

VISUALISING NAGA CULTURE: TANGIBLE TRADITIONS IN EASTERINE KIRE'S WHEN THE RIVER SLEEPS AND SKY IS MY FATHER: NAGA VILLAGE REMEMBERED

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of tangible culture and visual arts in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps and Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. The study explores how Kire transforms indigenous Naga traditions, rituals, oral narratives, landscapes, architecture, textiles and ecological practices into literary archives of cultural memory. Using postcolonial and eco-critical perspectives, the paper argues that Kire's fiction preserves endangered indigenous identities by foregrounding material culture and visual aesthetics. The novels depict nature as sacred, architecture as symbolic, and artistic traditions as carriers of communal history. Through vivid imagery and indigenous symbolism, Kire challenges colonial stereotypes and reconstructs Naga identity within contemporary literary discourse. The study further demonstrates how visual arts and tangible cultural practices function as forms of resistance against cultural erasure and globalization.

Keywords: Tangible culture; visual arts; Naga identity; indigenous literature; eco-criticism; post colonialism; cultural memory.

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Introduction

Northeast Indian literature has emerged as an important area in contemporary Indian writing in English because of its engagement with indigenous identities, oral traditions+ and cultural memory. Among the prominent voices from the region, Kire occupies a significant position as one of the first Naga writers to articulate Naga experiences in English. Her works preserve indigenous histories and traditions that mainstream literary narratives have often marginalized. Through fiction rooted in oral storytelling and ecological consciousness, Kire transforms literature into a repository of Naga cultural identity.

Kire's novels *When the River Sleeps* and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* vividly portray Naga life through rituals, myths, landscapes, folk beliefs and artistic traditions. These narratives foreground tangible cultural elements such as architecture, weaving, ornaments, sacred objects, and ecological practices. Such material representations are deeply connected with spirituality, memory, and communal identity. In addition to preserving indigenous traditions, Kire's fiction also reconstructs the visual aesthetics of Naga culture through descriptive imagery and symbolism. This paper analyses the tangible aspects of Naga culture represented in Kire's

novels, with particular attention to visual arts and ecological aesthetics. Employing postcolonial and eco-critical approaches, the study argues that Kire's works function as cultural archives resisting historical erasure and preserving indigenous consciousness.

Review of Literature

The growing body of scholarship on Kire's fiction primarily focuses on eco-criticism, indigenous identity, folklore, oral tradition, spirituality and postcolonial resistance. However, limited attention has been paid to the representation of visual arts and tangible cultural aesthetics in her works. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by examining how *When the River Sleeps* and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* preserve Naga cultural identity through material culture, indigenous visuality and ecological imagination.

One of the most significant critical studies on *When the River Sleeps* is Pronami Bhattacharyya's "Ecology of the 'Other': A Posthumanist Study of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*." Bhattacharyya analyses the novel through a posthumanist framework and argues that Kire dismantles anthropocentric binaries between humans and nature. According to the critic, Kire's narrative "break the unbridgeable gap between the

human, non-human, and the spiritual worlds” (Bhattacharyya 2). The study emphasises the interconnectedness between ecology, spirituality and indigenous cosmology in Naga culture. Bhattacharyya further observes that Kire's works are rooted in “collective memory” and indigenous ecological ethics, thereby positioning her fiction as a form of cultural preservation. While the article provides valuable insights into posthuman ecology, it does not specifically address visual arts and material aesthetics in the novels. Similarly, P. S. Luireiphy's article “Intersection of Ecology and Literature in Kire's *When the River Sleeps*” examines the ecological consciousness embedded in Kire's storytelling. Luireiphy argues that Kire depicts “nature as living, sacred presence” and connects ecological guardianship with indigenous cultural values (Luireiphy). The article highlights the intimate relationship between the Naga people and their environment, emphasising sustainability and ecological ethics. The critic also notes that Kire uses literature to communicate indigenous knowledge systems and environmental awareness. However, the study remains largely eco-critical and does not explore the artistic and visual dimensions of Naga culture represented in the novels.

Another important contribution is Neena Kishor's “Nature in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*: An Eco-critical Reading.” Kishor interprets the forest in the novel as a protective and empowering entity. The study argues that nature in Kire's fiction functions “almost like a character” assisting the protagonist in his spiritual journey (Kishor). The article foregrounds the themes of sanctuary, wilderness, and environmental harmony. Kishor's eco-critical reading contributes significantly to understanding Kire's ecological imagination, though it pays little attention to visual culture and tangible artistic traditions. Sanghamitra De's article “Of Being and Belonging: Contextualising ‘Cosubjectivity’ in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*” analyses the coexistence of human and non-human entities in Kire's fiction. De argues that Kire constructs “a reconstituted community space where both the individual and the collective meet” (De). The concept of “cosubjectivity” explains how indigenous communities perceive nature and spirits as integral parts of existence. The article contributes to understanding indigenous epistemology and territorial belonging in Kire's narratives. Nevertheless, the visual and aesthetic dimensions of cultural representation remain underexplored.

The article “Revering Naga Tribes as the Propagators of Ecocentrism: Retrieving the Evanescing Cultural Heritage through Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*” by K. Nithya and Anita Albert examines how Kire retrieves disappearing Naga cultural heritage through

ecocentric perspectives. The critics argue that tribal communities maintain a harmonious relationship with nature and preserve valuable indigenous traditions. The study emphasises animism, tribal identity and environmental ethics, presenting Kire's work as a literary response to cultural erosion. However, the article primarily focuses on ecological philosophy rather than visual aesthetics or material culture. Recent scholarship has also explored indigenous cosmology and decolonial aesthetics in Kire's fiction. In “Decolonizing Narrative Forms: Indigenous Cosmology in *When the River Sleeps* and *Carpentaria*,” Tirna Sadhu and Binoy Dangar argue that Kire's novel should not merely be categorized under magical realism but understood as “indigenous realism” rooted in Naga cosmology (Sadhu and Dangar). The study highlights how rivers, landscapes, and ancestral presences function as living realities within indigenous worldviews. This approach is particularly relevant to the present research because it foregrounds indigenous ways of seeing and representing reality.

Although several scholars have examined Kire's fiction from eco-critical, postcolonial, folkloric, and indigenous perspectives, there remains a noticeable lack of research on visual arts and tangible cultural aesthetics in her novels. Existing studies largely focus on ecology, spirituality, and oral narratives, overlooking the importance of architecture, weaving, ornaments, spatial aesthetics, and visual symbolism in preserving Naga cultural identity. The present study seeks to address this research gap by analysing how visual arts and material culture function as cultural archives in *When the River Sleeps* and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. By integrating eco-criticism, postcolonial theory, and visual cultural studies, this paper examines the relationship between indigenous aesthetics, ecological consciousness, and cultural memory in Kire's fiction.

Tangible Culture and Indigenous Identity

Tangible culture refers to the visible and material expressions of a community's traditions and social life. These include architecture, clothing, rituals, crafts, ornaments, and sacred spaces. In indigenous societies, tangible culture functions as a carrier of collective memory and historical continuity. In *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, Kire reconstructs traditional village life with ethnographic precision. The novel depicts communal living, agricultural practices, ceremonial rituals, and indigenous governance systems. The village itself becomes a cultural artifact representing ancestral continuity and social cohesion. Traditional objects such as shawls, beads, weapons, and ritual spaces symbolize communal identity and preserve tribal history.

Similarly, *When the River Sleeps* foregrounds indigenous beliefs and ecological practices through the journey of Vilie, the protagonist. Hunting rituals, herbal medicine, spirit worship, and oral traditions become central aspects of Naga identity. Kire portrays these cultural practices not as relics of the past but as living systems of knowledge deeply connected to land and spirituality. The intimate relationship between indigenous identity and land is reflected in the statement: "Our umbilical cords are buried here" (Kire, *When the River Sleeps*). This powerful image symbolizes ancestral rootedness and cultural belonging. The metaphor transforms the landscape into a repository of memory and identity.

Oral Tradition as Cultural Archive

Oral storytelling forms the foundation of Naga cultural expression. Folktales, myths, songs, and legends preserve historical memory and spiritual knowledge across generations. Kire translates these oral traditions into written literature while retaining their communal and performative qualities. The narrative structure of *When the River Sleeps* resembles a folktale or quest narrative rooted in oral tradition. The story of the sleeping river and the magical stone reflects indigenous cosmology and spiritual belief systems. Through oral storytelling techniques, Kire blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural. Scholars observe that Kire's fiction "breaks the unbridgeable gap between the human, non-human, and the spiritual worlds" (Bhattacharyya 2). This interconnected worldview reflects the indigenous cosmology embedded within Naga oral traditions. Similarly, *Sky is My Father: Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* functions as a cultural archive preserving memories of precolonial Naga society. Through oral narratives and communal recollections, the novel documents histories excluded from mainstream historiography.

Visual Arts and Indigenous Aesthetics

An important dimension of Kire's novels is the representation of visual arts and indigenous aesthetics. Naga visual culture includes weaving, beadwork, wood carving, architecture, body ornamentation, basketry, and symbolic motifs associated with tribal identity and spirituality. In *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, Kire provides detailed descriptions of traditional houses, ceremonial spaces, ornaments, and costumes. The morung, or youth dormitory, emerges as an important artistic and cultural structure decorated with carvings and symbolic motifs representing bravery, fertility and collective identity. These artistic elements are not merely decorative but function as repositories of communal memory. Traditional Naga textiles are another significant artistic form represented in the novels. Shawls woven with geometric patterns and vibrant colours communicate social identity, tribal

affiliation, and historical achievement. Weaving becomes both an artistic practice and a narrative tradition preserving cultural history through visual symbols. Kire's fiction also demonstrates how architecture functions as cultural text. Village spaces are organized according to communal and spiritual values, reflecting indigenous systems of knowledge and ecological adaptation. Through detailed spatial descriptions, Kire preserves the artistic heritage of Naga village life threatened by modernization and globalization.

Landscape as Visual and Spiritual Art

Kire's narrative style is deeply visual, often resembling landscape painting through its vivid imagery. Forests, rivers, mountains, and village pathways are rendered with sensory precision, transforming the natural world into an aesthetic and spiritual space. In *When the River Sleeps*, nature is represented as sacred and sentient. Vilie's emotional connection with the forest reveals the ecological spirituality central to Naga culture. Kire writes, "The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary" (Kire, *When the River Sleeps*). This metaphor personifies nature as a living companion and reflects indigenous ecological ethics based on reciprocity and respect. The landscape in Kire's fiction is never passive scenery; it actively shapes human experience and cultural identity. Rivers, forests, and stones possess spiritual significance within indigenous cosmology. The magical stone sought by Vilie symbolizes power, destiny, and cultural inheritance. P. S. Luireiphy observes that Kire depicts "nature as living, sacred presence" (Luireiphy). Such representations challenge anthropocentric perspectives and foreground the interconnected relationship between humans and the environment.

Ecology, Spirituality, and Symbolism

Nature occupies a sacred position in Naga culture, and Kire consistently portrays the environment as spiritually alive. Forests, rivers, birds, and animals coexist with humans within a shared cosmological framework. In *When the River Sleeps*, supernatural encounters occur naturally within everyday life. Spirits inhabit forests and rivers, while dreams and omens function as sources of knowledge. Indigenous spirituality is represented not as superstition but as an alternative epistemology rooted in ecological consciousness. Kire also employs visual symbolism drawn from Naga folklore and myths. Fire, moonlight, forests, and ritual objects carry spiritual significance and create a symbolic visual texture within the narratives. These recurring images function as cultural signs preserving indigenous philosophical worldviews. The protagonist's understanding of the forest reflects inherited indigenous wisdom. Vilie recognizes the importance of people possessing "knowledge of the ways of the forest" (Kire, *When*

the River Sleeps). This statement highlights ecological knowledge as a cultural inheritance transmitted across generations.

Colonialism, Modernity, and Cultural Preservation

A recurring concern in Kire's fiction is the erosion of indigenous traditions under colonialism and modernization. Colonial discourse often portrayed tribal societies as primitive and culturally inferior. Kire challenges these stereotypes by foregrounding the complexity and richness of Naga cultural practices. *Sky is My Father: Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* particularly addresses the transformation of traditional society under colonial influence. The novel captures tensions between indigenous customs and external systems introduced through colonial administration and missionary activity. Nevertheless, Kire does not romanticize the past uncritically; instead, she presents culture as dynamic while emphasizing the importance of preserving collective memory. Through her representation of visual arts, oral traditions, and ecological knowledge, Kire transforms fiction into an act of cultural resistance. Her novels preserve indigenous histories and artistic traditions endangered by globalization and cultural homogenization.

Narrative Technique and Cultural Representation

Kire's narrative technique reflects oral storytelling traditions through repetition, symbolism, and episodic structure. Her language remains simple yet evocative, allowing the cultural atmosphere of the narratives to emerge naturally. In *When the River Sleeps*, magical realism enables the coexistence of spiritual and physical realities. The blending of myth and realism reflects indigenous cosmology and challenges Western distinctions between reality and imagination. Kire's use of vivid visual imagery also contributes to the aesthetic quality of her fiction. Landscapes, rituals, and cultural objects are described with painterly precision, enabling readers to visualize the cultural world of the Nagas. Her narratives therefore function as literary museums preserving indigenous aesthetics through language.

Conclusion

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and *Sky is My Father: Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* preserve Naga identity through the representation of tangible culture, visual arts, oral traditions, and ecological spirituality. The novels foreground material practices such as weaving, architecture, ornaments, rituals, and storytelling as carriers of communal memory and indigenous knowledge. Kire's fiction also transforms landscapes into aesthetic and spiritual spaces where humans, nature, and spirits coexist. Through vivid imagery and symbolism, she reconstructs the visual culture of the Nagas while resisting colonial stereotypes and cultural erasure. The study demonstrates that visual arts and

tangible cultural practices in Kire's novels are not merely decorative elements but active forms of resistance, identity formation, and historical preservation. By documenting indigenous aesthetics within contemporary literature, Kire ensures the survival of Naga cultural memory for future generations.

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