



Research Paper

Reading Magical Realism in Easterine Kire's Novel *When the River Sleeps*

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Abstract

Magical realism is a genre of literature that depicts magical or unreal elements as a natural part in an otherwise realistic or mundane environment. Magical Realism is one of the most unique movements of the last century. This paper will probe into some of the aspects of magical realism while trying to examine Easterine Kire's use of magical realism in her award winning novel, *When the River Sleeps*. Elements of magical realism and its relevance to the stories and people of Nagaland as depicted in the novel will be analyzed. Naga myths, culture, tradition, the spiritual, the natural and the physical worlds are prominent features in Kire's writings. The people of Nagaland has always been closely associated with their natural environment and have a strong belief in the presence of supernatural elements around their existence. The physical world and the spiritual world have co-existed since time immemorial and Kire has effortlessly blended the co-existence of these two worlds in her novel and hence calls for a study through the lens of magical realism.

Keywords: *Easterine Kire, magical realism, myths, spirits, Nagaland*

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Magical realism refers to a genre of literature that depicts magical or unreal elements as a natural part in an otherwise realistic or mundane environment. The strange oxymoron which combines two contrasting components, refer to the amalgamation of realism and the fantastic in art, film, and literature. It blends realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow naturally out of the reality portrayed. Elements of the marvelous, mythical, or dreamlike are injected into an otherwise realistic story without breaking the narrative flow. *The Dictionary of Twentieth Century Culture: Hispanic Culture of South America* defines magical realism as "... fiction that does not distinguish between realistic and non-realistic events, fiction in which the supernatural, the mythical or the implausible are assimilated to the cognitive structure of reality without a perceptible break in the narrator's or characters' consciousness."

The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* states that magic realist novels and stories have typically, a strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic merges with the unexpected and the inexplicable and in which elements of dreams, fairy story, or mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence. According to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, magic realism is characterized by the mingling of and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, bizarre and skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealist description, arcane erudition, the elements of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable.

The term magical realism has been used in Europe, Africa, Australia, the United States and Latin America for many years; however, the first official use of the term was in 1925 by German art historian Franz Roh who applied the term to some of the paintings he studied. Magical Realism is one of the most unique movements of the last century. In order to reach a unifying definition of the term, the European and the Latin American literary worlds ushered in a number of studies on Magical Realism which resulted in a diversity of approaches. However, the contributions of Franz Roh and Latin American writer, Alejo Carpentier remain significant in the development of Magical Realism. Franz Roh coined the expression 'Magischer Realismus' to describe the art forms that were taking shape after the First World War in Europe. He used the term to describe

the 'Neue Sachlichkeit,' or New Objectivity, a style of painting that was popular in Germany at the time which also was an alternative to the romanticism of expressionism.

The term 'magischer realismus' was used to emphasize on how magical, fantastic, and strange normal objects can appear in the real world when you stop and look at them. Yet, the features of magical realism elicited by Roh defined Art and it was difficult to determine its transformation into the literary field and when the term found its way into literature, it resulted in becoming a widely used literary concept which became a present-day historian's nightmare (Guenther 34). Alejo Carpetier used the expression 'lo real maravilloso americano' where the word 'magic' did not appear but became associated with Roh's 'Magischer Realismus' and Carpetier's word 'maravillaso' indirectly replaced Roh's 'magischer' centering magical realism towards a Latin American artistic concept, thus attaching another dimension to the study of Magical Realism.

The term began to be known in Latin America with the introduction of the partial translation of the book *Post- Expressionism, Magic Realism* of Roh published in the Spanish magazine *Revista de Occidente* in 1927. By 1930 there were several artists in Latin America who applied magical realism in their art. The use of magical realism is worldwide. In Germany it appeared as escapist and reactionary in the 1940s and its use waned during World War II, apparently because of its suppression by the Nazis. It is now even applied anew to a genre of contemporary literature and art criticism.

According to Carpentier magical realism is "an unexpected alteration of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality" (Carpentier 1949). More specifically, magical realism achieves its particular power by weaving together elements we tend to associate with European realism and elements we associate with the fabulous, and these two would undergo a "closeness or near merging." Angel Flores also used the term magical realism in 1955 opined that, "In magical realism we find the transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal. It is predominantly an art of surprises. Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision" (Flores 1955).

Among other famous Latin American artists, writers, and critics whose work contains elements of magic realism are Miguel Angel Asturias, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Enrique Anderson Iribert, and Isabel Allende. Garcia Marquez maintains that realism is a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive vision of reality. However good or bad it may be, they are books which finish on the last page. Our reality is in itself all out of proportion. In other words, Garcia Marquez suggests that the magic text is, paradoxically, more realistic than the realist text. In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts. The principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances where key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things.

Easterine Kire, Nagaland's most prolific novelist, poet and children's story writer has once again proved her mettle in the art of effortless narrative in her award winning novel, *When the River Sleeps*. The hopes and aspirations of the Naga people, land, hills, mountains, cloud-covered villages, rivers, myths, mysteries, magical landscapes and the rich oral tradition find place in almost all of her writings. The Naga people and the stories they want to share have always been close to her heart. The spiritual world is a huge part of the Naga belief and it flows naturally into her writings because she is very much a part of it. In one of her recent interviews about her book, *When the River Sleeps* with Swati Daftuar of The Hindu, she mentioned having a spirit child playmate and encountering spirits, "In addition, my own experiences of the spirit world have come together to make this book. For instance, I had a spirit child playmate when I was about four. He was a little boy who mischievously invited me to play. In later life, I have had frightening but amazing spirit encounters that have convinced me of the realness of the spirit world" (2015).

When the River Sleeps takes the reader to a physical as well as a spiritual journey along with Vilie, the protagonist who sets out in search of a heart stone. The opening of the novel at once suggests the presence of something unreal and fantastic. Vilie is haunted by dreams about a sleeping river and the magical stone it cradled, "Sweat drenched his face and neck. He threw off the covers and lay back trying to catch his breath. He had had the same dream every month for the past two years, ever since he had first heard the story of the sleeping river. He was restless in a way that he had never been before" (Kire 2). To wrest a stone which possess untold powers from the sleeping river is a mystical and dangerous quest. He has to encounter the silent spirits that hover around the forest and must fight demons both within and without. He has to face the wrath of vengeful malignant widows and weretigers as well as armed men on his trail. The remote mountains of Nagaland which is full of natural wonder and supernatural enchantment is at once laid bare to us. We follow the protagonist through the forest along with the narrative and meet spirits who are as real as we are.

The forest was Vilie's home and he had spent twenty-five of his forty-eight years in the forest. He was the guardian of the *gwi*, the great mithuns, as well as the forest department's official protector of the rare

trigopan that liked to nest in his part of the forest. The Naga people have always been closely attached to the natural environment. However, Vilie's repeated statement of the forest being his wife leaves a sense of mystery in our hearts which becomes more mysterious when we learn about the ominous death of Seno, whom Vilie once intended to marry. "He's got hold of me, Mother!" (Kire 5). A tall, dark man had followed her home from the forest and she was afflicted with a terrible fever to which she succumbed. The Nagas have always lived a close-knit community life and therefore, when Vilie decided to make the forest hideout his home, the idea of a man living his life out of the village was so alien to his mother and the community. The magical elements in the novel is heightened when rumours spread about the two lovers meeting in their spirit forms in the woods. Many in the community believed that Vilie must have passed on to the other world which adds to the sense of mysterious concern in a realm between the real and magical.

Vilie felt light-headed once he decided to respond to the river's call. He made preparations for his quest which was filled with uncertainty. Yet, there was no doubt in his mind because he believed he was destined to find the river and thus he began his quest. Four and a half hours of walk in the forest took him to his nearest neighbours, the woodcutter Krishna and his wife where he spent the night amidst the noises of the forest. While he traverse through the forest, the author unravels many significant and mysterious beliefs associated with the Naga folklore, one of them being the existence of tiger spirits. The Nagas strongly believe in the connection between men and animals since the time of lore and even to this day there are people who possess different animal spirits. Vilie encounters a weretiger while he rested at a shed of a Zeliang man's field. He woke up from his slumber to a strange visit, hair raised, he knew he was not alone. A tiger came upon him fearlessly, fortunately a shot from his gun drove the tiger away into the night but it returned again and Vilie was now ascertained that this tiger was not an ordinary tiger. The blending of superstitious beliefs and rationality is a significant aspect in the book as well as an important element of magical realism.

Vilie is a very practical man when it comes to adjusting his life in the forest but at the same time, he believes in the beliefs and superstitions that have been passed down through the oral tradition of the Naga people. To ward off the tiger spirit Vilie invokes the Gods and his ancestors, "Kuovi! Menuhoulie! Wetsho! Is this the way to treat your clansmen? I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman" (Kire 26). The tiger slip away quietly which suggests that there is indeed a strange co-existence and interconnection between the natural and the supernatural worlds which cannot be questioned or reasoned. The elders in the villages have always taught the young to be aware of both these worlds and not be disrespectful of either.

As Vilie continue his journey, he passes through a nettle forest and we are introduced to various native herbs used to cure disease, heal wounds and ward off evil spirits. He comes across the barkweavers who offer him kindness and rest after which he finds company in a group of men and unwittingly entangles himself in a crime. His inability to stop the crime haunts him psychologically and for no fault of his, he becomes the hunted. He begins a mad run with the men trailing him until he reaches the rainforest where he felt safe because the rainforest was shunned by both villagers and local hunters as well because of the myth associated to it as the unclean forest, known to the people as *Rarhuria* but Vilie trusted the forest and it was a safe haven for him now. In magical realism there is only a thin line between the natural and the supernatural or nothing at all and it can be seen in the novel when Vilie enters the supernatural realm quite naturally in the belief that the forest would protect him from the evil of man and he felt truly wedded to her at this moment. However, as believed by the villagers, the next morning Vilie woke up to a terrible fever that lasted for two days and nights. He has heard about children being carried away by spirits to the unclean forest. Men, especially hunters swore to have seen beautiful long-haired girls playing and singing in the forest. The spirits sang the forest songs to enchant humans, "They sing such such sweet songs that you want to cry when they stop because you want nothing other than to keep on listening" (Kire 77).

Vilie's experience in the unclean forest is quite magical. He sees a young girl's reflection in the stream as he bend down to wash his face. It was definitely one of the many spirit dwellers of the forest and his head was full of thoughts about the stories he has heard about the unclean forest but he felt silly to acknowledge the other dwellers of forest and he had to pay for it. He is chased by spirits, their leader a hairy old man seem to be in a terrible rage, "Cursing and spitting, he jumped on Vilie's back and began to pull out his hair. The pain made Vilie cry out. He saw that the other spirits were closing in on him and he was terrified of what horrific death they would visit upon him. Presently he woke with a start, and relief washed over him as he realized it was only a dream" (Kire 82).

The mysterious presence is significantly blended with the real as he is pressed by a heavy weight on his chest even as he thought that it was a dream and yet he saw a dark indistinguishable shapes sitting on top of him. Petrified Vilie suddenly remembers the seer's words to overpower the other spirit by asserting that his spirit is the bigger one. With this thought, his fear vanished and he summoned all his strength and pushed the dark figure off him giving out a loud cry, "Mine is the greater spirit! I will never submit to you!" (Kire 83). The forest lit up from within as Vilie overcame the spirit and his heart grew bigger. He saw the girl's face again passing over the pool surface with no body attached to her beautiful face and long dark hair and he realizes that he has

disturbed the unclean forest and must no longer linger in this forest and this incident suggests how the natural and the supernatural worlds are intimidated by each other's existence and yet must meet now and then and this is an important feature of magic realism. On his trail towards the border village, we see an important aspect of the Naga people's hospitality towards strangers which can be seen through the village headman and his wife who offers him food and shelter and even accompanies him to the sleeping river.

As Vilie neared towards the sleeping river, he felt closer to the spiritual world. He listened closely to the headman's discourse about the river and felt that there certainly was a change in him. Unconsciously he was on a spiritual journey and the past few days in the deep forest had taught him so much about human nature and the world of the spirits. His near-lynching experience at the hands of the men from Dichu village, his encounters with the different forms of spirits had made him more knowledgeable. He met the darker side of the human heart, as well as the goodness of humanity that still lived inside the hearts of man. He had seen the alluring as well as the malignant side of the spirits. The quest for the heart stone, in fact, brought about an enlightening change in his heart. The vegetation changed as they kept walking towards the river and the ferns appeared to grow lush and green without any effort as he began to hear the sound of water over rocks up ahead. He had reached the river of his dreams. A magical silence occur in the narrative as soon as they entered the territory of the sleeping river and all birdsong ceased.

The silence was deafening and not a leaf stirred, and there was not the faintest of insect cheeping to break the silence nor any human sound to pollute the forest where the river lay. Vilie had to prove his patience and courage now and wait for the right moment because the river was guarded by the spirit widow-women and after a long wait, he saw the widow-women who guarded the river. They carried baskets on their backs and walked through the fog and down into the river and appeared as though they were fetching water but their water pots stayed in their baskets and after a strange ritual, they retreated and went up the bank. As soon as the widow-women disappeared behind the hills, the river stopped flowing and went to sleep. This was the brief interval, the moment Vilie had patiently waited for. He struggled as the river tried to push him down and under but as soon as he grabbed a stone, the river surrendered to his spirit which was now empowered by all the Sky and Earth spirits.

Vilie becomes an object of envy for the spirits as well as people who would risk anything to get hold of the magical stone because they could never get it on their own. The spirits cannot touch water and the power to wrest the stone is not bestowed upon every man and he faces bigger battles on his way back home. He encounters the most feared people of the mountains, the women of Kirhupfumia village who are thought to have poisonous powers and greatly feared. It is believed that their touch, and their look could maim, blind and even cause death. The presence of the revengeful women who are supposed to possess evil powers also moves between the magical and the real. We are left with a sense of fear as well as compassion for these revengeful women who seem to have become one with the evil spirits in the forest. However, Vilie is able to pass through this hurdle with the help of Ate, a woman from the said village. Zote, her elder sister wanted to possess the stone to destroy their ancestral village from where they've been ostracized and she leaves no stone unturned to fulfill her revengeful quest but finally gets killed by the ancestor spirits. Vilie returns to his village with the stone accompanied by Ate. His quest for the heart stone is complete and he gives a new life to Ate but still the magical element continue to haunt the narrative as Vilie's mysterious death in the forest remain uncertain and it further enhances the element of magical realism in the book.

Right from the dreamy beginning of the book to the uncanny disappearance of Vilie in the end, the awe and excitement of the enchanted and the marvelous narrative continue through and through. We continuously shuffle between the real and the magical which cannot be separated and must co-exist. It will not be an exaggeration to state that Easterine, has succeeded in using the elements of magical realism in the novel which is a true representation of the Naga people's belief and view about the presence of the supernatural in what appears to be ordinary. As Dr. Paul Pimomo of Central Washington University has stated, the novel is rightly a "...reminiscent of Marquez's magic realism." Besides, the universal theme of the struggle between the good and evil remain intact in this Naga story and in the end, the heart stone can belong only to him who can overcome the evils of both the natural and supernatural world that inseparably hovers around human life.

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