

Supernatural Elements in *When the River Sleeps*

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Abstract:

Easterine Kire is a poet and author who currently lives in Northern Norway. The majority of her writings are based in the lived realities of the people in Nagaland in north-east India. In *When the River Sleeps*, It is full of witchcraft, heart stones, seers and forest spirits. Kire's narration highlights the supernatural and gothic elements presented in the novel. It discusses the existence of the sprits and beautiful girls and also as the stone heart. Nature is presented as a place of retreat and sanctuary and it becomes almost like a character in the novel as it helps Vilie overcome the fear of not just people but also spirits.

Key Words:

Forest spirits, witchcraft, heart stones, seer.

The supernatural includes all that cannot be explained by science or the laws of nature, including things characteristic of or relating to ghosts, gods, or other supernatural beings, or to things beyond nature. Concepts in the supernatural domain are closely related to

“concepts in religious spirituality and occultism or spiritualism. The supernatural in always ‘beyond’, always inscrutably other” (Morey 28).

When the River Sleeps by Easterine Kire is a story of a lone hunter who ventures out to find the magical stone from the sleeping river. This book is about the forest tradition and myths that centre on the territories of Nagaland. The lively description of the nature and the life of forest dwellers make the narration more interesting. As the story moves deeper, one gets enchanted by the supernatural elements portrayed in the novel. The supernatural phenomena are abundant throughout the tale.

This novel is an enlarged form of Naga folktales which is rich in its supernatural beliefs. The protagonist Vilie experiences the presence of gothic features through his journey. He comes across the attack of weretigers in the forest during his stay. He believes that the unclean forest is capable of giving illness for those who came inside it, once he got attacked by the spirits. He suffers throughout his journey by the spirits which follow him on different occasions. Vilie goes even to his dead bed when he fought with the evil spirits in order to save the life of Ate and to get the heart stone.

The story first introduces the existence of the spirits through Mechuseno, who died in a spirit encounter. She was buried outside the village gate as she died under ominous circumstances (WRS 5). According to the myth, the people say that, “Any clan member dying after encountering a spirit could not be buried within the village (WRS 6).

As Vilie sets out to find the river of his dream, his expedition turns out to be dangerous. Kire brings out the stories about the weretigers, malignant widow spirits, spirit warriors which were a part of Naga tradition. The first spirit experience of Vilie was with the ‘weretiger’ or ‘ Tekhumiavi’(WRS26). These beasts were the men whose spirits had metamorphosed into tigers. Men attain their stage of weretigerhood after a long process. This folk practice of men transforming their spirits into tigers was highly confidential. “Among

Angamis, the weretiger ritual was a closely guarded one” (WRS 27). Therefore, certain supernatural practices are performed and details about them are kept confidential by the folklores.

There are also men in other tribes who can change their spirits into giant snakes and women spirits into monkeys. Vilie continued his journey with the guidance of the seer. The seer’s words motivated Vilie to move forward despite the strange incidents. His word goes as follows: Be patient my son, “only the patient-hearted are granted the blessing of catching the sleeping river” (WRS 31).

Rarhuria is a village believed by the tribal people that it is a place where the spirits’ children to assist human children for playing and never leave them back. Men who go out for hunting was often distracted by beautiful long haired girls playing and singing songs (WRS 76). They called them as forest songs. It is obvious when one find Vilie been mesmerised by the reflection of a young girl in the pool of the unclean forest. But after sometimes he realizes that “she was not of human but one of the many spirits dwellers of the forest” (WRS 49).

Apart from the real life happenings, even in dreams Vilie was hunted by the evil spirits. At one instance, Vilie found it difficult to move his body after an evil dream. This prolongs in his real life as Vilie was attacked vigorously by a dark, indistinguishable shape. He lay inert and helpless, pertified by fear (WRS 83). At those difficult times he is motivated by the seer’s words. “Let your spirit be the bigger one. They are spirits, they will submit to the authority of the spirit that asserts itself”(WRS 83).As soon as Vilie took the heart-stone out of the river, the two men were chased and cursed by the angry widow women spirits. In order to distract them those spirits made variety of sounds like cackling of old, sound of malicious victory, laughter of babies etc. After having reached their destined area, Kani shouted at the spirits to remain still. “Back! Back now or the worse for you!” (WRS 105).

The village of ‘Kirhupfumia’ (WRS 124) is full of women having magical powers that even their pointing of finger would curse the person. Here one can never fail to notice the contrast i.e., the contrast between good and evil spirit through Ate and Zote. Ate was a person of kind heart and humble nature but Zote was filled with evil thoughts. She was full of vengeance and developed a firm desire to revenge her ancestral village that deceived her once. Zote threatens Vilie to handover the stone to her because she needs the power to destroy her enemies, “I want the power of battle that will avenge me against my enemies” (WRS 135).

It was also believed that all Kirhupfumia were supposed to have a fear of death at the end of finger tips. It is an isolated village only for women who possess evil power. All neighbouring villagers those who know this story of Kirhupfumia maintained a safe distance from these strange women. Zote has been represented as a full -fledged evil spirit longing to avenge her ancestral village. She was envious about the heart-stone and stole it from Vilie and used all its power for evil things. Zote destroys her ancestral village to the fullest. This behaviour of Zote paved way for a big war between the spirits. Thus she invited the ancestral spirits by her deeds. “Ancestral spirits! She has invoked the wrath of the ancestor spirits! They will never let her go alive” (WRS 158).

The ultimate cause behind all the destruction was the “Heart-stone”. The prominence given to the heart-stone by the author proves to be a good choice. Even Heart-stone has been depicted as a spirit after a certain the hardships. The novel has taken its shape to the fullest only because of the quest and search for the heart-stone.

Kire, being a Naga writer, has explored her cultural knowledge of Nagaland through her writing. In order to gain the attention of the audience or the readers, she has taken up the element of supernaturalism. These inclusions of supernatural elements like weretigers, spirits, heart-stone, widow-women spirit, spirit encounters makes the reader to visualize the

atmosphere and experience the unnatural circumstances. These supernatural aspects play a major role in this novel. Though supernatural element excels, there arise a question whether it is accepted in this modern contemporary period. Kire's main motive was to explore the nature of Nagaland and she has chosen supernatural elements to support her topic and she had succeed in that too. The equal importance given to the spirits and the mankind foregrounds the animist faith of Nagas. Kire uses magical realism in an animist technique and this makes the novel different from other novels. Kire takes the readers to the world where there is no distinction between magic and reality. Nagaland is a place where spirits share an equal space with the mortals and everyone lives in harmony among nature. Thus there is a strong essence of supernatural elements, occult, gothic, phases and witchcraft throughout the novel.

Work Cited

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