

Reimagining the Boundaries: A Posthumanist Exploration of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

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ABSTRACT

Posthumanist ecologies dismantle entrenched anthropocentric frameworks by rejecting the rigid binaries that separate humans from the 'other' and by advocating for a relational ontology where human and non-human realms are dynamically entangled. Folktales rooted in indigenous traditions often reflect this posthumanist ethos, eschewing dualities of human/non-human and natural/supernatural in favour of a worldview where reciprocity with the environment governs ethical living—an urgently relevant perspective in the Anthropocene. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) embodies this posthumanist sensibility, offering a narrative that transcends Western epistemological paradigms. Vilie, a solitary hunter, embarks on a perilous quest to retrieve a mythical stone from a 'sleeping river,' a journey that becomes an initiation into a liminal realm where the mundane and the magical converge. His encounters with spirits, animals, and unseen forces dismantle his anthropocentric worldview, fostering an ontological shift where true balance is found not in mastery over nature but in recognising the intricate web of interdependencies that sustains all life. Kire's narrative critiques Western dualisms that privilege human agency while reducing nature to an exploitable resource. The river, far from being an inert entity, emerges as a sentient force demanding reverence and reciprocity. Vilie's transformative journey underscores the limitations of anthropocentric thinking and reclaims indigenous knowledge systems that colonial epistemologies have long dismissed as primitive and irrational. By foregrounding indigenous cosmologies where boundaries between the human and the more-than-human dissolve, Kire's narrative offers a critical intervention in Anthropocene discourse. It advocates for a posthumanist ethics that recognises the agency of all beings, urging a reimagining of human agency as a force of stewardship and reciprocity—a vital reorientation in a world grappling with ecological collapse.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Folktales, Easterine Kire, Indigenous Narratives, South Asian Literature

Posthuman ecology challenges the entrenched anthropocentric worldview that has historically positioned humans as superior to other forms of existence. This perspective, which emerges from the philosophical inquiries of posthumanism, dismantles the rigid boundaries between the human, non-human, and technological realms. It instead proposes a dynamic, interconnected understanding of life, acknowledging the agency and subjectivity of non-human entities (Mondello, 2018). Within this framework, the human ceases to be the exceptional figure at the centre of existence and is instead situated within a vast network of reciprocal relationships. Bauman's concept of "melting solids" (2000) aptly captures this fluidity, describing how established categories dissolve to make way for new, mutable arrangements of meaning and order. As these boundaries blur, the narratives that emerge reflect a fundamental shift in how we comprehend identity, knowledge, and existence. Such narratives necessitate a reconsideration of human agency, prompting readers to acknowledge the entangled realities of the natural world and technological forces (McGinnis, 1999).

The construction of the 'human' itself is a historically contingent notion, shaped by centuries of philosophical and social conventions that established norms of superiority. Enlightenment ideals, notably rooted in Cartesian dualism (Descartes, 2007), created a division between mind and matter, privileging human rationality while objectifying the natural world. This dualistic framework underpinned colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal systems that exploited nature for human benefit. Posthumanism, however, exposes the fractures in these narratives through genealogical critique, offering an alternative lens through which to view both society and the self. Foucault's seminal works, such as *Madness and Civilization* (1965) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), reveal how systems of power construct and maintain normative categories. By interrogating these discursive formations, Foucault opens up space for counter-narratives that recognise the inherent interconnectedness of human and non-human entities (Tarr & White, 2018). Posthumanism thus reconfigures the anthropocentric paradigm, not by dismissing human agency, but by decentering it within a more inclusive ecological and cosmic order (Tarr & White, 2018).

Julia Kristeva's concept of the 'foreigner within' (1991) is particularly relevant in the context of posthuman ecology, as it challenges the perceived fixity of identity. Kristeva posits that the human subject is perpetually negotiating the unfamiliar both within and outside the self. Vilie, the protagonist of *When the River Sleeps*, embodies this posthumanist transformation. His journey is not solely a quest for the mythical heart stone but an existential exploration that dismantles his anthropocentric assumptions. Through his encounters with human and non-human entities, Vilie experiences what Haraway (2003) terms *natureculture*, a space where traditional binaries of nature and culture collapse. This conceptual framework foregrounds the agency of the non-human world, disrupting human-centred narratives and inviting relational ontologies that acknowledge interconnectedness.

Folktales, particularly those rooted in indigenous traditions, serve as powerful expressions of these posthumanist sensibilities. Through their interweaving of human and supernatural realms, they challenge empirical paradigms that reduce existence to mechanistic functions. Zapata et al. (2018) argue that indigenous storytelling fosters relational knowledge, wherein wisdom emerges through embodied interactions with the world. Carolyn Merchant's *Reinventing Eden* (2003) similarly critiques dominant Western narratives that frame nature as a resource for human conquest. By championing regional voices and bioregional perspectives, Merchant advocates for alternative narratives that resist ecological degradation. Within this context, folktales act as repositories of ecological memory, offering counter-narratives that emphasise coexistence and environmental stewardship (Carr, 2018).

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* exemplifies this posthumanist vision. Born in Nagaland in 1959, Kire is an acclaimed poet, novelist, and storyteller whose works draw deeply from her Angami Naga heritage. Her narratives are shaped by a communal consciousness that values reciprocity, respect, and ecological balance. As the first Naga poet to publish a poetry collection in English in 1982 and the author of the first Naga novel in English, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), Kire has carved a significant space in contemporary literature. Her achievements, including the prestigious Hindu Lit for Life Prize in 2016 for *When the River Sleeps*, attest to her literary and cultural contributions. The novel follows Vilie's solitary quest to retrieve the heart stone from the sleeping river—a mythical object believed to bestow immense power. Through his journey across the forests of Nagaland, Vilie encounters human, non-human, and supernatural forces, engaging in a transformative dialogue with the landscape that reshapes his understanding of existence.

While *When the River Sleeps* has been subject to extensive analysis through lenses such as postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and supernaturalism (Lokde, 2020; Lahkar, 2021; Kishor, 2017; Tialia, 2022; Jana & Dutta, 2022; Kumar, 2019), a posthumanist reading remains relatively underexplored. This paper aims to bridge this critical gap by applying a posthumanist framework to the novel, intersecting it with Anthropocene studies—an essential discourse in an era marked by ecological crisis. The Anthropocene, as a geologic epoch defined by the profound impact of human activity on the planet, necessitates an ethical reevaluation of human responsibility. Kire's narrative, by foregrounding the interdependence between human and non-human realms, critiques the extractivist logic of the Anthropocene and offers a vision of relational coexistence.

Vilie's journey, unlike the linear heroic quests typical of Western narratives, follows a cyclical path of transformation. His worth is not proven through conquest but through his evolving relationships with the non-human world. In contrast to the Western *bildungsroman* tradition, which often centres on individual growth through mastery, Vilie's growth is marked by humility and acceptance. Drawing on Iris Murdoch's concept of "unselfing" (1970), the novel presents Vilie's spiritual transcendence as a relinquishing of egoistic desires. Through his immersion in the wilderness, he experiences a form of ecological unselfing, perceiving the world beyond the distortions of anthropocentric arrogance.

Nevertheless, Kire's narrative does not entirely displace the human perspective. By maintaining Vilie's centrality, the novel adopts a form of moderate anthropocentrism that acknowledges human agency while recognising the autonomy of the non-human world. This balanced perspective resonates with Rosi Braidotti's notion of the posthuman subject, which is "embedded within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings" (Braidotti, 2013b, p. 49). Vilie's relationship with the forest exemplifies this interconnected existence, echoing the principles of Deep Ecology (Næss, 1972) and bioregionalism (McGinnis, 1999). The forest, far from being a passive backdrop, emerges as an active presence that sustains, shelters, and transforms Vilie, illustrating the mutual entanglement of human and non-human lives.

This paper has critically examined how Kire's *When the River Sleeps* deconstructs anthropocentric hierarchies through its portrayal of Vilie's posthumanist journey. By exploring the novel's engagement with indigenous cosmologies, relational ontologies, and ecological ethics, the analysis will reveal how Kire critiques the dominant paradigms of human exceptionalism and envisions alternative futures rooted in coexistence and mutual respect. Through this exploration, the paper will contribute to the growing body of scholarship that foregrounds indigenous voices within posthumanist discourse, demonstrating the vital role of literature in reimagining the Anthropocene.

CONCLUSION

The narrative critiques the relentless capitalist exploitation of natural resources and underscores the pressing need to restore reciprocity with the earth, offering a profound blueprint for sustainable living in the Anthropocene. This epoch of ecological crisis demands not only a re-evaluation but also a rewriting of entrenched concepts, categories, and philosophies. Posthumanism, with its critical lens, enables a “reading back” of these constructs to forge a roadmap for navigating both the present and the future.

Kire’s supranatural ecology breathes new life into indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being—traditions long dismissed as “oriental,” “fantastic,” “superstitious,” and “exotic” (Kire 2014, p. 28)—and positions them as legitimate and viable alternatives to dominant Western paradigms. Her seamless storytelling animates the lived experiences and struggles of multiple beings, human and non-human alike, situating them within an invisible yet inescapable web of interconnection. This intricate entanglement highlights the dialectical relationship between these worlds, revealing a complex narrative where boundaries dissolve, and coexistence emerges as both necessary and inevitable.

Through his nomadic transversality, Vilie transcends the role of a mere guardian of the forest; he becomes a living embodiment of the delicate balance between nature and culture. His journey symbolises the principles of sustainable living, deeply rooted in indigenous worldviews, offering an evocative reminder that true harmony lies not in domination but in respectful co-existence with the more-than-human world.

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