Indigenous Ecotopia: A Critical Reading of Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights*

Suman Adak

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

West Bengal State University

West Bengal, India

sumonadok@gmail.com

Abstract

Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights* offers a template for planetary survival by deconstructing the anthropocentrism of the time as an archive of Naga Indigenous knowledge systems. By examining the narrative markers of the 'great darkness', a sudden nocturnal descent caused by a cosmic tiger on Naga natives, this study illustrates how marginal communities resist environmental and epistemic erasure. Integrating Theodore Roszak's "stone-Age psychiatry" and Andy Fisher's "kinship continuum", the analysis correlates with Tola's role as a traditional seer and Namu's relationship with the spiritual realm. This study aims to evaluate the entanglement of humans, spirits, and non-human animals. The deconstruction of the tiger hints at both a biological threat and a psychic presence in the Chang Naga collective unconscious. The study connects the idea of solastalgia to the villagers' distress figuring the rift between the human and natural worlds. The findings suggest that Kire's narrative strategy facilitates a recovery of Indigenous agency by affirming that human sanity is rooted in the more-than-human world.

Keywords: Animism, Ecocriticism, Ecopsychology, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), Naga Culture

Introduction

Easterine Kire's narratives are aimed at bridging the gap between ancient oral traditions and contemporary ecological crises. Her novel *Spirit Nights* not only functions as a work of magic realism but also as an epistemological intervention that claims Indigenous ways of knowledge beyond Western rationality. The novel is replete with Naga animism. Naga animism is a worldview where the sacred is immanent and the divine is within every aspect of the non-human world (Kire *Spirit*). In Indigenous ecology, nature is not a passive landscape for human action and reaction but a sentient entity with its own consciousness and agency. It is capable of testing, guiding, and judging human conduct. Naga animism rejects the Eurocentric unification of worldviews that places 'Man' at the top of a hierarchical ladder. Instead, it fosters a relationship of biocentric connectedness where humans are regarded as "plain members" of a biotic community (Leopold 203). Kire's work emphasizes that for Naga people, being civilized is not defined by technological mastery but by an ever-ongoing adjusted awareness of the balance between human groups and their nonhuman environments. This awareness is crucial for the sanity that binds a society. It is the same sanity that bonds humans to the creatures with whom they share the Earth (Roszak 13). The significance of *Spirit Nights* lies in its ability to present these Indigenous perspectives not as superstitions but as cosmological precepts. The novel operates within a landscape animated by unseen presences. The evidence of spirits, animals, and elemental forces is tangible in the novel. These forces reflect the moral and emotional depths of the inhabitants (Kurmi). By grounding Indigenous ways of knowing, Kire critiques the impulses of modernity. She critiques the erosion of local knowledge systems, keeping the virtue of her writing as a form of resistance. Her narratives serve as a repository of "ecofolklore" highlighting the intricate relationship between the Naga people and their environment (Mero and Devi 2682).

Research Rationale

The rationale for this study is grounded in the need to preserve Naga oral traditions. Easterine Kire describes the tradition as a body of knowledge that is decaying and at the risk of being lost to history. As the first Naga novelist to write in English, Kire's work functions as a written orature that archives undocumented polyvocal records of Naga botanical, geographical, and spiritual value systems. This research is further justified by the contemporary ecological breakdown. The Anthropocene discourse overlooks subaltern communities and fails to integrate their specific histories. By analyzing *Spirit Nights*, this study aims to retrieve these marginal voices, providing a solution to environmental crises. The solution comes through a quest for epistemic diversity. The 'multibeing community' in the novel offers a paradigm shift that is away from the civilized and linear time toward a relational world where humans, spirits, and animals are equal. This research seeks to legitimize Indigenous knowledge as a means to ensure the durability of the human race in an era marked by environmental erasure.

Methodology

The methodology for this article employs a multi-layered ecocritical analysis situated within the broader framework of the environmental humanities. This study adopts an Indigenous research paradigm interlinking text analysis with Naga cosmology, spirituality, and ecological ethics. The primary text, *Spirit Nights*, read as ethnographic fiction, captures the lived reality of the Chang Naga people with accuracy. To evaluate the human-nature relationship, the study uses a phenomenological approach to bridge the separation between mind and matter. The study also incorporates Susan Rowland's Jungian ecocriticism to deconstruct the hierarchy of science over text, privileging the inner creativity of the unconscious, which portrays the tiger-spirit. The analysis utilizes markers of "solastalgia" to diagnose the psychological distress caused to Naga natives by the disruption of their ancestral landscapes.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights* has expanded since the novel earned the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2024 for English literature. Dipak Kurmi positions the novel as a "luminous bridge" between myth and modernity, suggesting that Kire's storytelling mirrors the oral tradition while addressing the "delicate balance of community life". Payel Dutta Chowdhury expands this by analyzing "decolonizing Indigenous gastronomies" arguing that Kire's depiction of food practices, specifically the sharing of meat and rice brew, functions as a tool for cultural well-being and a rejection of capitalist consumerism (71). In a similar vein, W. Mero and T. S. Devi identify Kire's narratives as a repository of "traditional ecological knowledge" where the forest is not just a setting but a "living book" that necessitates an ethical reading (2698; Kire *When* 62).

Manisha and Anu Rathee argue that Kire's work constructs an ecological worldview grounded in "restraint, reciprocity, and communal responsibility" where nature is a moral agent capable of judging human conduct (498). This is echoed by N.K. Das, who reinterprets the "Great Darkness" as a "cosmological" rupture that validates Indigenous seership as an authentic knowledge system (47). Nigamananda Das further explores the "Angami Naga Ecotopia" suggesting that Kire's work provides a template for sustainable development dealing with the Anthropocene (66). It takes place breaking away from binary oppositions like human-animal and nature-culture. Simanta Baruah delves into the "representation of evil" within this folk-world, noting that the cosmic tiger represents a "non-naturalist ontology" that challenges modern empirical science (158). *The Planetary Subaltern* frames Kire's narratives as acts of resistance against "environmental exploitation" (Sarkar and Maity 58). Debajyoti Biswas and others draw parallels between the "Anthropocene" and the "Capitalocene" in Kire's work, emphasizing that marginal communities are the primary "narrators and collectors" of planetary crises (95; Sharma 16). Nilanjana Chatterjee introduces the concept of "eco-alterity"

identifying every agent of environmental disaster as the "ecological other". She positions Naga traditional knowledge as a "treasure-trove" of ethics (31). Vipinuo Kehie by reinforcing the idea that the spiritual is intrinsic to the real, supports this by highlighting that Naga oral traditions are "dynamic epistemological systems" that have wisdom regarding social responsibility and ethics (d391).

The Great Darkness and the Sun-Eating Tiger

The primary narrative engine of *Spirit Nights* is the "Great Darkness". It is a cataclysmic event rooted in the tribal histories of the Rengma and Chang Naga people (Kire *Spirit*). Unlike a regular eclipse, this darkness is unnatural, occurring in the middle of a sunny afternoon and turning a "perfectly clear sky" into a "thick mantle" that swallows the land. This event causes immediate pandemonium as the sun disappears, creating a cosmological rupture. It is a moment where not only the difference between the spiritual and material worlds becomes blurred but also nature becomes a precarious entity without the expected order suitable for human habitation. When the darkness descends, Tola, a grandmother and seer of "age-ripened wisdom", provides a mythic explanation: "Tiger has eaten the sun! Tiger has eaten the sun!" (Kire *Spirit*). While her words sound "weird" to those disconnected from ancestral lore, the narrative reveals that she is likely the only person in the village who truly understands the nature of such a crisis. This suggests that the ecological balance of the world is delicate and can be disturbed by "seemingly meaningless thoughts and actions" or deep moral transgressions (Kurmi). The darkness is so absolute that there is not even any starlight. There is no guidance for workers to go home. The silence seems to "magnify sound" allowing signals to travel further than they would during the day (Kire *Spirit*).

The tiger in this myth acts as a "Planetary Subaltern" force. It becomes an agent that exists outside the control of human technology or empirical reason (Sarkar and Maity 2). The cosmic tiger consumes the source of life, forcing the community to confront their "carnal

inherence". This narrative moment highlights the "search for Gaia" where the Earth is perceived to be a self-organizing system that demands ethical reciprocity or the repercussions would become detrimental (Roszak 159). Tola's explanation uncovers a fundamental truth of Naga prophetic tradition: visions are teaching tools intended to help humans prepare and persevere rather than make catastrophic forecasts (N. K. Das. 48). The village of Shumang Laangnyu Sang responds to the Great Darkness through structured and ritualized emergency protocols that have been preserved through oral tradition. The community's survival depends on their ability to reactivate "ancestral…memory" and collective resilience (N. K. Das 46). To signal the danger, men beat a giant wooden log-drum in "rapid, staccato bursts" a rhythm taught to every child from infancy to indicate "great danger" (Kire *Spirit*). The drumming is described as "frenzied" and "punishing". The village headman orders that it must not stop until every member of the village is safe and within the gates.

The elders command the youth to "abandon their tools" in the fields, leaving hoes and implements in the bushes to ensure that the workers can "outrace death" to reach safety before the darkness becomes absolute because the darkness is so thick that wormwood torches cannot be prepared in time (Kire *Spirit*). The community relies on the "hunters" to lead the way back, as they are the only ones capable of navigating without visual aid in total dark. Once safe, the village observes strict "genna", rituals of isolation, where individuals are confined to their homes and forbidden from camaraderie (Yanthan). Those who might disobey these seers' commands meet "mysterious and untimely deaths" emphasizing that in a traditional society, "breaking a taboo always breaks the violator" (Kire *Spirit*). These responses demonstrate what Roszak calls the "loyalty of the nurturing planet" relying on "purification, penance, and expiation" rather than domination (Roszak 13).

The Relational Identity and its Resistance to Epistemic Violence

Naga culture, as depicted by Kire, functions as a "multibeing community." This concept aligns with the observation that many Indigenous cultures perceive animals and plants not as distinct species but as persons forming a collective of all beings. In *Spirit Nights*, the community includes spirits of the dead, shapeshifters, and the forest itself, which is treated as a living entity with its own consciousness (Manisha and Rathee 500). The popular folk tale of the "three brothers", man, spirit, and tiger, underscores this "ontological kinship" that precedes the social order (Kire *Spirit*). The novel resists the "liquidation of the landscape" into a quantifiable capitalist future and instead presents a "relational view of person to planet" (Lincoln 227). The village gate is carved with warriors, hornbills, and animal heads. It serves as a physical and spiritual demarcation as it protects the multibeing community from external and internal disintegration (Kire *Spirit*). By recognizing the agency of the "non-human subalterns", be they tigers or spirits, the Nagas preserve a situatedness within a planetary framework that Western modernity has lost (Sarkar and Maity 3). Indigenous stories are thus a reclamation of Indigenous land and sovereignty (51).

Kire's narrative strategy is an act of epistemic resistance. Tola's refusal to follow the "fearful stories" promoted by missionary ideologies, which often demonized Indigenous spirits as dangerous. This allows her to reclaim her community's cognitive sovereignty. The spirit emissary's instruction to unlearn internalized shame is a political act, affirming that Indigenous knowledge is a weapon for survival. The novel thus becomes a narrative of reclamation, restoring voice and memory to a landscape that the state-capitalism nexus would otherwise reduce to a "serviceable Other" (Bhattacharjee and Lama 70).

Stone-Age Psychiatry

Theodore Roszak's *The Voice of the Earth* aims to heal the "normative alienation" of modern life. This is a condition where the mind is detached from the biosphere (60). Roszak

argues that sanity is not an exclusively social category but an ecological one (90). In *Spirit Nights*, the descent of the Great Darkness triggers a collective psychic crisis that can only be resolved through "Stone-Age Psychiatry" (74). "Stone-Age Psychiatry" is a practice rooted in a world where there is no sharp division between the internal mind and the external environment; denoting a "sacramental realm" (77). Traditional healers, like Tola, act as intermediaries who read the movements of the Earth to restore the health of both soul and society. Tola's seership is not a diseased madness but a gifted madness that allows her to perceive the underlying forces of the Earth. Tola's role is contrasted with the official village seer, Chongshen. Chongshen represents an urbanized form of seership; he is a 'seer only of the calendar and crops' lacking the ability to commune with the deeper spirit emissaries. His "dour and long-suffering" attitude reflects a patriarchal ego that views spiritual duty as a burden, not necessity. Tola's psychiatry, however, involves "reading" the Column of Light and the "shivering entities" of the landscape to navigate the Great Darkness. Her seership allows her to put her life at risk to when the male system fails (Yanthan). The ecological unconscious posits that human minds are part of a larger "eco-mental system" (Bateson 490). Kire's characters live in a "synaesthetic" relationship with their world, where the haze on the valley descends upon their awareness as well. During the Great Darkness, the villagers experience a paralysis of the reproduction process, not in an economic sense but in a spiritual sense of the dance of the cosmos (Kire *Spirit*). Tola's dedication to raising her orphaned grandson, Namu, as a knowledge bearer ensures that the ecological unconscious is not repressed but cultivated, guarding the community's sanity.

Kinship Continuum and The Tiger-Spirit as Kin

Andy Fisher's Kinship Continuum rejects the idea of the spectator-like understanding of nature, instead emphasizing that humans are only in conviviality with what is not human. In *Spirit Nights*, Namu's maturation is defined by his placement on this continuum through his

relationship with the tiger-spirit. Namu's relationship with the tiger-spirit is characterized by a complex duality: the tiger is a threat to the village, yet it is also a part of Namu's own subtle body. In Naga folklore, the idea 'Tiger, Man, and Spirit are brothers' represents an ontological kinship. This kinship precedes the social order. Namu's initiation involves learning to be fearless without being a conqueror. His eventual encounter with the tiger is not an act of domination but a legitimate inheritance. When he enters the tiger-world, a dimension of unfulfilled desires and dreams, he is navigating his own unconscious psyche where the non-human nature within him resides (Yanthan). Namu's ability to communicate with the spirit world is a manifestation of synaesthesia, the overlapping of the senses where one can feel what others feel. David Abram notes that bodies have evolved in subtle interaction with the living and nonliving earth, and to shut off these voices is to rob the mind of coherence (22). Namu's training under Tola ensures that his naturalistic intelligence, the drive to interact with other life forms, is not stifled by human-made technologies.

The Predatory Archetype and the Distress of the Darkness

Rowland's *The Ecocritical Psyche* argues that the unconscious is the territory where "non-human nature inhabits human beings". The tiger becomes a psychic animal that must remain alive for the mind to remain healthy. Rowland emphasizes that the "Predatory Archetype" allows humans to be "more hunters than hunted" by internalizing the wild. In *Spirit Nights*, Namu must act as a shaman using the tiger's nature to destroy the darkness. The tiger represents the unrealized desires and dreams that consume an individual, rendering them powerless. Only by acknowledging the "uroboros" as evidence of unconscious qualities can the community restore the dance of the seasons (Rowland).

Unlike nostalgia, which is a longing for a "home from which one is absent" solastalgia is felt while still at home when that home environment is under assault (Albrecht 41). During the Great Darkness, the villagers experience a combined and "lived experience of dislocation"

The fields, once sites of “hard labor” and “sunset return” become “fearful” and “meaningless” (Kire *Spirit*). This pathology of place manifests as disorientation, exhaustion, and a “crushed and defeated” psychic state. Albrecht identifies “powerlessness” as a key characteristic of solastalgia. In Kire's narrative, the villagers are powerless against the cosmic tiger and the unnatural night. The silence of the spirits dicards the potential for the environment to provide comfort, leading to a state of desolation. The distress of the villagers is not a personal neurosis but a response to difficult socio-ecological conditions. This pain for the world arises because humans and nature are interconnected. Kire portrays the exhaustion and dreamless sleep of the villagers as a collective symptom of a world where the “biosphere crumbles” (Roszak 19). The attempt to relieve solastalgia is seen in the community's drumming and the sharing of “food of war” rituals intended to restore “solidarity” and “wholeness” (Kire *Spirit*). Conducted in the right way, the sharing of food promotes both social and physical well-being in the Naga Culture.

Conclusion

Spirit Nights demonstrates that Kire’s work provides more than just a mythic story; it provides a framework for planetary survival through Indigenous agency. Namu is central to this recovery. As the knowledge bearer and faith keeper, Namu becomes an exception to extend the knowledge as a young male. Earlier, it was a woman’s domain. His maturation involves unlearning the internalized shame associated with his culture. He learns that the past is a preparation for the future. Kire’s use of written orature ensures that Naga traditions are not torn away by time and a disturbed ecology. By writing based on real Naga tribal stories, she creates an experiential space in which she reestablishes a relation to the environment. Her work affirms that speaking for subaltern subjects who have been silenced is a necessity. Storytelling is not artistic expression but a method of learning and healing. The conclusion, the return of light is a restoration of the community life (Kire *Spirit*). This recovery is not just a plot point but a

symbolic restoration of Indigenous agency in the face of modern erasure. Tola's directive to Namu to not teach fearful stories is a survival strategy; it is a resistance that unlearns the fear of the non-human other. By casting fear into fire, the Indigenous subject is able to reclaim their voice, memory, land, and future. *Spirit Nights* demonstrates that humans are to exist only in contact and conviviality with the more-than-human world.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Works Cited

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage Books, 1997.

Albrecht, Glenn. "'Solastalgia': A New Concept in Health and Identity." *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, no. 3, 2005, pp. 41-55.

Baruah, Simanta. "Transcending the Framework of Morality: A Study of the Representation of Evil in the Folk-world of Easterine Kire's When the River Sleeps." *Drishti: the Sight*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, p. 155.

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chandler Publishing, 1972.

Bhattacharjee, Subhayu, and Sinor Lama. "Can the Subaltern Alternate?: Exploring Planetarity as Radical Alterity in the Netflix Docuseries The Hunt for Veerappan." *The Planetary Subaltern: On Indian History, Theory, and Texts in the Anthropocene*, edited by Somasree Sarkar and Agnibha Maity, Routledge, 2025, pp. 62-72.

Biswas, Debajyoti. "Ecological Crisis and the Planetary Subaltern in Easterine Kire's Fiction." *The Planetary Subaltern: On Indian History, Theory, and Texts in the Anthropocene*, edited by Somasree Sarkar and Agnibha Maity, Routledge, 2025. pp. 93-106.

Chatterjee, Nilanjana. "Ecological Self vs. The Ecological Other: Indigenous Naga Ecotopia for the Dystopic World." *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 2026.

Chowdhury, Payel Dutta. "Decolonizing Indigenous Gastronomies and Folklore-based Food Practices in Easterine Kire's Spirit Nights." *Drishti: the Sight*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2024, pp. 71-75.

Das, N. K. “Cosmology, Ecology, and Spirituality: Reappraising Stone Culture, Genna Tradition, and Ancestor Veneration among the Naga Tribes.” *The Criterion*, vol. 16, no. 3, June 2025, pp. 45-65.

Das, Nigamananda. “Angami Naga Ecotopia in Easterine Kire's Fiction.” *The 13th Malaysia International Conference on Languages, Literatures and Cultures (MICOLLAC 2025) Proceedings*, 2025.

Fisher, Andy. *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*. 2nd ed., SUNY Press, 2013.

Kire, Easterine. *Spirit Nights*. Barbican Press, 2021.

---. *When the River Sleeps*. Zubaan, 2014.

Kurmi, Dipak. “Spirit Nights: Easterine Kire's Luminous Bridge Between Myth and Modernity.” *Eastern Mirror*, 2024.

Leopold, Aldo. A Sand County Almanac. Oxford UP, 2001.

Lincoln, Kenneth. *Indi’n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*. Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 227.

Manisha, and Anu Rathee. “Ecology, Myth, and Indigenous Ethics in Easterine Kire's When the River Sleeps: An Ecocritical Study.” *IJELS*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2025, pp. 498-503.

Mero, W., and T. S. Devi. “Ecofolklore and Indigenous Wisdom in Easterine Kire's Novels.” *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2024, pp. 2682-2689.

Roszak, Theodore. *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*. Touchstone, 1993.

Rowland, Susan. *The Ecocritical Psyche: Literature, Evolutionary Complexity and Jung*. Routledge, 2012.

Sarkar, Somasree, and Agnibha Maity, editors. *The Planetary Subaltern: On Indian History, Theory, and Texts in the Anthropocene*. Routledge, 2025.

Sharma, Mukul. Dalit Ecologies: Caste and Environmental Justice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Kehie, Vipinuo. "Oral Tradition As Epistemology: A Study of Angami Naga Myths as Indigenous Knowledge Systems." International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts, vol. 13, no. 7, July 2025, pp. d391-d396. IJCRT, https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2507385.pdf. Accessed 11 Dec. 2025

Yanthan, Beni Sumer. "Cutting through Shadows: Review of Easterine Kire's Spirit Nights." EastMojo, 16 Oct. 2022, www.eastmojo.com/nagaland/2022/10/16/cutting-through-shadows-review-of-easterine-kires-spirit-nights/.