character of a central human character. Ever since Vilie first heard the story of the Sleeping River, he continually had its dream for two years making him feel more restless every next dream. It was more than a story to him, nothing else mattered to him but catching the river when it went to sleep. He describes the 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" (Kire 12)

These above lines show how much he is mesmerised by the river. In Tylor's terms, animism is 'Spiritualism' (384), this means that a person believes in the notion of "extreme spiritualistic view" or "the general doctrine in spiritual beings" (Tylor 385); this idea is completely opposite to that of 'Materialism' which claims that all phenomena in the universe are material or can be reduced to the material. The Sleeping River could have been

just viewed for the sole purpose of economic development but rather than such a materialistic outlook, Kire establishes the Sleeping River as something living and possessing a soul of its own. This underscores the concept of 'Animism' i.e. treating things as being animated. Also, the concept of 'Heart Stone' which is again treated by the author in a way like a human character employs animism. The Heart Stone is believed to grant anything to its owner – cattle, money, prowess, women, and even victory in battles. Such great importance ascribed to the stone highlights its enchantments, treating it like a character exercising power and authority and hence contributing to animism.

The other aspect of the novel which employs animism is the portrayal of the 'Weretigers' who are mythical creatures described in the folktales of Southeast Asia. 'Weretiger' can be described as 'Shape-Shifter', shifting between a human figure and a tiger. This concept is described by ascribing supernatural elements which highlights the cultural significance of transformation and duality within folklore, reflecting themes of identity and the connection of human life with nature. Tylor asserts :

"Animism characterises tribes very low in the scale of humanity, and thence ascends, deeply modified in its transmission, but from first to last preserving an unbroken continuity, into the midst of high modern culture" (Tylor 385).

Considering this above statement, the same can be inferred in the novel too. The tradition of 'Weretiger' is described in the novel as a "folk practice of certain men transforming their spirits into tigers" (Kire 34). During his journey, Vilie encountered tigers during his stays in the forest, he recollects what he heard about the 'Weretiger' and how this tradition was practised by the Angamis and people of the village Dhilloma. When a tiger first attacked Vilie during his journey, he rapidly thought of the name of those men who had their tiger spirits in the region, coming up with three names he shouted :

"Kuovi! Menuolhoulie! Wetsho! Is this the way to treat your clansman? I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman." (26)

Tylor described 'Animism' as involving souls, controlling deities, and a hierarchy of subordinate spirits; this same view is held by the Nagas for weretigers. Also, with the above lines, we see how Vilie addresses the tiger who might have been just a wild creature but instead, Kire has asserted animism in his interaction with the tiger and reflects the importance of spirituality, culture, tradition and folktales. The other incident of the weretiger described in the novel is when the character Ate is attacked by a weretiger. Then too, Vilie could have just killed the tiger to protect her but he again realises that this was no real tiger. He remembers what he once heard from an old man: "Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers..." (31). Hence, it can be inferred that Kire has placed great spiritual importance on the figure of a tiger who otherwise was just an ordinary wild creature, reflecting the belief of 'animism' which claims that every object, place or creature possesses a distinct spiritual essence - as animated and alive.

5. Collective Unconsciousness: Redefining the Social Belief

The term collective unconsciousness, as defined by Jung in his 'The Significance of Constitution and Heredity in Psychology', is different from Freud's personal unconsciousness. The latter, according to Jung, is defined as a white paper where individual unconsciousness is driven by the experiences he takes from the environment, while the former is the "psychic life of our ancestors right back to the earliest beginnings" (Jung 155). While taking into consideration, the same definition suits well for the given novel as all the characters have their respective personal unconsciousness but possess some shared one too. They shared one belief in myths and spirits. The spirits, defined as the unconscious thoughts and trauma that were just visible to Vilie, were his own psyche. The same is true with the dark man visible to Seno was no one else but her personal trauma and thoughts, that eventually killed her, however, the concept of spirits itself is collective. The spirits that were taking the body of Zote were not just visible to her but to Vilie too. The same was the case when the weretiger attacked Ate, which was visible to her and her guardian Vilie. The widows around rivers were visible not only to the Vilie who fetched the heartstone but also to all the people who carried the identical intention and decided to fetch the same but with different desires. The release of their trauma was coming in the form of spirits, something that passed on from many generations to them by their ancestors. Thus the common fear and visibility that came to them as a lullaby or the bedtime story has now become their bed of belief. It is the matrix of all the characters and their "conscious psychic occurrences, and hence it exerts an influence that

compromises the freedom of consciousness to the highest degree since it is continually striving to lead all conscious processes back into the old paths” (155)

In Essence the given novel, ‘When The River Sleeps’ serves as a powerful critique in understanding human nature, his psychology and desires. When dealt with the ‘Psychoanalytic Criticism’ the text unfolds several deeper meanings that can be traced upon at different levels, apart from ecocriticism and oral literature. The contributions of critics like Freud, Jung, Lacan, der Kolk, McFarlane, and others in formulating several methods to understand the human psyche are of great importance, which have significantly assisted us in exploring the characters, their subconscious desires, trauma, and journey. Also, the portrayal of the setting using vivid visual imageries of ‘Sleeping River’, ‘Mountains’, ‘Weretigers’, ‘Spirits’ etc shows the excellent imagination and craftsmanship of our author ‘Easterine Kire’ representing the Naga culture; which in turn weaves a tapestry of emotions which deeply impacts the readers and the critics and proves human’s mind as the centre of the world.

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