

## Tracing Cultural and Mythic Memory in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

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### Abstract

This paper examines Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) through the framework of cultural memory. While existing scholarship has largely focused on ecocritical interpretations, this study argues that the novel functions as a repository of mythic and cultural memory rooted in Naga oral traditions. Drawing on Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory and Pierre Nora's idea of sites of memory, the paper demonstrates how the narrative transforms landscape, folklore, and storytelling into symbolic spaces that preserve indigenous identity. Through Vilie's journey, Kire reconstructs a cultural archive where myth, memory, and place intersect, ensuring the survival of Naga cosmology in written form.

*Keywords:* Easterine Kire, Cultural Memory, Naga Folklore, Indigenous Identity, Mythic Memory, Sites of Memory

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## **Introduction**

Contemporary Northeast Indian literature has increasingly emerged as a significant site for exploring indigenous identities, cultural memory, and ecological consciousness. Among the prominent voices in this field is Easterine Kire, whose writings foreground the oral traditions, cosmological beliefs, and lived experiences of the Naga community. Her novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) draws deeply upon Naga folklore and mythic imagination, presenting a narrative that intertwines landscape, spirituality, and cultural memory. Through the journey of the protagonist Vilie in search of the legendary stone from the sleeping river, the novel constructs a narrative world where memory, myth, and indigenous cosmology are inseparable.

Scholarly discussions on *When the River Sleeps* have largely emphasized its ecological and cultural dimensions. Several critics have interpreted the novel through the lens of ecocriticism, highlighting the sacred relationship between human beings and the natural environment. For instance, (Kishor, 2017; Gayathri, 2023) observes that nature in the novel functions not merely as a setting but as a living presence, arguing that “nature is presented as an empowered, benevolent provider which protects those who take refuge in it” (Kishor, 2017, p. 130). Such readings emphasize the ecological ethics embedded in Kire’s narrative and the indigenous worldview that regards the natural landscape as spiritually animated.

Similarly, other scholars examining Northeast Indian narratives have noted that Kire’s works draw heavily on oral traditions and mythic storytelling. Indigenous myths, spirits, and folklore shape the narrative structure of *When the River Sleeps*, reflecting what critics describe as the continuity of cultural storytelling practices in Naga society. As one study suggests, Kire’s narrative recreates. Kire’s narrative reconstructs a cultural universe in which folklore, myth, and collective memory coexist within everyday life (Lakhar, 2021). Through such elements, the novel preserves and transmits cultural knowledge across generations. (Lakhar, 2021; Saikia, 2019).

Another significant dimension of the novel is the role of landscape as a repository of cultural meaning. The forests, rivers, and mountains depicted in the narrative are not merely geographical features but symbolic spaces that carry ancestral memory. The protagonist's journey through these spaces becomes a process of encountering the spiritual and cultural past of the community. As Vilie reflects during his quest, the river and the surrounding forest appear to possess a mysterious agency, suggesting that nature itself holds hidden knowledge and power (Kire, 2014).

Despite the growing body of scholarship on the novel, most studies focus primarily on ecological themes or cultural representation. While these approaches illuminate important aspects of the text, they often overlook the deeper relationship between myth, memory, and narrative structure. The myth of the sleeping river itself functions as a cultural memory embedded within the landscape, preserved through oral tradition and collective belief. By tracing how these mythic memories shape the narrative and guide Vilie's journey, the novel reveals the ways in which storytelling becomes a medium for preserving indigenous identity.

This paper examines *When the River Sleeps* through the lens of cultural and mythic memory. It draws on theories of cultural memory and mythic narrative to argue that the novel presents the landscape of Nagaland as a repository of ancestral knowledge and mythic memory. Through Vilie's journey, the narrative shows how indigenous storytelling keeps cultural continuity alive while also reimagining the connection between humans, memory, and the natural world.

## **Literature Review**

Critical work on *When the River Sleeps* by Easterine Kire has mostly focused on the novel's ecological awareness, cultural representation, and indigenous worldview. Kire has emerged as a significant voice in contemporary Northeast Indian literature. Her writings have gained increasing attention for their depiction of Naga folklore, oral traditions, and spiritual ties to nature. However, while some studies address environmental and cultural themes in the novel, relatively few consider the role of mythic and cultural memory in shaping the story.

One major area of criticism looks at the novel from ecocritical angles. Scholars highlight nature's importance and the spiritual connection between people and the environment. For

example, Kishor (2017) asserts that the natural landscape in the novel acts as a moral and protective force instead of just a backdrop. Kishor explains, “nature is presented as an empowered, benevolent provider which protects those who take refuge in it” (Kishor, 2017, p. 130). This view emphasizes how the forest, mountains, and rivers serve as active agents in the story, reflecting indigenous ecological values.

Other critics have examined the depiction of indigenous cosmology and cultural traditions in Kire’s work. Studies on Northeast Indian literature commonly point out that Kire’s stories preserve oral storytelling customs and mythic beliefs of the Naga community. The presence of spirits, supernatural beings, and sacred landscapes in *When the River Sleeps* reveals a worldview where nature and spirituality are closely linked. One analysis of Kire’s fiction states that her stories reconstruct Kire’s fiction reconstructs a cultural universe in which folklore, myth, and cultural memory coexist within everyday life (Lakhar, 2021).

Another important focus for scholars is the cultural and social context of Kire’s works. Researchers looking into Naga literature often explore how writers in the region express indigenous identity and cultural memory through storytelling. These studies underscore how folklore and myth help maintain community history and cultural values. The myth of the sleeping river itself fits into this broader cultural framework, serving as a story that passes down ancestral knowledge throughout generations.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing studies typically concentrate on ecological themes, cultural representation, or regional identity. While these approaches shed light on key aspects of Kire’s narrative world, they often miss the deeper connection between myth, storytelling, and cultural memory found within the novel’s structure. The mythic legend of the sleeping river, the sacred stone, and Vilie’s spiritual journey can all be seen as reflections of collective cultural memory preserved through oral traditions.

This study aims to expand current scholarship by examining *When the River Sleeps* through cultural and mythic memory. It focuses on how myths, landscapes, and storytelling maintain ancestral knowledge. The study shows that Kire’s novel serves not only as an adventure story but also as a repository of indigenous cultural memory.

The present study looks at *When the River Sleeps* through the ideas of cultural memory and mythic narrative. These frameworks help analyze how indigenous stories, landscapes, and myths act as stores of collective memory in literary texts. Cultural memory is key to understanding how communities pass down knowledge through generations. Cultural memory theorist Jan Assmann defines it as the shared pool of knowledge and traditions that help societies build and keep their collective identity. According to Assmann (1995), cultural memory is preserved through “texts, rituals, monuments, and commemorative practices” that support a community’s understanding of its past (p. 129). In literary narratives rooted in oral traditions, myths and legends often serve as vital carriers of this memory.

The idea of sites of memory, created by historian Pierre Nora, is closely tied to this concept. Nora (1989) suggests that cultural memory is often found in symbolic spaces, such as landscapes, monuments, and narratives, that store historical awareness. These memory sites hold collective experiences and cultural meanings. In the context of indigenous storytelling, natural landscapes like forests, rivers, and mountains frequently act as such sites, representing ancestral histories and mythic traditions.

These theoretical ideas are especially relevant to *When the River Sleeps* where the landscape of Nagaland appears deeply connected to myth and memory. The legend that the river “sleeps” once a year and reveals a powerful stone reflects a mythic story passed down orally. The protagonist, Vilie, embarks on a journey to obtain the stone, making this adventure an encounter with the cultural memory tied to the landscape.

Alongside cultural memory theory, this study also uses myth criticism to explore the novel's narrative structure. Myth theorist Joseph Campbell describes a common narrative pattern known as the “hero’s journey,” where the protagonist goes on a quest filled with trials, change, and return (Campbell, 1949). Vilie’s journey through forests, encounters with supernatural beings, and ultimate discovery of the sleeping river resonate with this mythic structure. These narrative patterns reinforce the link between storytelling and collective memory in indigenous cultures.

By merging theories of cultural memory and mythic narrative, this study aims to analyze how *When the River Sleeps* preserves and reinterprets Naga myths and oral traditions. The

novel illustrates how storytelling serves as a powerful medium for sustaining cultural identities, spiritual beliefs, and ancestral memories in contemporary literature.

### **Landscape as Cultural Memory**

In *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire constructs the landscape of Nagaland as a living repository of cultural memory. The forests, rivers, and mountains are not simply natural settings but symbolic spaces that preserve ancestral beliefs and mythic traditions. Through these landscapes, the narrative reflects the indigenous worldview in which nature and memory are deeply intertwined.

The myth of the sleeping river itself represents a powerful example of how cultural memory operates within the novel. The belief that the river sleeps once a year and reveals a magical stone has been passed down through generations as part of oral tradition. This legend functions as a collective memory shared by the community, embodying the spiritual relationship between people and the natural environment. As cultural memory theorist Jan Assmann explains, collective memory is preserved through narratives and symbols that transmit cultural knowledge across generations (Assmann, 1995).

Within the novel, the river becomes a sacred space that contains hidden knowledge and spiritual power. The journey to the sleeping river is therefore not merely a physical quest but also an engagement with ancestral memory embedded in the landscape. The natural environment acts as a medium through which myth and memory are preserved. As Vilie approaches the river during his quest, the atmosphere of the landscape becomes mysterious and spiritually charged, suggesting that nature itself holds a deeper meaning beyond its physical presence (Kire, 2014).

Scholars studying Kire's work have also noted the centrality of nature in her narratives. (Kishor, 2017) observes that nature in the novel functions as an active presence that guides and protects individuals, emphasizing that "Nature is presented as an empowered, benevolent provider which protects those who take refuge in it" (Kishor, 2017, p. 131). This perspective highlights how the landscape embodies moral and spiritual authority within the narrative.

Furthermore, the forest through which Vilie travels can be interpreted as a symbolic archive of cultural memory. Indigenous myths and beliefs are embedded within these natural

spaces, and the protagonist's encounters with supernatural beings reflect the persistence of these traditions within contemporary storytelling. In this sense, the landscape becomes what Pierre Nora describes as a "site of memory," where cultural meanings and collective experiences are preserved (Nora, 1989).

Thus, the novel demonstrates how indigenous storytelling traditions transform the natural environment into a repository of mythic and cultural memory. By situating the narrative within a landscape filled with legends and spiritual significance, Kire highlights the ways in which memory, myth, and place are inseparable in Naga cultural imagination. (Saikia, 2019; Lakhar, 2021).

### **Mythic Quest and the Journey of Vilie**

The narrative structure of *When the River Sleeps* closely follows a mythic quest pattern, where the protagonist undertakes a perilous journey in pursuit of a sacred object. In the novel, the young hunter Vilie sets out to obtain a mystical stone from the legendary sleeping river, a journey that mirrors the archetypal structure of mythic narratives found across many cultures. Through this quest, Easterine Kire integrates indigenous folklore with universal patterns of mythic storytelling.

Myth critic Joseph Campbell identifies the structure of the "hero's journey" as a recurring narrative pattern in which the hero responds to a call to adventure, undergoes trials, encounters supernatural forces, and eventually returns transformed (Campbell, 1949). Vilie's journey reflects many of these elements. His decision to seek the river stone marks the initial call to adventure, drawing him away from ordinary life into a mysterious and dangerous landscape filled with spiritual forces.

Throughout his journey, Vilie encounters numerous trials that test his courage, patience, and moral character. The forest becomes a liminal space where the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds blur. Encounters with spirits, hostile strangers, and mysterious beings reinforce the mythic atmosphere of the narrative. These trials function not merely as obstacles but as stages in the protagonist's spiritual development. The journey thus becomes a process of transformation through which Vilie gradually gains wisdom and humility.

The symbolic object at the center of the quest—the stone from the sleeping river—also carries mythic significance. In many mythic narratives, sacred objects represent power, knowledge, or spiritual authority. Similarly, the river stone in Kire’s novel embodies both mystical power and moral responsibility. Its value lies not simply in its supernatural qualities but in the spiritual discipline required to obtain and protect it.

Scholars examining indigenous storytelling traditions often note that such narratives use mythic journeys to convey cultural values and ethical lessons. In *When the River Sleeps*, Vilie’s quest reflects the indigenous belief that power must be balanced by humility and respect for nature. His encounters along the journey reveal the dangers of greed and selfishness, emphasizing that spiritual strength arises from moral integrity rather than domination.

Moreover, the mythic quest structure reinforces the novel’s connection to cultural memory. The legend of the sleeping river itself originates from oral storytelling traditions, and Vilie’s journey can be understood as a reenactment of this ancestral myth. By retelling and reimagining this legend within a modern narrative form, Kire demonstrates how myth continues to shape cultural identity and collective memory within contemporary literature.

Through the figure of Vilie and his quest for the river stone, the novel transforms an indigenous legend into a narrative of spiritual discovery and cultural remembrance. The mythic journey thus becomes a literary device through which ancestral beliefs and cultural memory are preserved and transmitted.

### **Myth and Oral Storytelling as Cultural Memory**

Myth and oral storytelling occupy a central place in *When the River Sleeps*, where Easterine Kire reconstructs indigenous narrative traditions as carriers of cultural memory. Within the Naga cultural context, myths are not merely fictional stories but repositories of ancestral knowledge and collective belief systems transmitted across generations. The legend of the sleeping river in the novel exemplifies this process, functioning as a mythic narrative that preserves the community’s understanding of the relationship between human beings, nature, and spiritual forces.

The legend of the sleeping river forms the mythic foundation of the narrative. According to the traditional belief in the story, “once every year the river sleeps, and whoever finds the stone in that moment will possess great power” (Kire, 2014, p. 3). This myth functions as a cultural narrative preserved through oral tradition and collective memory.

Cultural memory theorists emphasize that collective identities are sustained through narratives that preserve and transmit shared experiences. As Jan Assmann explains, cultural memory is maintained through symbolic forms such as stories, rituals, and myths that allow societies to remember and reinterpret their past (Assmann, 1995). In indigenous cultures, oral storytelling becomes one of the primary mechanisms through which such memory survives. The myth of the sleeping river in Kire’s novel reflects this dynamic, embodying a story that has circulated within the community and continues to shape cultural consciousness.

At the beginning of the narrative, the legend of the river establishes the mythic framework of the story. The belief that the river sleeps once a year and reveals a powerful stone is presented as a story known among villagers and hunters. This legend operates as a form of communal memory, preserved through oral narration rather than written documentation. As the narrative suggests, the story of the sleeping river carries both mystery and reverence, indicating the deep cultural significance attached to the natural landscape in the novel functions as a repository of cultural memory and spiritual meaning. The forest becomes a sacred refuge where the protagonist experiences both protection and transformation. As the narrative suggests, “the forest was his home; it protected him from the evil in the heart of man” (Kire, 2014, p. 51). This depiction reflects the indigenous worldview in which nature is deeply intertwined with cultural identity and collective memory. (Kire, 2014).

Scholars studying Kire’s fiction have similarly noted the role of folklore and myth in her storytelling. According to (Kishor, 2017), Kire’s narratives draw extensively upon indigenous oral traditions, where the novel portrays a cultural worldview in which the natural and supernatural realms coexist within indigenous imagination (Lakhar, 2021). Through the integration of myths, spirits, and sacred landscapes, Kire recreates the storytelling traditions of Naga culture within a contemporary literary form.

The presence of supernatural beings in the novel further reinforces the role of myth as cultural memory. Throughout Vilie's journey, he encounters mysterious spirits and other supernatural forces that reflect indigenous cosmological beliefs. These figures echo the mythic stories traditionally shared within Naga communities, where the boundaries between the human and spirit worlds remain fluid. Such narrative elements illustrate how mythic memory continues to influence cultural perceptions of reality.

Furthermore, the act of storytelling itself becomes a means of preserving cultural identity. Myths such as the legend of the sleeping river function as narrative archives that transmit ethical values and communal beliefs. The story warns against greed and selfishness while emphasizing humility and respect for nature, values deeply embedded within indigenous cosmology. By retelling this myth through the journey of Vilie, Kire not only preserves these cultural narratives but also reinterprets them for contemporary readers.

The novel therefore demonstrates how myth and oral storytelling operate as powerful vehicles of cultural memory. By embedding ancestral legends within the narrative structure, *When the River Sleeps* transforms indigenous myths into literary expressions of collective remembrance. Through these stories, the novel sustains the cultural memory of the Naga community while reaffirming the enduring relationship between myth, landscape, and identity.

Another significant dimension through which *When the River Sleeps* articulates cultural and mythic memory is the representation of indigenous cosmology. In the narrative, the natural and supernatural worlds are deeply interconnected, reflecting the spiritual worldview embedded within Naga cultural traditions. Through encounters with spirits, mysterious forces, and sacred landscapes, Easterine Kire reconstructs a cosmology in which myth and memory shape everyday perception of the world.

In many indigenous traditions, cosmology is preserved through oral narratives that explain the origins of natural phenomena and the presence of supernatural forces within the environment. Cultural memory theorists argue that such narratives function as symbolic systems through which communities remember and interpret their past. According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory is sustained through narrative traditions that encode the beliefs and values of a

society, allowing them to be transmitted across generations (Assmann, 1995). The mythic elements present in Kire's novel therefore operate as narrative expressions of collective memory.

Throughout Vilie's journey, the forest appears as a space inhabited by unseen forces and spirits. These supernatural presences reflect the animistic worldview characteristic of many indigenous belief systems, where natural elements are believed to possess spiritual agency. The atmosphere of the forest is often described as mysterious and alive, suggesting that the landscape itself participates in the mythic reality of the narrative (Kire, 2014). Such representations demonstrate how the novel preserves traditional cosmological beliefs within its storytelling structure. The presence of supernatural forces in the forest reflects the indigenous cosmological worldview represented in the novel. The landscape appears spiritually animated, suggesting that it carries the memory of ancestral stories and myths (Kire, 2014).

Scholars examining Kire's work have noted that her narratives frequently draw upon indigenous cosmology to represent cultural identity. Studies on her fiction emphasize that myths, legends, and supernatural beings are not merely decorative elements but integral components of cultural knowledge. As one critic observes, Kire's narratives depict a cultural universe shaped by folklore, spiritual beliefs, and ancestral traditions that continue to influence contemporary Naga identity (Saikia, 2019).

Within this cosmological framework, the legend of the sleeping river gains deeper symbolic significance. The river is not simply a natural entity but a sacred presence capable of revealing hidden power. The belief that the river sleeps once a year reflects a mythic understanding of nature in which time and space are infused with spiritual meaning. Vilie's quest to obtain the stone therefore becomes an encounter with a sacred myth preserved within collective cultural memory.

Moreover, the supernatural encounters experienced by Vilie reinforce the continuity between mythic past and present reality. These experiences suggest that the stories told by previous generations are not merely remnants of the past but living narratives that continue to shape cultural imagination. By integrating these mythic elements into the narrative, Kire demonstrates how indigenous cosmology functions as a form of mythic memory embedded within both landscape and storytelling.

Thus, *When the River Sleeps* portrays indigenous cosmology as a vital component of cultural memory. The presence of spirits, sacred landscapes, and mythic legends illustrates how ancestral beliefs remain embedded within the narrative consciousness of the community. Through this representation, the novel preserves and revitalizes the mythic memory of Naga culture while presenting it within a contemporary literary framework.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined *When the River Sleeps* by Easterine Kire as a literary narrative that preserves and reinterprets cultural and mythic memory within the context of Naga indigenous traditions. Through the legend of the sleeping river, the spiritual journey of the protagonist Vilie, and the depiction of sacred landscapes, the novel reveals how storytelling becomes a medium through which ancestral beliefs and collective memories are transmitted across generations.

The analysis demonstrates that the natural landscape in the novel functions as a symbolic archive of cultural memory. Rivers, forests, and mountains are not merely geographical features but spaces embedded with mythic meaning and spiritual significance. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Jan Assmann and Pierre Nora, the study shows how these landscapes operate as sites where collective memory is preserved and remembered through narrative traditions. The myth of the sleeping river, passed down through oral storytelling, illustrates how indigenous communities encode cultural knowledge within legends connected to the natural environment.

Furthermore, the novel employs a mythic quest structure that reinforces the relationship between storytelling and cultural memory. Vilie's journey to obtain the river stone reflects the archetypal hero's journey described by Joseph Campbell, where the protagonist undergoes trials and transformation through encounters with supernatural forces. Through this narrative structure, the legend of the sleeping river is re-enacted within the contemporary literary form, ensuring that the myth continues to live within cultural imagination.

The study also highlights the role of indigenous cosmology in sustaining mythic memory within the narrative. The presence of spirits, sacred landscapes, and supernatural encounters reflects a worldview in which the boundaries between the natural and spiritual worlds remain

fluid. These elements demonstrate how myths function as repositories of collective belief systems, preserving ethical values and cultural identity within storytelling traditions.

Ultimately, *When the River Sleeps* illustrates the enduring power of myth and memory in shaping cultural identity. By embedding indigenous myths and oral traditions within the narrative, Kire not only preserves the cultural memory of the Naga community but also reimagines these traditions within contemporary literature. The novel therefore stands as an important example of how indigenous storytelling continues to sustain cultural heritage while contributing to the broader landscape of modern Indian writing in English.

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