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Ecology of the 'Other': A Posthumanist Study of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014)

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Abstract: In Posthuman Ecology, anthropocentrism, based on the binary division between the privileged human and the 'other', gets deconstructed, leading to an acknowledgment of humans as essentially tangled in an intricate web of the natural world. In such ecologies, boundaries between the human and the more-than-human (non-human) worlds become porous, creating fluid identities and conditions of being within a framework of active interplay between the human and the non-human world. The ecology of folktales is replete with Posthumanism, as their narratives consistently break the unbridgeable gap between the human, non-human, and the spiritual and/or supernatural worlds and present certain non-naturalist ontologies that are mostly at odds with naturalism or modern empirical science. Such tales provided much-needed templates for sustainable development in the time of the Anthropocene. This paper attempts to study Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) as a posthumanist narrative where Vilie (a hunter) goes on a fantastical journey to find a fabled magical stone from the bottom of the 'sleeping river'. Vilie's journey comes out as a playground for both mundane and fantastic elements. He grows as a human being, and this happens as he transacts with the non-human and the supernatural world and comes across deep metaphysical questions and presents keys to understanding balance-in-transcendence.

Keywords: Posthumanism; Anthropocene; Ecocriticism; folktales; Kire; South Asia



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1. Introduction

In Posthuman ecology, anthropocentrism, based on the binary division between the privileged human and the 'other', gets deconstructed, leading to an acknowledgment of humans as essentially tangled in an intricate web of the natural world (*Towards a Posthuman Ecology* Mondello 2018, p. 2). It is a worldview that undermines the traditional divisions between the human, the non-human, and the technological. In such ecologies, boundaries between the human and the more-than-human (non-human) worlds become porous, resulting in what can be seen as the fluidity of modern life (Bauman 2000, p. 3) and the "melting of solids" (Bauman 2000, p. 6) that could result in a dissipation of forces that frame the dynamics of order and system. Such ecologies generate narratives that dwell on the constant shifting of boundaries of ontology, epistemology, and of 'beings and things'. Integral to these narratives is the philosophy of how humans hypothesize and place themselves in relation to the more-than-human world (McGinnis 1999, p. 2), creating fluid identities and conditions of being within a framework of active interplay.

Since the 'human' is a historical construct that became a social convention and a standard for normalcy, normality, and normativity, a genealogical critique of Posthumanism opens up novel spaces for both social and personal transformation and frees us from traditional entrenchments by offering new ways of imagining the world and our existence in it. Historically, Cartesian dualism (Descartes 2007) shapes understandings of meaning as rooted only in human thought and language. Foucault's genealogies [*Madness and Civilization* (Foucault 1965), *The Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault 1973), *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1975), and *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1976; Mahon 1992)] throw light

on the processes of legitimation in history as well as in their discontinuities, disruptions, incongruities, and omissions to give voice and space to alternative narrations and knowledges. In such narratives, humans are seen not as dominant or exceptional but instead as interrelated in mind, body, and behavior with non-human species and the environment (Tarr and White 2018). However, an important aspect of Posthumanism is that it is “not so much anti-humanism as it is a re-envisioning” of humanism (Tarr and White 2018, p. xvi). Vilie, the protagonist of *When the River Sleeps*, serves as a posthuman figure (Braidotti 2013b) who is instrumental in opening up ‘the foreigner that lives within us’ (Kristeva 1991, p. 1) as well as the ones outside—an introspective journey both within and without. He is freed to imagine ‘other’ possibilities, which his human society did not allow or facilitate. In this way, Vilie’s ecology is a resonance of Natureculture (*The Companion Species Manifesto* Haraway 2003; “Natureculture” Malone and Ovenden 2017) because it puts into question the dualism deeply rooted in the intellectual mores of the humanities and sciences and constantly *co-creates* by intrinsically intertwining discourse, matter, and semiotics. Since posthuman knowledge claims go beyond the critiques of the universal and exceptional ‘Man’, it intersects essentially with Post-Anthropocentrism, which critiques Anthropos as ‘central’ and a deciding factor in the nature-culture milieu, and develops as a study of the past and present oriented towards the future.

The ecology of folktales mystically transports characters, vis-à-vis readers, into the realm of the ‘beyond’, one that melts into the ‘transcendent’ or spiritual experience from the ‘everyday’ human experience. Angie Zapata et al. write: “posthumanist scholarship is rooted in a relational ontology, meaning that we come to know through our being with and in the world” (Zapata et al. 2018, p. 479). Such tales are not merely literary investigations into human characters but intricate narratives that raise reflective philosophical questions about the basic essence of human existence, involving supernatural forces and entities to answer these subterranean metaphysical questions (Carr 2018, p. 255). In a sense, such encounters present certain non-naturalist ontologies, which are mostly at odds with naturalism, modern empirical science, and capitalist predispositions. In *Reinventing Eden*, Carolyn Merchant says: “Those who construct and follow new synthesizing narratives will do so by allowing regional peoples to preserve and use their own bioregional environments in ways that counter the environmentally destructive modes of global capitalism” (Merchant 2003, p. 203). Folktales provide templates for synthesizing narratives and are developed against a posthuman ideological backdrop, as their narratives consistently break the unbridgeable gap between the human, non-human, and the spiritual and/or supernatural worlds. This paper reads through the folk ecology presented in Easterine Kire’s *When the River Sleeps*.

Born in Nagaland in 1959, Kire is a short story writer, poet, and novelist who has settled in Arctic Norway. Her narratives draw on the indigenous culture of Nagaland, which is not only based on her personal memory and experiences but also the long-brewed collective memory of the community, particularly the Angami Naga tradition that thrives on a culture of respect, reciprocity, and moderation. She is the first Naga poet to publish a poetry book in English in 1982 and the first Naga novel in English *A Naga Village Remembered* in 2003. Kire is also celebrated as the first author from Nagaland to write books for children and has been awarded the prestigious Hindu Lit for Life prize in 2016 for *When the River Sleeps*, outshining fifty-eight contenders, including renowned writers like Anuradha Roy and Amitav Ghosh. A critically acclaimed novel, *When the River Sleeps*, published in 2015, has been widely studied from the points of view of postcolonialism, folklore studies, ecocriticism, and supernaturalism. It is the tale of Vilie, who sets out on an adventure to find the mythical stone from the sleeping river that will give him untold power. In the enchanting landscape of Nagaland, he fights as well as befriends elements from the human and non-human worlds—he ends up almost wedded to the forest. While ecocritical readings of the novel have highlighted the intricate interactions between the human and non-human (supernatural included) worlds in the folk culture of Nagaland, Folklore studies have assessed the broad spectrum of the ways of living of the tribes of Nagaland and how communities have come to shape their reality over time. Such studies successfully tend to

highlight inherent postcolonial tendencies, inducting marginalized voices into dominant discourses. However, based on the literature review undertaken ([Lokde 2020](#); [Lahkar 2021](#); [Kishor 2017](#); [Tialia 2022](#); [Jana and Dutta 2022](#); [Kumar 2019](#)), it is seen that a posthumanist lens has not been applied to the text hitherto. However, singular aspects of magic realism, archiving, orality, supernaturalism, and ecocriticism have been explored. This paper not only attempts to engage in a posthumanist meaning-making process from a region that has long gone unheard but also intersects it with Anthropocene studies, an area of paramount importance in the current time.

When the River Sleeps presents the tale of an almost mythic protagonist, Vilie (a hunter), who goes on a fantastical journey to find a fabled magical stone from the bottom of the 'sleeping river'. Unlike his Western counterparts, Vilie does not have to prove himself worthy of finding the stone; rather, he must prove his worth after procuring the powerful stone to be able to keep it. Vilie's journey establishes the fact that not everyone is a hero at the beginning of the journey; rather, it is more important to experience and learn, imbibe heroic qualities during the journey, and grow. Vilie replicates this course of action. The stone that Vilie seeks is supposed to be laced with stories of the collective human history of Nagaland/Vilie's tribe. It is also filled with energy that supposedly turns a human into one with superhuman qualities. Vilie's journey is through the verdant landscape of Nagaland (India), which emerges as a playground for both mundane and fantastic elements. On the surface, the purpose of Vilie's journey is to find the sleeping stone; however, the seemingly magico-fantastical narrative also draws on the fact that the aim of human spiritual and moral life should be a liberation from what Murdoch calls the "fat relentless ego" ([Murdoch 1970](#), p. 258) of the Anthropos and its anthropocentric points of view. Like a character in a bildungsroman, we find Vilie growing as a human being, and this happens as he transacts with the non-human and the supernatural worlds and comes across deep metaphysical questions. The narrative presents keys to understanding balance-in-transcendence that emphasize that humans (or men) are not necessarily independent and complete in themselves. As Murdoch explains, "the key to this purely unselfish and other-regarding love, compassion, or concern is an 'unselfing' detachment from those vain and egotistic feelings and desires that prevent us from seeing the world and others as they truly are—and hence having due sympathetic understanding of why they are what they are" ([Murdoch 1970](#), p. 258). Vilie's journey enables him to look at the world 'as it really is', devoid of the layers of anthropocentric interpretations. Vilie undergoes a transcendence that would not have been possible without this journey, one from man-made culture into an ecology of nature-culture. In fact, nature provides the canvas on which humans develop their cultural processes and belief systems. His journey is also remarkable in that it reflects posthumanism even without essentially decentering the human from the center. Vilie remains the center of the action, but the point of view of both the non-humans and the supernatural beings can be effortlessly discerned. It is important not to dethrone humans altogether from such narratives, as moderate anthropocentrism would drive humans to look after their environment for their own survival and hence facilitate important political decisions. Kire's narrative paints an ecology where Vilie is an important factor and part of the landscape, but not necessarily placed at the center. Kire's fluid narration, which transcends points of view and thereby experiences, has the potential to cater to the rapidly changing current times that are dealing with the dwindling spiritual connection between the human and the non-human world and the health of our ecology. Ecological destruction is real, and a thorough data analysis shows that "Amazon deforestation was down 68% from the year before, with 127 square miles of forest having been destroyed" ([Open Access Government 2023](#)). Narratives like Kire's weave fiction against such backdrops and can lead to a concrete change in people's perceptions, choices, and behaviors. This perception change is of utmost importance and the first step towards macroscale changes needed on socio-economic-political levels.

In 2000, Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist, announced that we are living in the Anthropocene, leaving behind a negative human carbon footprint more

than ever since the time of the Industrial Revolution. In its race to progress, humans have fallen prey to the fallacy of what is registered as ‘nature vs. culture’ (Eagleton 2000), thereby feeding the already existing chasm between the human and the non-human world. Such a divide results in the autonomy of things (non-human world) resting on human beings leading to an inevitable antagonism between the two (Descola 2013a). It is, as if, cultures are inherently conditioned to carry a sense of this human (culture) and nature (non-human) division (Descola 2013b). One should recognize and appreciate the fact that human culture is intricately tied to the immediate physical world that is affecting it and, in turn, gets affected by it (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, p. xix). Narratives in their varied genres and forms act as a binding force within social and cultural systems—folktales do this with the larger framework of nature (human, non-human, and supernatural) as their backdrop. The tales represent ways of living much needed in current times that offer templates for sustainable living in sync with nature, the perceived ‘other’ of culture.

The idea of spirit or soul (more so when religiously indexed) is at odds with non-naturalist ontologies. But in folk ontologies, trees caress one, birds sing a lullaby, and bears bring you food. On a spiritual level, this brings to the fore the continuum of human-nonhuman relationships. For people belonging to cultures that believe that trees have souls, the connection between human and tree life becomes profound. The world saw major changes during the colonial period and the era of modernization, with an ever-increasing chasm between natural and non-naturalist ontologies. However, the twenty-first century is a time and space for counter stories, of ontologies and ecologies of the ‘other’ where voices from the margins are being heard. For a contemporary need for a new orientation towards life, such stories go a long way. Michaela Fenske and Martha Norkunas say that “humans learn what it means to be just one actor in an entangled world rather than the dominant being in a human-oriented hierarchy.” They acquire the capacity to coexist with other humans and other-than-humans. As a result, familiar concepts of nature and culture, civilization and wilderness, humans and nonhumans are changing” (Fenske and Norkunas 2017, p. 107). Nature is a milieu of culture, even as culture is rooted in and shaped by its immediate ecological setup. Homes III Rolston is of the opinion that “culture remains tethered to the biosystem, and the options within built environments, however expanded, provide no release from nature” (Rolston 1999, p. 155). While animals and plants largely adapt to their respective environments and engage in a continuous communication with their surroundings (Griffin 1976, p. 3), humans “reshape their environments, including new ones into which they expand, rather than being themselves morphologically and genetically reshaped to fit their changing environments” (Rolston 1999, p. 155). This can be seen as “a slow violence” (Eitel and Meurer 2021, p. 3) which has become the epithet of the Anthropocene. It has been largely forgotten that existence is not about humans or nature in isolation, but about, as Haraway opines, a two-way traffic between the two ‘our’ story is not only about humans (Haraway 2003).

When the River Sleeps celebrates a mutual ecology in which there is life beyond the ‘self’, that is rooted in autonomous transcendental consciousness, in a landscape seeped in the ancient ways of life, the ancient world thus informs the present and the future, even as the present lends a lens to interpret the past. The ecology of Nagaland, as presented in the novel, upholds the fluidly shared identities of diverse entities in a lush landscape. This aspect of the narrative also highlights the posthuman concept of trans-corporeality, which incorporates multiple horizon crossings. With unexpected passages and transits, “trans-corporeality means that all creatures, as embodied beings, are intermeshed with the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them” (Alaimo 2018, p. 435). In fact, trans-corporeality is not a mere spiritual, mystical, experiential, or phenomenological sense that declares “everything is connected”. Rather, it posits a revisionist thinking of ontologies and epistemologies like those of science studies, critical race studies, feminist theory, environmental theories, disability studies, art, literature, and everyday activism. This framework unsettles the central subject of

‘Western humanist individualism’, who envisions himself as transcendent, incorporeal, and detached from the world he inspects.

2. Nagaland: A Verdant Romantic Ecology

Sky is my father, Earth is my mother (Kire 2014, p. 193)

In *Nature's Economy, A History of Ecological Ideas*, Donald Worster says that “at the very core of [the] Romantic view of nature was what later generations would come to call an ecological perspective: that is, a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes the earth” (Worster 1977, p. 82). Kire’s Nagaland is a rich landscape with equal space for human, non-human, and spirit beings. It is only with a symbiotic relationship between all the spaces that a sustainable, peaceful way of living can be achieved. Michael McGinnis, in *Bioregionalism*, proposes the idea of ‘bioregionalism’ that perceives human society to be structured and coordinated within the immediate ecological context rather than political boundaries. He says, “Human beings are also connected to the ebb and flow of a living earth; the sensual fibers of an animate world tug and pull to connect culture with the land. When we listen to the landscape, we can fall back to our primitive roots—we can smell and taste the flesh of the land” (McGinnis 1999, p. 1). If looked at historically, long before the concept of bioregionalism entered the mainstream lexicon, indigenous people had been practicing its tenets. Correspondingly, the theory of Deep Ecology (Næss 1972, p. 95; Luke 2002, p. 178) strongly underpins a sense of sensitivity towards all life forms and rings in the bell of the philosophy of “Gaia” (Lovelock 1990, p. 100). Deep Ecology shoulders an “anticlass posture” while resting on the “principles of ecological egalitarianism and of symbiosis” (Næss 2005, p. 2). It encourages “plurality of voices” (Gaard 1993, p. vii). In such a plural ecology, the romance of the human and the more-than-human world thrives. The following sub-section discusses the forest as a plural ecology, as portrayed in the novel, that is representative of an all-inclusive, classless system that is an inseparable part of it.

Forest: An Ecology for All

...the forest is dangerous to those who don’t know it, but it can be kind to those who befriend it. (Kire 2014, p. 20)

When the River Sleeps portrays a holistic approach to life, showcasing an absence of all power-based binaries. Amrita Satapathy observes that “man and nature can coexist harmoniously even in a capitalist and consumerist driven 21st century” (Satapathy 2020, p. 1). The ecology of the novel illustrates this potential. Within a posthumanist frame of reference, Vilie, the man, is the ‘guardian’ for the forest, but he learns from and respects the forest and its inhabitants. His symbiotic relationship with the forest is almost matrimonial. At various points in the book, he claims, “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. . .” (Kire 2014, p. 9). Much later, during his journey, when he is attacked by some humans and has to take shelter deep inside a supposedly “unclean¹” evil forest, ‘Rarhuria’, he spends some of the most tranquil moments of his life. The villagers shunned the evil forest out of fear of ‘unknown’ spirits living in it. However, for Vilie, one who harbored no malicious intentions towards the human or non-human world, the ‘unknown’ was not a fear. In fact, he was safe in the forest when he was being hunted by some of his fellow humans. The forest acted like his “wife,” and “he felt truly wedded to her at this moment” (Kire 2014, p. 51). She (the forest) provided him with much needed “sanctuary” and food when his supplies were poor and protected him from the “evil in the heart of man” (Kire 2014, p. 51). While Vilie is about to set out on his journey to find the heart stone, he feels as if “he was being an unfaithful spouse. He began to think that leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife” (Kire 2014, p. 9). The forest is his “home” (Kire 2014, p. 3), where he spent twenty-five years. He lives in it as a hunter as well as a guardian of the forest and its dwellers. He

is the official “guardian of the gwi, the great mithuns that walked these regions,” as well as of the “rare tragopan,” in lieu of “a small salary in addition to monthly rations of rice and salt, tea, and sugar” (Kire 2014, p. 4) from the forest department. Thus, non-human ecology provides the much-needed sanctuary from his human foes—“But for Vilie this was a boon. He could recoup his strength here and try to make his way back. 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 2014, p. 51). The forest is Vilie’s home, a safe haven.

The ecology in the narrative is gendered in an organic and balanced way, a perspective reflected in all ancient knowledge systems. Vandana Shiva, discussing Indian philosophical thought, elucidates, “Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakriti creates the world” (Shiva 2010, p. 38). Prakriti (nature) is regarded as the omnipresent, all-inclusive, and spiritually enriching natural cipher that ropes together all living forms, while Purusha (man) is considered the soul of creation/consciousness (Sankhya Philosophy). Indigenous ecological ethics are manifestations of such world views. In Kire’s world, one can clearly see the strong need and presence of women and various manifestations of feminine energy for maintaining equilibrium. Gender inequalities restrict women’s access to resources and their means of subsistence. However, Kire’s world unsettles patriarchal systems of thought and enables the expansion of the latitude of cultural evaluation. In Kire’s world, women can surface as formidable human or non-human forces, and men can find themselves incapacitated in the wake of such powers. However, a considerate merger of the two could bring about a coveted living order.

On a similar note, if the forest is the wife, then trees could be taken as siblings. The ecology almost turns into an organically arranged family. Kire observes, “The Zeliangs did not like to cut down the fig tree. They called it their brother-tree because one of their folk tales told them of a fig tree that had helped to hide a man of their tribe and saved him from being killed by spirits” (Kire 2014, p. 116). Evolution is about growing with the knowledge that humans learn about the diversity of nature (the non-human world) as well as their human surroundings. It is the very essence of survival to know that one could eat an herbivorous animal for survival or that one could be killed by a carnivorous tiger. Consequently, humans acquired the skill to organize their knowledge of the non-human/natural world into a series of connected categories. Vilie knows the ecology of the forest; however, the journey that he undertakes leads him through a whole new school of thoughts and realizations, placing him next to various non-human and supernatural beings. In this grand journey, almost akin to a bildungsroman, he as well as the reader discover that at the edge of the ‘known’ space, there is an inexplicable world of unknown and evil spirits, lurking beasts, and cruel as well as kind people out in the forest. As Blake says, “Not existing in the objective world, these beings can only be projections of the human psyche, the true locus of their existence” (Blake 2013, n.p.); similarly, Vilie’s world of the (supernatural) evil is a projection of the vices lurking inside human beings, and the journey could be the metaphorical journey of life learning to overcome those. However, this romantic ecology is more than the mere fantastical characters, motifs, imaginations, and symbols. It is a whole theory of ecosystems and of models of co-existence.

While folklore is the illustration of cultural ideas and beliefs, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) (Schmonskey 2012, n.p.) can be the platform for transmitting sustained expressions for ecological purposes. In this regard, folk belief has it that the forest is the abode of their abundant spirits and gods, in nature both benevolent and malevolent.

Trees and forests thus took on symbolic divine characteristics, or were seen to represent superlative forces such as courage, endurance or immortality. They were the means of communication between worlds. (Crews 2003, p. 37)

Hence, a relationship sans exploitation could reap manifold benefits for humans, as Vilie is shown to be extremely diligent in seeking the magic stone, respecting local beliefs, so that he can “make its magic” (Kire 2014, p. 3) his own.

Meanwhile, the hunter and protector Vilie discovers that “the people residing in the forest, “the forest dwellers”, seem to have a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of life” (Kire 2014, p. 11). Regarding the ‘sleeping river’, he realizes the superficiality of his knowledge about it and that “only forest dwellers can understand such things exist in the places not frequented by man? Will the magic of the river work only for a believer? Would it work in spite of lack of faith?” (Kire 2014, p. 11). This represents an ecolect, reciprocal in nature, similar to what James McKusick in *Green Writings* calls a newly created linguistic space “generating a dwelling-place for all living things” (McKusick 2000, p. 44). The trees provide him with comfortable resting places and safe places for his halts at night, as “all day he walked until he found a tree with branches close together. He climbed up and made a bed across three branches that looked as though they had served that purpose before” (Kire 2014, p. 21). During the daytime, for his hunger, he turned around to herbs instead of hopping Squirrels around, as he “didn’t have the heart to kill them for food” (Kire 2014, p. 49). At one point, Ate, the girl from the estranged village of Kirhupfümia, appreciates Vilie’s resolve to maintain the homeostasis of the natural world when she observes, “you trap animals for food but also protect the ones entrusted to you. Not many men can keep that balance” (Kire 2014, p. 141). Krishna also upholds his integrity as a ‘forest dweller’ even in the face of being attacked by wild animals like wolves. Vilie asks him to apply for a gun to keep his family safe, to which Krishna replies—“No no! You mustn’t do that, Saab! We are forest people. Our people have always lived like this. We will be all right” (Kire 2014, p. 19). The indigenous people are appreciative of the fact that the Forest and its non-human inhabitants are capable of feeling and sensitivity. This appreciation is at the core of ecological consciousness.

Nature is reciprocal at its core, and the ideal relationship is oriented towards ‘interbeing’. Sadly, this reciprocity is severely unhinged and chronically disoriented in the capitalist system around us today. Vilie’s journey, however, upholds this belongingness to the earth and everything around it. Northeast India being a biodiversity hotspot, the variety of herbs not only aided in satiating Vilie’s hunger from time to time but also tended to his wounds. For instance, once Vilie found “a patch of Vilhuü nha, he made a paste out of the leaves and stuck it on his injury and let the brown juice seep into his open skin. . .the bleeding stopped immediately” (Kire 2014, p. 49). On another occasion, as he was resting on a tree, “beneath were stalks of jotho, the soft-stalked herb that could be added to almost any broth” hence, “he decided he would first make a shelter and then gather some jotho for his pot. . .there were also young gara and gapa plants at the base of the tree. He would not want for food here” (Kire 2014, p. 50). Knowing the biodiversity around you is at the core of survival. Since it is an interdependent world, Vilie, with his extensive knowledge of local medicine, also takes care of the wounds of his fellow forest-dwellers. In doing so, Vilie acts as the life force that reflects egalitarianism by upholding freedom, equality, and justice. Vilie’s concern for the forest dwellers elevates him into a metaphorical window to other lives, someone that binds all into one organic unit.

The guardian of the forest carefully tended to injured forest dwellers when he came across them on his walks through the forest. He was skilled at using splints to set broken bones. He would make pastes of *ciena* for open wounds that worked for smaller injuries, but for bigger wounds he liked to use the pungent *Japan nha* and rock bee honey. He had tried these on himself, and the healing had been quick, with little scarring. (Kire 2014, p. 41)

Vilie’s geographical location enables him to act like a medicine man. In Northeast India, “there are 51 different types of forests found in the region, which include tropical moist deciduous forests, tropical semi evergreen forests, tropical wet evergreen forests, subtropical forests, temperate forests, and alpine forests” (Chakraborty et al. 2012, p. 145). In such a rich milieu, folk knowledge is well refined in terms of natural herbs, and such

knowledge has become a part of their cultural identity. Jonathan Bate explains how nature is a source for both “recreation” and “re-creation” (Bate 2000, p. 132). In Vilie’s journey, the forest healed him not just physically but also relaxed him on the inside. His long days alternated between resting and eating. Even when he walked the mossy floor of the forest, “not only was it gentle on his feet, he felt it was gentle on his muscles, and the walking helped build them up without straining them” (Kire 2014, pp. 56–57).

In fact, the forest impacted Vilie in more than one way, as, for the first time, the hunter could partake of the perspective of the hunted. He seems to have overcome the myopic ‘ontology of domination’ that has prevailed in human society since time immemorial. Vilie felt a great deal of sympathy for all the creatures and was somewhat guilty at the same time. Parochially, one might perceive animal suffering from the point of view of human suffering. Justin Smith observes that animal suffering is just as bad as human suffering; “it is thus rational to wish to put a stop to their suffering, even if we do not ascribe a whole set of other human capacities to animals” (Smith 2016, p. 2). It is, as one sees, quite commonplace for humankind to be progressively severed from nature, which, however, could be seen healing when Vilie realizes “the forest was his as much as it was theirs” and he is satisfied that “he had not caused any injury to any of them” (Kire 2014, p. 84). Rosi Braidotti describes the posthuman subject as embedded “within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say, a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable” (Braidotti 2013b, p. 49). Such a subject is both ‘embodied and embedded’ and is grounded in a strong sense of relationality, collectivity, egalitarianism, and community building. Posthumanist ecology seems to be aiding in dissolving the alienating, individuating tendencies of enlightenment. Breaking the nature-culture binary, *When the River Sleeps* strongly upholds the fact that “the safety of the village was interconnected to the safety of all who made the forest their home” and that “the village owned the forest and was responsible for its safekeeping” (Kire 2014, p. 219). It is as if a whole discourse of ethical and legal responsibilities (Vorster 2011, p. 38) gets blueprinted that outgrows the concept of human society’s dependence on the non-human world merely to sustain itself. It is the wisdom of the earth that should be an inseparable component of ‘progress of civilization’, and it is this wisdom that texts like *When the River Sleeps* propagate. This leads us to understand the folk nuances presented in the text.

3. Folk Ontologies and Practices

Multi-dimensional folk ontology is diagonally opposite to the one-sided, preferential ideology of the anthropocentric world. It has a wholesome way of educating the growth of a human. Michaela and Kaithrin say that it could help in their “processual becoming, providing new possibilities for political interventions to shape and form the world we like to live in” (Eitel and Meurer 2021, p. 4). Such ontologies and practices are in tune with the immediate ecology that stems from a greater biosphere, one that is devoid of hierarchies. *When the River Sleeps* presents a lush landscape of people abundant in knowledge of effective herbal medicines and social and ecological ethics that are “based on their needs, instinct, observation, trial and error and long experience” (Chakraborty et al. 2012, p. 145). Almost every character in the novel is an institution in himself/herself, representing some or other folk knowledge and/or practice. When Krishna explains that he is poor and cannot afford to send his son to school, Vilie ruminates:

What could school possibly teach him that his parents could not improve upon? they were rich in their knowledge of the ways of the forest, the herbs one could use for food, the animals and birds one could trap and the bitter herbs to counteract the sting of a poisonous snake. (Kire 2014, p. 15)

“I guess he will go to the best school then,” Vilie remarked. “You will be one of his teachers, Saab,” Krishna said with a smile. (Kire 2014, p. 15)

Characters like Krishna and Vilie are well capable of schooling children/people in the ways of the world, even though they are not themselves schooled in ‘modern’ modes of education. The European knowledge system, mostly based on cartesian duality, is not the sole benchmark for assessing knowledge in today’s world. The recent surge of research into indigenous knowledge systems across the world has shown that folk/indigenous ways of life promote balance in nature as well as social equity. The United Nations says that “traditional knowledge or local knowledge is a record of human achievement in comprehending the complexities of life and survival in often unfriendly environments. Traditional knowledge, which may be technical, social, organisational, or cultural was obtained as part of the great human experiment of survival and development” (Malhotra 2013, n.p.). Cartography is one such area whose history generally covers the European narratives of Columbus and the likes of ‘discovering’ and ‘charting’ ‘virgin’ lands. Steve DeRoy observes that “mapping is a powerful tool that holds stories” and that the “world’s earliest maps can be seen in cave paintings or heard in stories passed down through generations” (DeRoy 2021, n.p.). Hence, it is important to acknowledge and trace indigenous mapping practices. In Western cartography, selected, observable features of the landscape are mapped onto a flat piece of paper. Indigenous maps are mostly oral, developed through experience and passed on through word of mouth, or drawn on the walls of caves. Vilie started his journey with no printed maps of the land; rather, he followed the advice of local people and the positioning of the sun for directions. At no point in the narrative does he seem to have faltered and gone in the wrong direction. Vilie did not have any maps, nor did any hunter in his part of the world. They had skillfully “mapped out the land in their heads” and, on one occasion, “when an Australian researcher wanted to make a map of the Zuzie region, he used the hunters and their knowledge of places and place-names to construct a fairly accurate map” (Kire 2014, p. 16). Vilie spans this expanse of land while harvesting deep into ontologies that are not possible to grasp through Western models based on cartesian duality and naturalism. His journey is not only a reflection of ethnogeography but also cultural ecology—in all, a study of topography and the cultural beliefs and practices that manifest themselves in ecology. Vilie’s topographical knowledge is geography laced with stories—tales of people’s experiences and fantasy charting through the landscape. *When the River Sleeps* systematically unsettles the prejudice entrenched against the indigenous forms of knowledge systems and world views, Ecology in the book is a common playground for both visible and invisible entities, thriving on a network of interactions.

Human beings have a primal fear of the deep-dark-woods. However, even with such fears of the ominous woods, the state of global green cover is progressively and crucially worse. Global deforestation continues at an alarming rate: during 2015–2020, 10 million hectares of forest were converted to other land uses every year, an area roughly the size of Iceland (<https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/forests>, accessed date 10 August 2020). In such a state of affairs, it is essential that we strive to interrogate and understand our relationships with the more-than-human world. The past decade has seen a surge in perspectives that merge the ‘green’ and the ‘gothic’. While Gothic historically registers and manifests our anxieties and agitations, the ecoGothic reveals our environmental anxieties and desires. Theorists have tried to explore the ways in which ecoGothic reading could represent ecological crises and expose cultural consternations about the human relationship to the non-human world through uncanny apparitions of monstrous nature (Parker 2020; Smith and Hughes 2013; Hillard 2009). Folk narrations are replete with the mention of Lycanthropes, characters that are halfway between metamorphosing into animals from their human selves. Nagaland has numerous variations of the folktale on ‘weretigers’. Kire explains that a “folk practice of certain men transforming their spirits into tigers was a closely guarded art” and that “despite the secrecy, most of the villagers knew who were the men who had become weretigers” (Kire 2014, p. 26). It is interesting to note that the villagers/hunters refrain from killing a tiger, even if it turns into a weretiger. Vilie never practiced it himself.

He was used to shooting smaller animals for food but he had never shot a tiger. For one, he could not use it for food. Secondly, he would be obligated to perform the tiger-killer ritual which was complicated and not meant for a solitary hunter to fulfil alone in the forest. It was a ritual that required the presence of many members of the clan. (Kire 2014, p. 25)

Thus, killing a tiger would make the killer undergo extensive ritualistic purgation. It is seen as a burden of sin for the community as a whole, not just one individual.

After being attacked by a weretiger, Vilie had a unique way of dealing with the situation—without a weapon. Vilie fights with his mind and spirit rather than an external, physical piece of metal. He established a conversation with the ‘being’ and “sure enough the animal retreated for the second time, but not before it had made a call like a warrior’s ululating cry as it departed” (Kire 2014, p. 26). The tiger, representing the ‘other’, shows reciprocity and the capability of establishing a connection. It is a form of communication of some sort, one that is powerful and evocative. The conversation with the supernatural and taking control of a situation is visibly out of the modern naturalistic take on the world around us. This non-naturalist, pre-colonial sensitivity towards animals/non-humans was not just limited to transformation into weretigers but spread to other, tinier animals as well. In fact, “there are men in the other tribes who have been known to turn their spirits into giant snakes, and their women’s spirits have become monkeys” (Kire 2014, p. 28). Legends say that every weretiger began as a smaller animal, possibly a wildcat. Vilie 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!” (Kire 2014, p. 26). That was all the boy needed to understand—that his spirit was becoming one with the tiger. He had already been told that when his spirit was metamorphosing into a tiger, it would begin with lower forms of the cat family: “He was about thirteen years old, and being a sensitive young lad, knew that the wildcat would eventually grow into a mighty tiger which was his spirit” (Kire 2014, p. 27). This fantastical belief is a refreshing substitute for the hierarchical binaries that have been fed into our system for a long time. This thought also showcases the growth of human personality. Vilie and Krishna’s points of view present a new praxis altogether, where the non-human world is an extended consciousness of the human world itself. In *Dr. Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, Faustus wants to be turned into an animal, a lesser mortal, whose soul simply dissolves into the elements without any judgement in the afterlife (Marlowe 1995). Thus, if he turns into an animal, then he can avoid his soul being eternally damned in hell. This represents the chasm between the human and non-human worlds in the Western style of thought. The dichotomy and discrimination between the human and the non-human animal had also resulted in rampant game hunting during colonial times in India that led to a serious dwindling in the population of tigers—“80,000 tigers were killed between 1875 and 1925” (Mitra 2019, p. 816). Diagonally opposite to this, considering the acts of cutting trees or killing an animal as an act of upsetting supernatural powers is a manifestation of the eco-sensitivity of folk ontologies.

It is pertinent to note that the villagers took diligent care in passing on this folk knowledge through generations, for “knowledge is always powerful” (Kire 2014, p. 28), and for that purpose they built “age-group houses. . .to impart knowledge of the natural and the supernatural . . .so that you go out into the world with knowledge of both, and not disrespectful of either world as some people are” (Kire 2014, p. 28). This tradition of imparting knowledge was prevalent long before the introduction of European/modern systems of education. What is noteworthy is that folk knowledge is wholesome, with a close association with nature. The seer instructs Vilie on diverse matters like “using the gun sparingly” or that “the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder” (Kire 2014, p. 31). Also, during his journey, Vilie recalls the names of several herbs that he must carry with him or at least know of, like “Cienal or bitter wormwood and Tierhutiefü, a soft leafed plant with

a rather unpleasant smell. . . Ciena was good for warding off evil spirits, the other herb was supposed to be good for a number of ailments” (Kire 2014, p. 32).

Ishan Kukreti observes that the intersection of the mundane with the spiritual realm “is an ecological expression of their existence that maintains an intimate relationship with nature” (Kukreti 2020, n.p.). The tribal values of environmental management result in their knowledge enrichment. They shield natural resources, uphold an equilibrium between nature and tribal life, and conserve the ecology of their territorial habitat. By the end of his journey, Vilie does not just remain the guardian of tragopans but begins empathizing with the ecology itself. He discovers entities, their existences, their power or effect over him, and the results of his actions on his surroundings. *When the River Sleeps* aptly represents (a part of) Nagaland that is symbolic of a ‘bio-culture region’. The narrative contributes significantly towards sustainable development, peace, and stability.

4. Conclusions

In a posthuman space, along with decentering the Anthropos point of view and position, one also learns to unlearn, re-learn, and grow simultaneously. Posthumanism as a tool challenges foundational concepts and develops new ways of pedagogical practices (Snaza and Weaver 2015). Vilie walks through the space in which knowing and becoming are intertwined, illustrating Gilles Deleuze’s (1977) idea of spontaneous actions, the mutation of difference, and the ontological process of becoming transversal subjectivities. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti’s philosophy of Nomadic becomings is “the process of affirmation of the unalterably positive structure of difference, unhinged from the binary system that traditionally opposed it to Sameness” (Braidotti 2014, p. 171). Vilie is rooted, yet he connects and spreads, reflecting Haraway’s concept that “the world is a knot in motion” (Haraway 2003, p. 6). A multi-species future has important implications for ethics and responsive capacity for all forms of life. The posthuman position is a realization of the fact that the human being is “immersed and enmeshed in the world” (Alaimo 2016, p. 157) and that he/she is not an isolated figure that thrusts its will on a static natural world.

Vilie, the ‘hunter’ as well as the ‘guardian of the forest dwellers’, knows the ways of the jungle. However, his journey steadily de-centers him and places him on par with various non-human and supernatural beings—he *becomes*. In this circumgyration, the male human interacts and transacts with his non-human ‘others’ and enables the ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak [1988] 2015, p. 78) of defining and/or exploiting to be undone. Vilie learns the diversity of existence and does not attempt to homogenize ‘others;’ rather, he meets them on an equal plane of corporeal and metaphysical reality. Kire’s narrative eases out the naturalist tension between these separate planes of existence and celebrates the plurality of perspectives. Having said that, the narrative, however, does not attempt to put aside the human interest, as this would result in what has been recognized as “useless ethics that would be both insufficient and irrelevant for political decision-making and potential environmental concern” (Lindgren and Öhman 2019, p. 1201). Instead, posthumanism suggests that nonhuman elements are existing parts of cultures, societies, and humans themselves. The world requires new narratives proposing that men, women, and the earth work together while giving equal weight to the needs of both humans and nature (Merchant 2003). The developmental process inherently advocates a balance in ‘nature,’ part of which is ‘culture’.

When the River Sleeps propagates this ideal and creates alternative subjectivities, which represent a sensitivity to the interplay of ecological devastation, capitalization, commodification, and/or obliteration of non-human nature and their perspectives. Vilie is an active, mobile element in this journey of culture-nature fusion. Through his nomadic transversality, he seems to go beyond a “logic of dialectical reversibility” and is reflective of a “transpersonal mode, ultimately collective” (Braidotti 2013a, p. 346). Kire carefully chooses an almost nomadic character to chart the ecologically fertile and diverse landscape of Nagaland, woven into the rich folklore of its existence. The journey and its encounters are of utmost importance, as nomads were originally conceptualized to transcend human

limitations. Deleuze says, "...there is no longer a division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute themselves in an open space—a space which is unlimited, or at least without precise limits" (Deleuze 2001, p. 36). Concurring, a nomad can be seen as an anti-state entity, one who transgresses boundaries. Such an entity can be considered a model for posthumanist characters representing otherness, deviancy, or 'abnormality'. This is a subject that breaks hierarchical structures. Vilie is seen charting vast landscapes; he transgresses limitations put on his ontological (human) being, and his encounters and realizations foreground an ancient way of life that could present models of sustainable living in the current time. The urgency of the Anthropocene necessitates a re-writing of concepts, categories, and philosophemes. Posthumanism offers a critical lens through which one can 'read back' to create a roadmap for the present and the future. Kire's supranatural ecology gives voice to ways of life and knowledge systems that were long dubbed 'oriental', 'fantastic', 'superstitious', 'exotic' and, hence, unlikely to be true when looked at from a Western-naturalist perspective. The effortless storytelling has brought to life the experiences and challenges faced by multiple beings, human and non-human alike, established them in the middle of an invisible yet inescapable entangled network, and foregrounds the dialectical relationship between the two worlds.

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Notes

- ¹ A forest shunned by villagers; believed to be inhabited by unholy forces.

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